

The World Bears Witness to God's Goodness

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[0:00] Well, this evening, I'd like us to turn back together to Acts 14. Let's read verses 15 to 17 again. This is when the people tried to come and offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas as though they were some kind of divine figures.

And Paul responds by saying, Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

In past generations, he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, but he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

This evening, we're in the middle of a short three-part series called Glory, Goodness, Guilt, Grace. And in this series, in this short series, we are thinking about what theologians have called natural theology.

And when we introduced this two weeks ago, we were highlighting that that's not really referring to our theology of nature. It's not referring to what the Bible says about the creation out there.

[1:15] That would be part of our doctrine of creation. Instead, natural theology, rather than talking about what the Bible says about nature, instead, it's referring to what nature tells us about the God of the Bible.

And so I think there's a quote that's coming up on the screen from a theologian called William Cunningham, and he describes natural theology as the information that may be obtained concerning God from the natural exercise of our own powers upon ourselves and upon the objects around us.

In other words, when we look at the world around us, when we look at ourselves, when we think about that, it helps us to learn more about God. We started this two weeks ago in Psalm 19, which is the magnificent statement that the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

In other words, all around us, the created world is speaking to us about God. And Psalm 19, we saw, is especially pointing us to the glory of the God who has made it all.

And you see that glory in the vastness of the universe before us on, well, a glimpse of which is before us on a star-filled sky on a clear night. And you also see it when you look at a flower or even at our own body in detail.

[2:42] And another Scottish theologian, Thomas Chalmers, used to say that you can use a telescope, you can use a microscope, and you're going to see more of the glory and majesty of God. So the world around us is crying out to us about the glory of God.

But even though that voice is there and even though that voice is loud, we struggle to hear it. And one of the big points we highlighted a couple of weeks ago, and that we're going to repeat again and again and again, is that natural theology is not neutral theology.

Natural theology is not neutral theology. And the reason that's important to emphasize is that when we think about God and when we are asking the biggest questions of life and death and right and wrong and truth and error, we are never asking those questions on neutral territory.

So often we think that we are. We think in our exercise of these questions about God, about life, we think we need to sort of stand in the neutral middle ground to figure out what's true, what's right, what's wrong, and that from that neutral territory we can make a clear and objective judgment.

We assume that we have that neutral territory to think in. We don't have it. And despite the fact that we don't have that, lots of people think that we do. And this is why many people have tried over the years to actually put the Bible to one side and say, and many theologians have done this, they've

tried to put the Bible to one side and say, we're going to try and prove the existence of God.

[4:10] And that was a very prominent thing, particularly in the Middle Ages, and some fascinating arguments were presented. Equally, people have done the opposite where they've also said, well, I'm going to stand on neutral territory and prove that there isn't a God.

And again, both approaches are actually assuming the same thing, assuming that they can stand on neutral ground to either prove or disprove the existence of God.

But neither of these approaches really work. Nobody in the history of thought has been successful in proving the existence of God because many people still doubt that, and nobody's been successful in proving the non-existence of God because loads of people still believe in Him.

The whole proof thing doesn't really work. The reason it doesn't work is because neutral, objective ground where we can exercise our own powers of reason and judgment, that neutral territory doesn't exist.

In other words, we're never neutral when we think about God or about any of these big questions of life. And that's because we're biased, it's because we're finite, and because we're sinful.

[5:23] We're biased in the sense that we can't escape the fact that we've been influenced by our environment, our history, our experience, and our preferences. And all of these things will influence our judgment. We can't help it.

It's always going to affect our judgment. And that might affect us in a good way, it might affect us in a bad way, but it's never in a neutral way. Our judgment about anything is always influenced by factors that we've experienced in our lives.

Also, as well as being biased, we're finite. And that's just to emphasize the fact that our knowledge and comprehension cannot take everything in. We cannot absorb all the information that we need to absorb.

So I used to be an engineer before I was a minister, and sometimes we'd be doing a job, we could work on an engine, and you would take the engine, you'd put it on the bench in the workshop, whether it was an engine or a part or whatever it might be, and you're able to pretty much build a comprehensive understanding of that engine, and you can make a judgment, and you can fix it. That's possible with an engine or with a starter motor or with a set of injectors or something like that. You can put it on the bench. You can't put the universe on the bench. And you can't put God on the bench.

[6:38] And you can't put the massive categories of right and wrong and truth and error and time and eternity onto the bench. It's all too big for us. And so our judgments are limited by the fact that we're finite.

And so even though the world around us is a symphony to the glory of God, we cannot take it all in. So we're biased. Bias doesn't necessarily mean bad, but it just means biased.

It just means influenced. We're biased. We're finite. Again, that's not necessarily bad. It's just a fact of what we are. But the one thing that is bad is the fact that we're also sinful. And sin has affected our thinking.

And theologians will often talk about the noetic effect of sin. That's the effect of sin on our minds.

And it means that our judgment has been skewed, and it's been damaged by the effect of sin.

And so even though the world around us is screaming to us that there has to be something behind all of this, and even though our hearts have a kind of yearning for truth and for reality and for something bigger that must be above us, so often we will suppress the truth and will refuse to listen to what's been said to us.

[7:50] And that's why natural theology is always limited in its effectiveness. And so the world around us is telling us crucial things that we need to know.

And in particular in this series, we are thinking about the fact that it's telling us about glory, goodness, and guilt. It's telling us about glory, goodness, and guilt.

And we need to know about those things. But the world around us is not telling us everything that we need to know because in order to be saved, we also need a message of grace.

And that message is in a category of its own. So we're thinking about all of this together. Two weeks ago, we looked at how the world speaks to us of God's glory.

This week, we're going to think more about goodness. And Acts 14 is going to be our guide because it reveals to us two categories of goodness, and these are going to be our headings, experiential goodness and moral goodness.

[8:52] And I'll explain what I mean by these as we go. So first of all, thinking about experiential goodness. What do I mean by that? Well, what I mean is simply this, that there are so many ways that we experience God's goodness through the environment around us.

And this is, the interesting thing is that this is what Paul directly highlights in this passage, in particular in verse 17. So we're going to put verse 17 on its own up on the screen. And we maybe don't quite capture the emphasis on, emphasis that's been made here because the English translation, it's very, very good, but it's not quite, not quite as perfect as we want it to be. Now, my pen's not working tonight, so I can't throw on the screen. So you just have to imagine that I'm drawing on the screen. You see in English there, it says, yet he did not leave himself without witness, comma, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons. In the original Greek, the comma is in a slightly different place. It's a little bit further on. It's actually, the emphasis is more, he did not leave himself without witness by doing good, comma, he gave you rain from heavens, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And the big point that I want to highlight there is that the witnessing and the doing good are tied together. that's how God bears witness about himself.

[10:15] He bears witness about himself by doing good. In other words, a key part of natural theology is God doing good to humanity.

And the big emphasis in verse 17 there is that that goodness is something that we experience. and that can apply in a thousand ways.

There are so many good things that we receive from God's hand. But what's really interesting is to see what Paul specifically highlights in this verse. And so you can see it there. There's three things. Rain from heaven, fruitful seasons, and hearts that have been satisfied by food and gladness. And I just want to look at each of these in turn in a little bit more detail.

So first of all, Paul speaks of rain from heaven. Now, living in Lewis, especially on a day like today, it's harder to associate rain with goodness because we sometimes feel like we have too much of it.

[11:16] But even living in the soggy Hebrides where we live, we can still see how precious rain is. And the big point about rain is that it's something that we need.

And so as God sends rain, he's providing for our needs. We need rain for drinking and we need rain to produce food. And so even if you think about it at the most basic level, humanity can't survive without clean water.

And so when it rains, the thing that we absolutely need for our survival is literally falling on top of us. It's an amazing provision. And here, there's actually a really interesting connection to be made back with Psalm 19.

We can pop Psalm 19 up on the screen there because both these verses, Psalm 19, verse 1 and 2 and Acts 14 and 17 are getting us to do the same thing. They're getting us to look up. Psalm 19 is getting us to look up into an endless starry sky on a cloudless night and it declares the glory of God. In Acts 14, you're looking up on a grey day when it's bucketing and you're seeing the abundant goodness of God. And that rain produces crops and that leads to fruitful seasons.

[12:32] and again, this spoke very powerfully to the society and culture in the ancient Near East where rainfall was so crucial for a harvest.

And we are maybe a little bit removed from that today but there are so many people in the world still today for whom rainfall is so crucial. A friend of mine has been a missionary in Uganda, Kenny John McKenzie.

He spoke here a few weeks ago. He's visited Uganda. Well, he spent most of the last 20 years in Uganda. He was sending me photos this summer saying, pray for rain and he was sending photos of crops that were just withered because they didn't have rain.

And we maybe don't see that so clearly because we just go to Tesco and we buy our food and our bread and everything else but all of that depends on rain. Every loaf of bread, every bowl of fruit, every bowl of cereal, every cup of tea or coffee, all of it depends on rain, all of it depends on a fruitful season for a farmer.

And the theological implications of this were especially important in biblical times because so many of the pagan religions, especially those of the nations surrounding Israel in the Old Testament, so many of their religion, so much of their religion was tied to rainfall and fertility and harvest.

[13:46] And so much of their worship was trying to invoke the gods to send the rains that would produce the harvest that would allow them to survive. And one of the reasons why Israel struggled

so much with the snare of idolatry was that they were constantly surrounded by this temptation to think that it's the pagan gods that are the source of the rainfall that we need because everything in the religions around them was tied into this.

Fruitful seasons are crucial for survival. Paul's telling us that they're a demonstration, a witness to the goodness of God. Then you have the third thing, we can just go back to Acts 14, 17 on its own. The third thing that Paul mentions in regard to demonstrating the goodness of God is that he satisfies our hearts with food and gladness.

I absolutely love that this is what Paul mentions. So he's trying to persuade the people of Lystra that God has always been bearing witness to them that he exists.

In other words, he's saying, look, it's like, give us the proof that God exists. And Paul says, okay, I'll give you the proof that God exists. And the example he gives them is the wonderful feeling of eating a delicious meal.

[15:07] And I love that that's what he highlights. God provides rain. That brings fruitful seasons and that means that you can have wonderful food and when you do, it is so good.

Or to put it another way, the universe declares the glory of God and roast dinner declares the goodness of God. That's exactly what Paul is saying in this verse.

And the key point I want to emphasize here is that we experience, this is experiential goodness. goodness. So we feel the rain pour down and we benefit from it.

We bring the harvest in and the fruit that's grown and we benefit from it. And we sit down with family and friends and we enjoy a wonderful meal and we benefit from it.

And all the time these things are crying out to us about the God who's been so good to us. And it's teaching us that this reality of experiential goodness is a key part of natural theology.

[16:12] And so much of this is actually tied to our senses. We experience good things through our senses. So we look at things and we can experience their goodness. You look at a sunset across the Atlantic.

You look at beautiful flowers that have grown over these summer months. You look at the mountains of Scotland. You look at the sun glistening on a loch or on the shore.

You look at trees in full bloom or in the autumn as you get a thousand different shades of brown and copper. You look at people. You look at their smiles.

You look at works of art. There's an aesthetic beauty all around us that we can look at. We hear things and we experience their goodness.

Bird song, music, harmonies, the lap of waves on a beach, the voice of a child, the beauty of language, a Hebridean accent.

[17:10] We touch things and we experience their goodness. So you touch the petal of a delicate flower. You run your hand through soft grass. You rub Scottish heather in between your fingers.

You pick up a precious stone and feel how smooth it is. You squish a baby's chubby cheeks. You hold someone's hand and you experience something so precious.

We smell things and we experience their goodness. Flowers, cut grass, peach smoke, fresh bread, crispy bacon.

I'm sure you could add your own favorites to that list. And we taste things and experience their goodness. Ice cold water, proper coffee, not instant coffee, only proper coffee.

Medium rare steak, Christmas dinner. so, so good. These things are so good. And the key point is that as we experience that goodness, the goodness is telling you something.

[18:21] That's what Paul's saying. It's telling you something. It's telling you about God. It's telling you that he's the giver of all these good things. James highlights that in James 1, 17.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there's no variation or shadow due to change. There's two very important points of application here to mention briefly.

The first is that this has to shape how we look at life. So, we look at the weather, we look at the harvest, we look at our cupboards, we look at our dinner, all of it is bearing witness to the goodness of God.

And I, honestly, I miss that so much because in the busyness of life, the distractions of life, you don't even think about it half the time and yet, all the time, all the time that witness is there.

It has to shape how we look at life. The second point of application is that this has to shape how we look at God. And this is massively important because it's reminding us that when we look at God,

we have to recognize that He is the fountain of everything that's good.

[19:40] That's a big point made by a famous reformer, John Calvin. I've mentioned this before because I love this emphasis in Calvin's theology. He highlights that we will never worship God properly unless we realize that He is the fountain of everything that's good in our lives.

And this is so good because he's highlighting, Calvin is highlighting that we don't just emphasize, we don't just worship God because we have to, although it's duty as though you must. That's not actually going to prompt through worship.

It just prompts routine and obligation. Instead, he's saying, if you recognize that God is the source of everything that is brilliant in your life, then you fall down on your knees in joyful thanksgiving to Him.

We do not worship God simply because it's our duty. We worship Him because He's the source of everything that makes us truly happy in our lives.

So experiential goodness bears witness to God. And that's what you see directly in Acts 17. But across the whole chapter, you see indirect references to moral goodness.

[20:48] And by moral goodness, what I mean by that is just basically the fact that there's certain things that are right and certain things that are wrong. Certain things that are good and there are certain things that are bad.

And you see several of each in Acts chapter 14. There's lots of positive things. So verse 1, you see Paul and Barnabas speaking at the synagogue in Iconium and it has a really positive effect on the people there.

They go on to heal a cripple at Lystra in verses 8 to 10. And you see, well, that's beautiful. The man couldn't walk. He'd never walked and he was healed miraculously.

You go to verses 21 and 22 and you see the encouragement of the believers in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. And all of it's brilliant. These are all good things.

But interwoven into the narrative of the chapter are so many things that are wrong and often it's the response to these good things that are wrong. And so there was the good teaching in verse 1 but then unbelieving Jews came and poisoned their minds.

[21:53] There's an attempt to stone Paul and Barnabas because they're not happy with what they're doing. In verse 13 to 15, we saw the idolatry, sorry, not 13 to 15, 11 to 13, you see the idolatry of the crowds.

They see Paul and Barnabas perform this miracle. They heal the man and they think, oh, these are gods. We need to bow down before them. And of course, that's breaching the first, the very first of the Ten Commandments.

And it kind of culminates in verse 19 with the violence of the Jews towards Paul and they'd left him for dead, thinking and hoping that they'd killed him.

And all of that, all of these are just indirect reference to that category of moral goodness, moral evil that we see repeated millions of times over in the history of humanity.

We see it in the world around us today. All of us, all of us, and everybody in Britain, everybody in, everybody, everywhere, can look at the world just now and see things and think, that's good and that's bad.

[22:57] We have these categories. And we experience this ourselves as well. We experience things that are really good and right, but we also experience things that are morally wrong and you will have experienced that many times.

Maybe there's times when you've been deceived or you've been lied to or you've been threatened. Maybe there's times you've felt hated. Maybe there's times you've even been exposed to or experiencing violence from somebody else.

And all of these things are wrong. All of these things are things that shouldn't be there. The big point that lies behind this though is that it's just pointing us to the big categories that we have to hold in our world view.

And it's telling us that if all these things that we see that are wrong, if they really are wrong, it's because other things really are right. And if we see things that really are bad, it's because there's other things that really are good.

And this is perhaps where natural theology speaks that it's most powerfully because when we look at the world around us and when we see the vulnerable being exploited, when we see deception and corruption among the powerful, when we are lied to or betrayed, when people are violent or

manipulative or abusive, when justice is ignored, when wickedness is swept under the carpet, when anything like that happens, none of us say, oh well.

[24:24] All of us know that it's wrong. And the only reason we know it's wrong and bad is because we know that something else is right and good.

And that's telling you something. Moral goodness as a category is telling you something. And in particular, it's confirming two things.

First is that it's confirming goodness. And this might sound like a silly thing to say, but it's a really important thing to recognize, that none of us can live without the category of goodness in our lives. I've never met anybody who can look at a stunning Hebridean beach or be in a joyful, warm, precious family meal and walk away from these things and say, there's nothing good in that. some of the awful acts of violence and deception that we see. The other way around, I've never met anybody who can look at some of the awful acts of violence and deception that we see and say, there's nothing bad about that.

[25:30] None of us can live without this category of goodness. In fact, goodness for us is an ultimate category. It's the kind of thing that we would put in the things that matter most.

And if we want it at that level, if we want it at that level, then it has to be, it can only be there if there's an ultimate explanation of goodness, an ultimate ground of goodness.

And that can only be God. It's interesting. People often struggle with the problem of evil in terms of whether they should believe in God or not.

So lots of people have struggled with this over the years and it's an understandable struggle. They say, well, if there's a good God, why is there evil in the world? And that's a struggle that many people have battled with over the years and there's different ways that we can try and address that, but it's a very, very difficult question.

But it's maybe an even bigger problem for the unbeliever to try and address the problem of good. So yes, the problem of evil is a problem, but you can only say that evil is a problem if you have a category of goodness.

[26:50] And the key question is, where did you get that from? How do we account for goodness? How can we make judgments How can we make judgments as to what is good or not?

How can we hold to that whole idea of goodness if we abandon the idea of God? And the interesting thing is that this is exactly what the philosophers and the artists of the 20th century discovered.

In the 20th century, most of the higher levels of intellectual influence had kind of moved in the direction of atheism and most people had kind of figured out that, well, we're beyond believing in God.

It's a primitive thing. We don't need God anymore. So most kind of most artists, most philosophers came to the conclusion that there was no God.

And that conclusion shifted their philosophy and shifted their art in a very, very particular direction. It shifted the philosophers into a direction of despair where ultimately it's like, well, we have no category for right and wrong.

[28:01] we have no ultimate source of goodness. We've actually got nothing. And the artists reflected that, which is why you see many of the really prominent pieces of art are remarkable in a way because they're reflecting the intellectual mindset of the times, but the actual thing on the wall is just a scribble or a mess or a distortion because the whole foundation of a category of goodness has been pulled away.

And all of this is because we're not listening to what the world around us is telling us, that if goodness is a thing, there has to be a source behind it.

If goodness is real and ultimate, God has to be real too. So it confirms, moral goodness confirms goodness as a category.

But the second thing that it confirms is guilt. And this is where we go to the diagram that we put up a couple of weeks ago, feed into each other because we, our categories, glory, goodness, and guilt actually feed into each other because we want the category of goodness, don't we?

And we want God to be the ultimate source of that category of goodness. In fact, we want His goodness to be the level of glory. It's glorious goodness, the best goodness that we can imagine.

[29:31] It's impeccable goodness and it has to be for it to be ultimate. But as soon as we start thinking in those terms, we realize that we fall short and that we're not at that level.

In fact, we're not even close to that level. In fact, we're miles from that level. And that's why goodness is a beautiful and a painful subject to think about.

Because when we think about it in its highest terms, we see everything that we want and we see the very thing that we are not.

We see what we want, but we don't see what we are. And you see that in Acts 14. All the evil things that we highlighted in Acts 14.

Who did them? People. And Paul himself, he's on the receiving end of it in Acts 14. Back in Acts 6, 7, and 8, he was the persecutor.

[30:40] And all of this confirms our guilt. I'm running out of time. Oh, this is very frustrating. One of the things that we have to recognize here, and one of the things that can actually confirm our guilt, can you go back a couple of slides?

I forgot to put a slide in. Go back to the one that's got the heading in it, the two headings in it. There you go, that one. One of the things that actually I think confirms our guilt is that very often in our lives, we think that we have to choose between experiential goodness and moral goodness.

And what do I mean by that? Well, what we tend to think is that actually doing something that's wrong is going to taste really good. And we also think doing something right is actually going to be a bit dull.

And we create this kind of dichotomy where we think that actually to be happiest, we have to kind of indulge in the things that are wrong. And people do that in a thousand ways. They do it in relation to food, to drink, to sex, to money, to power.

But in all sorts of ways, we think the thing that's wrong is the thing that will make us happy. We think my experiential goodness, it's going to taste good, it has to come at the expense of moral goodness. And the other way around, this is what puts people off being Christians.

[31:54] They think, well, okay, if I do, if I follow the path that God wants me to follow, if I try to obey his commandments, my life's going to be rubbish. I'm not going to experience good things. And that mindset, you have to recognize that that mindset is a lie.

It's a satanic lie. It's the lie that made humanity fall in the first place. Satan was trying to get humanity to drive a wedge between holiness and happiness.

The idea that if you're going to be holy, if you're going to follow the Lord and do what he says, you're not going to be happy. If you want to be happy, you need to ignore God. Driving a wedge between happiness and holiness, it's a lie.

Please never, ever listen to it. too often we do. And so much of our lives, so much of my life has been making stupid decisions that I thought would be good that have actually only confirmed my guilt.

And all of this is just this problem. If you go back to the circle slide again, there we go, that you see God's glory, he reveals his goodness, and then actually it exposes the fact that we are guilty.

[33:00] And that doesn't tell us that God's not glorious, it actually tells us that he is glorious. Because he's impeccably perfect, and we have this circle, and this is where natural theology takes us.

It actually takes us into a cycle of glory and doom. And there's only one solution. The solution is grace.

But the key point is that grace is not revealed through natural theology. It's not revealed through what the heavens are declaring, or what the rain is declaring, or the fruitful seasons, or the good meals.

Grace is revealed in the gospel, in the message of Jesus, that he has come to save us.

This is why natural theology is always insufficient. It will tell us about glory, goodness, and guilt. It won't tell us about grace. We need the Bible for that. We need God's special revelation salvation through his son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

[34:01] Now, I'm nearly finished, but there's just two things I really want to say. Super fast, super fast. Two big things to highlight how grace applies to goodness. First of all is that grace just deals with our guilt.

Grace deals with our guilt. That Jesus died on the cross, rose again, so that all the ways in which we have failed to be good, and all the ways in which we have fallen short of God's glory, all of them are forgiven.

And so, there's just this amazing grace in response to our guilt. That's really what lies at the heart of the gospel. But the second thing I want to highlight is that grace doesn't just describe God forgiving our failure to be good.

Grace also teaches us about the abundance of goodness that God wants to pour into the lives of all who trust in Jesus and who follow him.

And so, goodness is actually speaking to us in two ways. The goodness that you experience, if you're a Christian or if you become one, the good things you experience, the rain and the fruitful seasons and the good meal and everything else, it's pointing to, it's teaching you things, it's speaking to you in two ways.

[35 : 08] It's pointing backwards to God as the source of all goodness, but it's pointing forwards because it's a foretaste. It's a glimpse of everything that God is promising for all who trust in him in his new creation.

In other words, if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, then the grace of God means that Jesus wants to pour an abundance of blessing into your life for eternity.

eternity. You see so many glimpses of that in the Gospels. We see so many glimpses of it in our lives. The big thing I want you to remember, I've run out of time, so I'm skipping out a few things. I just want to go to the big thing I want you to realize.

I want you to realize that in the Gospel, Jesus only ever wants to be unbelievably good to you. that is what he wants to do. That's what grace involves. That's what the Gospel offers.

[36 : 13] And so this week, you are going to taste so much goodness from God and thank him for it. But that will also remind us of our guilt. But as it does, so may the waves of God's grace flood into your heart.

God's grace. Reminding you of the fullness of forgiveness that we have if we're trusting in Jesus. And may that help you to see that the goodness you're enjoying now is just a glimpse of the unbelievable goodness that Jesus is preparing for his people.

Amen. Let's pray.