

# Great and Good

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## Psalm 8:1, 3-5

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Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory in the heavens.

[...]

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.

## Introduction

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I want to look at one of the most important and foundational issues in our faith: what God is like.

It's easy to get so caught up with Church Stuff we don't think much about this. But it's crucial.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder.

-- James 2:19.

But everything about our Christian lives follows from how we see God. But don't take my word for it:

- Jesus thought it was important when he told the woman at the well, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know" (John 4:22).
- Paul thought it was important when he was preaching in Athens: "as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about" (Acts 17:23).
- And he thought it was important when he wrote about the Jews: "I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2).

Yes, our higher goal is not just to know *about* God, but to know God. But just as a house doesn't stand without a foundation, so the higher goal doesn't stand without the lower.

Seeing God clearly is the first step in the prayer of Richard of Chichester:

May I see you more clearly,  
Love you more dearly,  
And follow you more nearly.

## What God is like

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Recently, one of our leaders prayed: "Forgive us when we imagine you smaller than you are."

But we *always* do that. Because we can't possibly imagine him as he is. He won't fit in our minds.

Theologians break down the characteristics of God into a lot of headings. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* lists five "incommunicable" attributes of God (independence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, unity) and 20 "communicable" attributes (spirituality, invisibility, omniscience, wisdom, truthfulness, goodness, love, mercy, holiness, peace, righteousness, jealousy, wrath, will, freedom, omnipotence, perfection, blessedness, beauty and glory).

We won't try to pack in that much detail!

We're going to look at just two things about God today, and Psalm 8 shows us both of them.

## Great and good

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God is both Great and Good.

But we have some difficulty with these words.

Here's an example from football, but you can find it everywhere. Each week on *Match of the Day*, we hear "that was a great goal!". I want to reply, "No, that was a *good* goal; Michael Owen's solo goal against Argentina in 1998 was a *great* goal."

But that not right. "Great" isn't just "good, but more so". It's a different thing

This is clearer when we talk about great and good *people*.

Who was the greatest person in the 20th century? For power, influence, affect on world events, it's Hitler. But we would not call him good!

When I think of a good person, I think of someone in a church I was in long ago, who I'll call Annie. She spent an amazing amount of time with the least lovable people in the church. But we would not call her great. No-one knew of her outside her own church, and not even everyone there.

Greatness and goodness do not often go together. Perhaps to become great in the world you can't afford to be good.

But in God, we find both qualities to the fullest degree. In Psalm 8:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

(Greatness)

What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.

(Goodness)

## ***Both great and good***

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Why is this important? Because we see two facets of who God is.

- If he were only great, he would be a terrible tyrant
- If he were only good, he would be unable to help us

God's greatness and goodness are not in conflict. He doesn't alternate between them.

Sometimes people see the Old Testament God as great and terrible, and Jesus as good: "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild"

But that doesn't stand up at all.

- The same OT God who created the universe in Genesis spoke kindly to the outcast slave Hagar in the Genesis 16 and 21.
- The same Jesus who touched and healed unclean lepers in Luke 5 terrified the disciples in Luke 8:

"In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him"."  
-- Luke 8:25.

## **Different perspectives for understanding**

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We need to see something from many different angles to understand it.

If you see Concorde from the side, it's long and thin, like a pencil. But seen from above it's triangular.

Both are true; but neither truth alone gives a full picture of Concorde.

[Maybe mention photogrammetry.]

In the same way, if we're going to understand what God is like, we need to see both his greatness and his goodness.

## The greatness and goodness of God in the Bible

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Once you see this both-great-and-good pattern, you spot it everywhere on the Bible. I'll give three examples to finish.

First, from the Old Testament, a very simple one: just three words!

It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.  
-- Isaiah 63:1.

"Mighty" is his greatness.

"... to save", not to conquer, is his goodness.

Second, from the New Testament, this story:

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.  
"Who touched me?" Jesus asked.  
When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you."  
But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me."  
Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.  
Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."  
-- Luke 8:42a-48.

Here we see the power of Jesus in a miraculous healing.

Then we see the kindness of Jesus in how he spoke to her when she was trembling with fear.

And finally, as Jesus was being arrested, knowing it would result in his crucifixion:

The men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.  
Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"  
-- Matthew 26:50b-54.

We can hardly imagine the power of someone who could command more than twelve legions of angels. That is Jesus's greatness.

But he submitted to his arrest, trial, torture and execution for us. That is his goodness.

## Conclusion

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God is great, and God is good.

Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* describes God as "the greatest good". I like that, because it captures both "great" and "good" in one sentence.

But I think we can also say he is "the goodest great".