

THE GOODNESS OF GOD LEADETH TO REPENTANCE

(ROM. 2:4)

God is often exceedingly good to those who are utterly unworthy of such treatment. “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good;” indeed, sometimes, the evil seem to have more of the sunshine than the good have. David said, “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree.” God’s forbearance has been misinterpreted, and even misrepresented by some who have implied or actually asserted that God winks at sin, and does not care how men behave, but treats all alike, whether they are good or evil. Some have wickedly asked, as Job reminded his friends, “What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?” Many have said, “Do not the wicked prosper? Do they not even die in peace? Is it not written concerning them, “O There are no bands in their death; but their strength is firm?” This is a misinterpretation of the merciful design of God toward the ungodly, and is corrected by the apostle in the verse from which our text is selected: “Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that *the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*”

The goodness of God to a man of evil life is not intended to encourage him to continue in his sin, but it is meant to woo and win him away from it. God manifests His infinite gentleness and love so that He may thereby kill man’s sin; and that, by His tender mercy, He may win man’s hard heart unto Himself; and that, by His abundant loving-kindness, He may awaken man’s conscience

to a sense of his true position in his Maker's sight, that he may turn away from the sin which he now loves, and may seek his God, whom he has despised and neglected. Dear Friend, if you are still ungodly, yet you have been prospered by your God, understand clearly the Lord's intention in your prosperity: *"The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance."* You must not be so unwise, you must not be so wicked, as to say, "I am prospering although I am living in sin; therefore, I will continue to do so." Remember what the Lord said through Isaiah the prophet: "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib." At least be as wise as these brute beasts, and recognize from your prosperity comes; and then accept as true, God's explanation of His actions as given by the Holy Spirit through the apostle, and believe that *"the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance."*

I

It is our prayer that those who are enjoying the goodness of God, but yet have never repented of sin, may see their conduct in its true light, and may be brought to a sincere and hearty repentance of their sin. To that end, we shall, first of all, spend a little time in mentioning **SOME OF THE TOKENS OF THE GOODNESS OF GOD WHICH HE HAS LAVISHED UPON MANY WITH THE VIEW OF LEADING THEM TO REPENTANCE.**

We begin with this remark; it is a great blessing to have been born of Christian parents, or even of parents who were respectable and moral; it gives one a good start in life where this is the case. On the other hand, we do not doubt that some have strong propensities to evil which have been at work within them from their very birth, so that they were more likely than certain others were to plunge into gross sin. Therefore, it is no small mercy to have been started in this world under a roof where the name of Jesus was often heard, where holy things were constantly brought before one's eye, where blasphemy was never heard, where

uncleanness would have been put outside the door with the utmost abhorrence; so, if any of you have been the recipients of these marks of God's favorable regard, and yet are not godly, perhaps not even moral, it is clear, from our text, that this goodness of God to you ought to lead you to repentance.

Remember your gracious mother, who is now, perhaps, with God in glory. Your godly father, possibly, lives to sorrow over you. If they could have known, when you were a fair-haired boy at home, that you would ever be what you now are, they might have wished that you had never been born. Try to recall those early, happy days; imagine that you can hear again your mother's earnest pleadings both with and for her boy; think once more of how you felt when you were sitting at the table on which the family Bible lay open, and, morning and evening, prayer was offered unto the Most High; and, as you do so, may the Lord, by some soft and gentle voice within your conscience, call you to repentance!

Next, it is a mark of the great goodness and forbearance of God as He continues to spare the lives of men. We often marvel that He does not more quickly cut them down as cumberers of the ground. If the first wanton transgression had been followed by a solemn warning, and if the next willful sin had involved severe chastisement with the threatening that the third offence should be the last, we might not have been surprised; yet God, in His abounding mercy, allows men to sin over and over again, to sin against light and knowledge, against rebuke and instruction, against conscience and reason, and even against the love of Christ. Singularly enough, God often spares, in an extraordinary manner, the lives of some of the most atrocious rebels against His righteous rule. There are some men, who are so wicked that, if they were dead, the moral atmosphere of the world would be much purer; yet they live on, and seem as if they could not die. Disease after disease has laid them low, for they sin against their own bodies, and bring themselves into a truly horrible condition,

yet they rise from their sick-bed only to sin again more foully than ever. How is it that such sinners are spared, while an earnest and zealous foreign missionary sickens, and dies, and an eminent saint, who did but pass through a street where fever raged, was stricken with the disease, and speedily carried off by it? If we understood why the miscreants are spared when the godly are taken, and surely we do, for our text instructs us, the goodness of God is manifested in order to lead such sinners to repentance.

He spares them that they may turn unto Him. The sailor who, a little while before, was blaspheming the name of the Lord; and then working at the pumps, with all his might, to try to save the ship, sees the vessel go down, but he clings to a spar that floats upon the raging sea. His shipmates have been sinking all around him, but he finds himself washed up high and dry upon a rock. To what end, seaman, are you spared? Is it not that the goodness of God may lead to repentance even you, who could scarcely speak without an oath? God means, we trust, that you should, henceforth, live a new life and serve Him as you have not yet done. And the soldier, too, who in the day of battle, when the bullets have whistled close by his ears, and comrade after comrade has fallen at his side. Years ago, we were honored to hear from one who fought at Iwo Jima speak of brave soldiers falling around him to the right and to the left, yet on to the end he charged through the valley of death; and, though he was a stranger, we found ourselves unable to stop telling him of Christ who had spared his life in that terrible time. Are we addressing anyone who has been in imminent peril of any sort, by car, railway or plane accident or in shipwreck, in battle or in storm, when it seemed as if you must die, yet you did not? Then, surely, your preservation means that God was saying to grim Death, "Spare him, for he is Mine. I intend to save his soul as well as to spare his life." If that is the case with any of you, God's goodness is meant to lead you to repentance.

Nor is this all, though there is great mercy in a godly parentage, and in life preserved in times of peril; for sometimes, ungodly men enjoy the privilege of perfect health for many years. "I never had a day's illness in my life," says one; yet he has not been careful of his constitution; on the contrary, he has done much to injure it. Another says, "I never missed a day's work, and never was kept away from business, by suffering of any kind; I scarcely know what aches and pains mean." Well, friend, in that respect God deals with you in a very different way from the treatment He metes out to some of us, who, nevertheless, try to serve Him. Surely, you ought to seriously think of this matter, and say to yourself, "He does not even give me as much of the rod as He gives to His own children. It cannot be that He loves me better than He loves them; it must be because I am not His child. As a man does not punish another person's boy, but leaves him to go his own way, so I must not reckon that God is specially showing His love to me in this long-continued health and strength, and I must solemnly ask myself, O Am I his child? And then, on the other hand, I must say to Him, 'O Dost thou, O Lord, indulge me with health and strength? Dost thou favor me with this long immunity from pain, I, who never lived to serve Thee, and never even thanked Thee for all Thy goodness to me? Then am I thoroughly ashamed of myself, and I implore Thee, O my gracious Preserver, to forgive my forgetfulness and ingratitude, and to receive me, and to put me among Thy children!'"

Nor is this all, for we know some ungodly people who are greatly prospering in this world. When they started in life, perhaps things were a little hard with them; and they thought that if God would but give them enough to eat and drink, it would be a great mercy. Possibly, they soon found a position which just suited their capacities; but, before long, they began to aspire to something higher, and God gave it to them. So it has gone on until now, they have just about all that they could wish to have. Well, dear friends, if this has been your experience, recollect that all has

come to you from the Giver of every good and perfect gift. Each one of these blessings has been sent to you marked with some such message as this from the Lord Himself, "Will not My creature consider what return should be rendered to Me for this mercy, and that mercy, and the other mercy, which I have given to him, more even than I have given to some of the best of My own people; will he not turn unto Me, and bless the Giver of all this goodness to him?"

We would like to take you by the hand, young man, you who have been signally helped, perhaps, out of a difficulty in business, when it seemed as if you must fail. Since then, you have had many severe storms and trials to face, yet you have always been delivered out of them all, and now you have come into a channel where it is all smooth sailing. Is it not time for you to begin to consider your ways, and to turn unto the Lord? You were blessed with a happy marriage; your children are growing up around you, and whereas many others have had to bury their offspring, yours have all been spared. Do you not see how God has blessed you in all sorts of ways? Therefore, will you not give Him your heart? Will you not cast away from you the sin that He hates? Will you not turn unto Him, trusting and loving Christ with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength? The goodness of God to you, coming in so many different forms and ways, should lead you to repentance.

Notice, dear friends, that the Lord does not drive you to repentance. Cain was driven away, as a fugitive and a vagabond, when he had killed his righteous brother Abel; Judas went and hanged himself, being driven by an anguish of remorse because of what he had done in betraying his Lord; but the sweetest and best repentance is that which comes, not by driving, but by drawing: "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." It is a wretched spirit that needs to be continually flogged with the whip of a slave-holder. Hopefully, we are addressing those who

can be affected by other motives than those of dread. The good God, the gracious God, who has abounded in mercy and goodness so wonderfully to many of you, should you not feel that something is drawing you toward Him? At least, do Him the justice to look at Him as He reveals Himself in Christ Jesus, and see if He is not worth serving, if it is not meet and right that you should serve Him. Having provided His Son to be the Savior of sinners, is it not meet that you should turn to Him, and find eternal life through believing in Him and obeying His Gospel?

We have given only a brief outline of the many forms of God's goodness to many of us; but your experiences are so different that you, each one, must fill up his or her own. You all have reason to bless God for some special goodness. There is a song we sing that says, "Tell it unto sinners, tell, I am, I am out of hell;" but it could be added that we are also not in the lunatic asylum, not in prison, not upon the bed of sickness; and all these things are tokens of God's goodness to us, which ought to lead us to repentance.

II

Let's consider IN WHAT WAY THE GOODNESS OF GOD IS AN ARGUMENT FOR OUR REPENTANCE.

First, God has been so good to us, He cannot be a hard taskmaster. The ungodly man cannot truly say to God what the man in the parable said to his lord, "I feared thee, because thou art an austere man." How can God be austere when He has manifested all this goodness to you? Your house has been without prayer, yet you have had no fire to burn it down, no thieves to ransack it, no fever to invade it; you have lived for forty, fifty, sixty, or even seventy or eighty years without ever serving your Maker; yet you are surrounded with every earthly comfort; after all that, can you call God a hard task-master? No; it is

proved beyond question that God is good, and only good, and that He does good even to the unthankful and the evil. Well, then, what a shame it is that such a generous, magnanimous God as He is should be treated as the careless and indifferent treat Him!

When a man is simply a just man, that is good so far as it goes; but he may be hard and stern; but when a man is generous, forgiving, tender-hearted, surely, the most coarse-minded among us would be unwilling to inflict pain on such a heart as that! But the heart of God is more loving than that of any man who has ever lived; and more tender than ever any mother was with her child. He cannot bear that you should love evil instead of loving Him. Why do you turn against Him, after He has done for you all this of which we have been speaking? Did you make use of a blasphemous expression? For which of all the good things that He has done for you did you blaspheme His holy name? For sparing your life when you had that terrible fever; or for raising up your dear little child from the very brink of the grave? Do you neglect to worship the Lord, do you rail at His people, do you scoff at His church, because of the many tokens of God's goodness that He has manifested toward you? Come, now, be a man; sink not below the level of a brute, for even a brute will render good for good. It is the devil who renders evil for good; yet you are sinking to his level if you continue in sin, and turn not unto God, who has dealt so kindly and so graciously with you.

The next reflection to help you to repentance is this. As God has dealt so kindly with you while you have been living in sin, then it is untrue, as you thought, that He is unwilling to forgive. There are many, who do not seek God's mercy, because they think it is not to be obtained by them, but that is one of the devil's lies. Why has He spared you so long? He must be willing to forgive you.

There are some, who even dare to invoke their Maker's curse upon their own limbs and eyes; if any of you have ever done that,

and yet the Lord has not done what you blasphemously asked Him to do, the reason for His forbearance must have been that He is full of longsuffering and gentleness. Turn to Him, we pray you; and, with broken heart and contrite spirit, ask Him to forgive you, and you shall see how quickly He will do so, for it is still true that "He is good: for his mercy endureth for ever." "He delighteth in mercy." "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way, and live." The great goodness of God to rebellious sinners is proof positive that He is willing to bestow His forgiving mercy on them as soon as they repent of their sin and obey the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ; so it should be a great inducement to them to turn to Him, and live.

The argument, however, will appear to be stronger still if, in reading our text: we lay the emphasis on the personal pronoun: "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance."

Now, dear friend, if God has taken the trouble to be especially good to you, in order to lead you to repentance, you may be certain that He would not have picked you out in this remarkable manner unless He had intended to welcome you if you will come to Him. We will not point a finger at any particular person, nor will we intentionally direct a glance of the eye at any special individual; but we are persuaded that some of you are in the providence of God and have been signally favored. If your life-story could be written, it would, perhaps, scarcely be believed; and as you look back on difficulties and trials that you have been able to surmount, and on the many blessings that have been showered on you, it must sometimes seem to you almost like a dream. You cannot understand it; you say to yourself that you have been one of the darlings of destiny. If you have said that, do not talk any more about destiny, but think of what the apostle says in our text; "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." Hopefully, you are a true believer who has obeyed the Gospel of

Christ. Hopefully, in your heart you have heard Him say, by His Holy Spirit, though not in words audible to thine outward ear, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

You are like a besieged city; yet something more powerful than great guns is now ranged against you. The batteries of almighty love have come into the field. Providence after providence has surrounded you with the gracious artillery of divine mercy. You cannot escape; therefore, surrender to your best Friend! Surrender to your God! Surrender to holiness, and happiness, and everlasting life!

God help you to do so, for the legitimate argument of undeserved goodness, given to the worst of men, is that it should speedily lead them to repentance and eternal life. This personal pronoun is in the singular, so I pray thee, my brother, and thee, my sister, to take home to thine own heart the message of the text: “The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.”

For a minute or two, before closing, let us address those who have repented and obeyed the Gospel. Beloved friends, shall we tell you what your experience has been? Perhaps we can, by telling you what ours has been. First of all, when we truly came to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we discovered that He loved sinners. Before we made that discovery, we thought He loved only the good and the righteous; but when we read His Word, we found that He came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. For a long while, we thought that He wanted our good works, and we had none to bring to Him; but, as we read His Word, we found that He gave Himself for our sins, not for our righteousnesses. Then as we read and studied His Holy Word we came to understand that whosoever believed in Him and obeyed the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ, should not be condemned. We believed in Him and obeyed the Gospel, and from His Word knew

at once that we were not condemned, that He had died for us, that all our sins were pardoned. And, honestly, we never repented before as we repented then. We must have been almost as bad as the devil himself to have sinned against Him as we had done, requiring His beloved Son suffer and die that He might be able justly to forgive us. Even while we rejoiced in being pardoned, we felt almost ashamed to look Him in the face, and claim His mercy. To think that we should have sinned against such a Friend, who was so ready to forgive us all our guilt, made us ready to hide our heads in the dust. If He had bidden the thunders of His wrath to roll around us, we would not have been surprised; but when, instead of thunders, He gently said, "I love thee, and I forgive thee," then our hearts were broken. Dissolved by his mercy we fell to the ground, and wept to the praise of the mercy we had found.

After that, we found that He was not only willing to pardon us, but that He had come to robe us in His own righteousness that we might stand accepted in His place. At this, we wondered much; but when we saw that He really did impute to us His own righteousness, and that we, as sinners, stood before God "accepted in the Beloved," that pulled the sluices up again, and as we realized how we had been a lover of sin instead of a lover of God, yet He blessed us with a wondrous righteousness, we repented even more.

Then a voice whispered that being pardoned and justified, we were also adopted into the family of God. Now we wondered more than ever; how could it be that an heir of wrath should be able to say, "Abba, Father." As we understood this, we said, "Father, we did not know that You were our Father, or we would not have trespassed against You, and gone away from You as we have done." As we grieved that we had so long offended our Father and our God, our voices were almost choked, our hearts were full, and our tears freely flowed. To make a long story short, we find ourselves repenting more and more every day. We are more and

more angry with ourselves to think we did not keep our Father's commands in our minds or serve Him with our hearts.

No doubt, as we learn more of His goodness, it will always lead us to repentance; and we pray, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, that we speak what is in your mind also. The dearer Christ is to us, the blacker is sin in our sight. The sweeter the love of God is to us, the more bitter is the thought of having so long sinned against it. The more you see what divine grace has done for you and to you, the more you smite on your breast and cry, "How could I ever have sinned against the Lord as I have done; and how can I sin against Him as I still continue to do?"

"Ah!" says one, "but mine is a very bad case, for I have had a relapse. I did think I was saved once, but I have been just as bad or even worse since then." Ah, but our Master delights to forgive His backsliding children! He has put this invitation in the Scriptures on purpose for you: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you." Again and again He says, "Return! Return! Return! For I will receive you graciously, and love you freely."

"Ah!" says one, "but I do not feel my need of Christ as I would like to feel it. I believe it in theory, but I do not feel it as I should." Well, be humbled about this; weep because you do not weep; be grieved to think that you should be so hard-hearted; but, oh! remember that Christ can cure hard hearts quite as well as sinful ones. Come just as you are. You have a real need of Christ, whether you feel it or not. It is not your sense of need, but your real need of Christ that must draw you to come to Him. O ye who are sick, and who is there among us who is not? – come to the great Physician, and be made whole! We would gladly move your souls if we could, but this is not in man's power. There have been times when some preacher has been able to stir you through and through, as the waves of the sea are moved by the wind; but we

know that when man only has done this, and when the tempest has soon subsided, then you have gone your way as before; but, oh! if God shall own this poor and imperfect statement of most precious truth, then unto Him shall be the glory. How often have we looked back on our sermons and wondered how God could have ever have blessed a soul through them. We pray God to bless the message. Young man, what say you to haul down the black flag, and run up the blood-red cross? You may yet be a minister of Christ, perhaps a missionary of the cross. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, we bid you believe on Him, obey the Gospel of Christ and you shall live; and all who are reading this or listening, we command, beseech, implore, and entreat you, do not put away from you the Gospel which is preached in your hearing.

Trust Christ, obey His Gospel and you shall live; if you will not do so, it may be that you will never again be exhorted to come to Christ. You may never again be told that He is willing and able to receive you. Oh, will you again go your ways, and despise the Lord? Will you go to your merchandise and to your trade, and neglect the salvation of your soul, and let it become still worse in this foul disease which ends in death and damnation? "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways, for why will ye die?"

By that cross where hung the Son of God in mortal flesh, by those five wounds, and by the agonies He endured, we implore you to Turn, look to Him, obey His Gospel and live. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so we lift up the Son of man to sinbitten sinners. Though you do not feel the venom, yet look! look! look!

We pray you turn, look, obey the Gospel and be saved! By the living God, whose splendors of grace we now proclaim, and whose splendors of wrath you shall one day feel if you reject His Son, look! look yonder, see the blood, it flows for you! See the hands of Jesus; they are nailed fast to the tree! See His feet,

fastened by the nails as if they would stop there till you come to Him! See that heart of His; how it streams with blood to wash away your many sins! We plead with you to turn, look, obey the Gospel and live! We cannot say more. God knows we cannot do more; we can only testify to you the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you turn not at our message, we must be a swift witness against you on the Day of Judgment; we must say it, we must be a swift witness against you. Your blood is on your own head! Christ is preached to you. Turn, look, obey the Gospel and live! Believe and obey Christ and be saved! But reject Him, and be lost eternally for rejecting so great a salvation.

Yet, we pray you, think not so much of the law as of the Gospel, nor think so much of hell as of the Christ who has delivered His people from hell, nor so much of divine wrath as of God's goodness. It is a good God whom we set before you. We never wish to be eloquent except when speaking of Him, and all His love to guilty sinners. What has He done to any of us but that which is good? Even if He has sorely smitten us, it has been in mercy that He has done so. Though you may have lain for weeks on a sick-bed, it was meant to cure your souls of the fatal disease of sin. That limb was broken that your spirit might be healed. That loss of sight was sent that you might learn, by inward sight, to turn, look, and see the Lord Jesus as your Savior.

Conclusion

The young preacher introduced an elderly minister whom he described as one of his dearest childhood friends and he wanted him to take a few moments and share with the congregation whatever was on his heart.

The old man slowly stepped to the pulpit and began to speak. "A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the pacific coast when a fast approaching storm blocked any attempt to get

back to the shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright and the three were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized.”

He hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time since the service began, looking somewhat interested. Then he continued with his story:

“Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life – to which boy would he throw the other end of the life line. He only had seconds to make the decision. The father knew that his son was a Christian and he also knew that his son’s friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves. As the father yelled out, ‘I love you, son!’ he threw out the life line to his son’s friend. By the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells into the black of night. His body was never recovered.”

By this time, the two teenagers were sitting up in the pew, anxiously waiting for the next words. The old man continued:

“The father knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus and he could not bear the thought of his son’s friend stepping into an eternity without Jesus. Therefore, he sacrificed his son to save the son’s friend. How great is the love of God that He should do the same for us. Our heavenly Father sacrificed His only begotten son that we could be saved. I urge you to accept His offer to rescue you and take hold of the life line He is now throwing out to you.”

With that, the old minister turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room.

The young preacher walked to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon, with an invitation at the end. No one responded to the appeal.

Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old man's side.

"That was a nice story," politely stated one of them, "but I don't think it was very realistic for a father to give up his only son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian."

"Well, you've got a point there," the old man replied, glancing down at his worn Bible. A big smile broadened his narrow face. He once again looked up at the boys and said,

"It sure isn't very realistic, is it? But, I'm standing here today to tell you that story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up His Son for me. You see, I was that father and your preacher is my son's friend."

God is all goodness, and mercy, and love, and tenderness, and He has set His own dear Son before you saying, "Believe in Him, obey His Gospel and you shall be saved." "O Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Will you not turn to Him and live? Eternal Spirit, turn them, and they shall be turned, for Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.