

“The more I learned about God’s goodness, the more I realized how little I truly trusted Him. I asked God to use the teaching to transform my mind. He answered those prayers and established a firm foundation of trust in His goodness. Without this understanding, which developed through a day-by-day walk with Jesus through joys and deep sorrows, I would remain stuck in the early stages of spiritual transformation. The fruit of knowing God’s goodness in the depths of my soul brings peace and intimacy with my Creator. This rest has brought calm into my life, and I no longer feel the need to perform for the approval of God or others. Instead of losing myself in Christ, I am finding the person God created me to be.”

— LINDA STROHKORB, mother of three teenagers

“Drawing upon their rich life experiences and deep passion for God, authors Mimi Wilson and Shelly Cook Volkhardt explore the essence of God’s character and attributes. By examining God as the physical source of light, the essence of truth, the creator of time, and the source of all goodness, Mimi and Shelly unfold doctrinal truths in a manner both approachable and profound. With expertise from years of intimately looking at God’s holiness, they shine fresh light on the richness of God’s character so the reader’s vision of God becomes sharper and clearer.”

— PEGGY LANUM, mother of two grade-school children

mimi wilson and shelly cook volkhardt

trusting in **His goodness**

a woman's guide to knowing God's purpose



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From Mimi:

To my dear husband, Cal; to our children, Kurt and Lori, Tom and Kyndra, Kevin and Sarah; and to my precious grandchildren, whom I love dearly.

From Shelly:

For my precious “boys” — Glen, my beloved; Carl; and Culver — with deep love and thanks to God for the family He has made us.

For Mimi and the other women who have built into my life by their example, teaching, and friendship; you have enriched me forever.

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Chapter 1

360 Degrees of Absolute Goodness

Karen welcomed us warmly as we stepped into her lovely home. Windows two stories tall looked out onto breathtaking mountains wearing white winter hats of snow. The sun was shining with a brilliance defying the bitter cold. The dining table was perfectly set, and Karen served us a delicious meal. She seemed to enjoy a fairy-tale existence: She had a handsome, successful husband and a beautiful son who made top honors at school and excelled on the basketball team. But when we asked her if she had other children, something indefinable flitted across her face.

“We have a daughter in heaven,” she said. “Two years ago our Katie died. She was a few weeks shy of her university graduation. We were stunned when we got the news. We couldn’t believe it when the police ruled it a suicide. The grief was suffocating, overwhelming. We couldn’t comprehend any of it. Katie’s boyfriend was as shocked as we were. Like us, he had no inkling Katie was heavyhearted. Her professors described her as a dedicated student, intelligent, bright, and happy. No one in our daughter’s life could have imagined that she would take her life.

“I was angry at God. How could He let Katie commit suicide? Why didn’t He make us aware of her despondency? If she was murdered,

why hadn't He protected her? Doesn't the Bible say that God protects His children? Katie loved God; she had committed her life to Him. She had so much to offer Him, and now she was gone. Most days I could barely breathe through the horror of it. I was teetering on the conclusion that God was at fault, that He must not really be a good God if He would let Katie die, regardless of how it happened."

Is God Really Good?

Karen wanted to know, *Is God really good? Can I trust Him?* We don't know anyone who hasn't asked these questions, who at some point hasn't wondered if God didn't have it out for them. The problem is, many people never get beyond the questions; they remain stuck in their doubts.

Without a strong confidence in God's goodness, it's impossible to build a foundation from which we can cultivate gratefulness, trust, obedience, and rest, which lead to transformation. If we don't believe that God is good, we will become cynical and angry when difficulties come our way. If we don't believe He is good, we can't trust Him with all of our life, we can't obey Him in everything, and we can't give thanks for the hard things in life. Transformation — Christlikeness — comes as we live within the circle of God's goodness, viewing everything that happens through that lens. When we live in the circle of God's goodness, it becomes the filter for how we interpret everything in life — the good and the bad, the beautiful and the horrific.

Even the first woman wondered if God was good. When Satan approached Eve in the Garden of Eden, he asked a question that got her to focus on the fruit of the forbidden tree. She began to wonder, *If God is good, why would He forbid me to eat something that is good for me?*

What if Eve's answer to the serpent's question had been, "Look to the east. As far as your eye can see, I can eat of the fruit of any tree. Look to the west. As far as your eye can see, I can eat of the fruit of any

tree. To the north and south, the same. Why would I sit under the tree and focus on the fruit I cannot have?” Like Eve’s, our eyes are often on the things that God has determined are not for our benefit. Being finite, Eve could not understand God’s ways, nor can we.

What would Eve have seen if instead of focusing on the fruit that God said she could not have she had looked around at His provision? The trees were newly created, and the fruit was surely the best of the best, the colors deep, rich, and inviting. There was likely every variety of apricots, apples, pears, kiwis, plums, oranges, lemons, pomegranates, watermelons, strawberries, and so much more. Eve was surrounded by a 360-degree panorama of God’s abundant goodness, but her focus was locked in on what she could not have. If she had fixated on what God did permit, she would have been able to put the forbidden fruit into perspective even though she did not grasp God’s purposes. If Eve had only paid attention to God’s bounty, how different the outcome of her life would have been! And how dramatically changed our lives could be if we did the same.

Few of us know what it is to live in the circle of God’s goodness. We may understand intellectually that God is good, and we may even have stepped into a slice of His goodness, but our focus is typically on only one or two aspects of it: on His sovereignty or on His love. Like Eve, we often look to what we don’t have and decide (many times without realizing it) that God must not be good since we cannot have what we desire. We don’t have to look far to see evidence of this. Single women bemoan that they have no husband, and married women wish they didn’t have the husbands they have. Chronically ill women grieve over being sick. Childless women mourn their infertility, and those who have children weep over yet another pregnancy. Some women wish they were skinnier, and others wish they were fatter, and on it goes.

It’s not wrong to feel sadness and grief over these things. It’s normal. However, when these feelings dominate our lives, we’re tempted to focus on the negatives and allow them to grow so big in

our minds that they blot out all the good. Consequently, we miss the essence of who God is.

God's Essence

Everything good in the world is born out of God's character. All that is good comes from Him. We can see goodness in a myriad of things in our daily lives — in the fresh bloom of a rose, the loving smile of a friend, the innocence of a newborn baby, and the gifts of taste, movement, and smell. And in life itself. The essence of goodness, its true flavor, comes from God because He *is* goodness.

Moses saw God in ways that were unknown before his day. He encountered God at the burning bush. He witnessed the plagues in Egypt and stood on the banks of the Red Sea as the waters parted. He camped under smoke coming from Mt. Sinai, yet he still asked for further insight into God's character. He experienced the presence of God, but still he longed for more. In Exodus 33:18, Moses makes a simple request: "Now show me your glory."

Graciously God replies,

I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. (Exodus 33:19-20)

Then He adds,

There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen. (verses 21-23)

When Moses asks to see God's glory, God responds by offering to show His goodness. Why would He do that? Because every facet of the expansive character of God is partnered with His goodness. God's goodness is so much more than the glory Moses wanted to see. He was asking for a slice when God wanted Him to see a bigger picture. Goodness is "His essence."¹

In this event, God clearly tied His name to His goodness. The name *Lord* can be translated Jehovah or "I AM that I AM." This was the same name God used when He introduced Himself to Moses at the burning bush. As the I AM, God's goodness is self-existent and eternal, always in the present. It is unchanging. Out of His goodness, He created all things and maintains all things. His good rule is absolutely sovereign.

When God speaks to Moses in this passage, He displays His goodness through acts of mercy and compassion. We see His mercy as He prepares Moses for the encounter. He tells Moses that man cannot look on Him and live, so He finds a rock for Moses to hide behind when He reveals Himself. We see His compassion when He covers Moses with His hand. Who is God protecting Moses from? From Himself! How little we understand this. Nothing created can protect us from the consuming holiness of almighty God. Moses would have died unless he was hidden *in* God from the consuming power *of* God. Only the uncreated hand of God could keep Moses alive. There was no safer place in the universe for Moses to be.

The same is true for us. Just as Moses would have died by looking directly at God, so would we. God's hand still must protect us from His consuming holiness. But we can see even more of God's goodness in that the hand that covers us is pierced. We cannot draw near to God unless He makes it possible. Jesus Christ's death on the cross covers our sins. This covering allows us to draw near to God without fear of death. Moses saw God's revelation of Himself through the protection of God's hand. We can look at our world and our circumstances through His nail-pierced hand.

The next day when Moses goes to meet with God,

The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”
(Exodus 34:5-7)

As Moses hides in the rock, covered by God’s hand, he hears further declarations of God’s goodness. He first announces Himself as the Lord. This is a reminder to Moses that He is transcendent, above all created and uncreated. He tells Moses that He is compassionate, full of tender affection toward Moses and all His people. His graciousness indicates the manner in which He gives all His gifts. He longs to show kindness instead of rushing to anger. Out of His abundant goodness and faithfulness He shows His love, and despite His complete holiness, He forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin (see Exodus 34:6-7). Each revelation shows more of God’s goodness. As He passed before Moses, He passes in front of us day by day to allow us a better view of who He is.

Paul, in Ephesians 3:18-19, prays that we would grasp the infinite dimensions of God’s character. His goodness is limitless because His resources are limitless, and it is infinite — without end — because He is infinite. The psalmist wrote, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Psalm 145:15-16). God can meet the needs of everything living at the same time and not deplete the amount of goodness in His own being.

This is hard for us to grasp. We all have limitations, and because of this we often unknowingly project those boundaries onto God. When we come to Him and ask for more of His goodness, He doesn’t turn

His pockets inside out and say, “I’m all out; there’s no more left.” His goodness is never-ending; we cannot make a dent in it. If all mankind had a cup and could dip it into the goodness of God’s character at the same time, our cups would be full and He would not have a drop less of goodness in Him. When we project limits onto God and His goodness, we make Him into a little god in our own image.

God’s goodness is for all and is seen by all, not just a few chosen ones. Matthew 5:45 says, “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” No one lives without evidence of God’s goodness. Since the creation of the world, God has made Himself plainly known through what He created. He revealed His nature — His goodness as well as the rest of who He is — through creation. “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20). What we know of God can point the way for us to keep moving toward Him.

If we look at creation and fail to see the Creator, we are no different from the people Paul talked about in Romans 1:21-22: “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.” At best, we limit ourselves to a small slice of the whole pie of the goodness of God. The people of whom Paul wrote didn’t allow themselves to recognize God’s hand, which led them into further darkness and depravity. One translation of verse 25 says that they suppressed the truth.² It was not ignorance on their part; it was rebellion. The result was that they ended up worshipping creation or idols — the work of their own hands — instead of their Creator God. The goodness of God was all around them, but they denied it.

When we don’t pay attention to the goodness of God surrounding us, we starve our belief that God is good and weaken its foundation.

When that happens and the storms of life batter us, our foundation cracks and we blame God and question His goodness.

How can we become more aware of God's goodness? It's simple, really.

The Art of Savoring His Goodness

The first step to noticing God's goodness is opening our eyes and looking for it.

Shelly:

The backyard of our first home ended in a lake. It was a draw for birds of all kinds. Our first few weeks there, Glen kept saying to me, "Did you see that bird?" He would then describe the color of the bird's beak, wingtips, sometimes even his feet. I was surprised by the details he could give me. To me a bird was a bird. I had never stopped to notice coloring, markings, and physical characteristics.

I bought Glen a bird book and a pair of binoculars for his birthday and we decided to become students of the birds of South Florida. I learned to identify the egrets that came to feed on the fish in the shallow water, the blue heron that flew onto the neighbor's deck across the lake, the sand hill cranes oddly standing in the grass of a field, and many others. A new world opened up to me, all because we decided to cultivate an awareness of the birds of South Florida.

For years I was blind to the evidence of God's goodness all around me the same way I was to birds. I was numb to the circle of His goodness; I allowed it to simply be a part of the scenery, nothing remarkable. I never paid attention.

When the psalmist said, "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8), he was telling us to use our senses to pay attention to the world God created. When we do, we expand our awareness of His goodness.

Many times when we eat we don't pay attention to how the food tastes or how it looks. Contrast this approach with that of professional wine tasters. They pay careful attention to the wine sample in front of them. They hold the glass in their hands and carefully watch how the liquid slides down the sides of the glass. They sniff the wine to capture subtle aromas. They roll the wine around in their mouth, exposing it to all their taste buds. They pay attention to the wine's texture and how it feels. Once they swallow the wine, they note its aftertaste. How long does it last? Do they like the taste? Savoring is an art. It requires time, practice, and focus.

God has given us innumerable spices, colors, and textures to savor. He could have made everything in black and white, but He made food with brilliant colors. The skin of a single mango, for example, can have green, yellow, orange, and even red in it. Each time we notice these things, we can choose to look up into God's face and express our pleasure at His goodness in giving us such a rich variety. As we do this, we strengthen the foundation of our faith in His goodness. The more we store up evidence of His goodness, the stronger our resolve will be to trust Him when our circumstances tempt us to doubt Him.

I Have Resolved . . .

Barbi grew up the youngest of six children. A few days before her birthday, she hugged her father good-bye before he went on a hunting trip. It was the last hug she ever got from him. The next time she saw her dad, on her birthday, he was lying in a casket. Barbi says her dad was bigger than life. He swept everyone up in his expansive enjoyment and passion for life. The emptiness she felt after his death was devastating. After her father's funeral, she told God, "If You exist, You are going to have to reveal Yourself to me. I want to know You."

The following year, some youth leaders from a nearby church reached out to Barbi during a visit to the school lunchroom. They

began to teach her about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Barbi fell passionately in love with Him and grew quickly in her faith. She couldn't get enough of God's goodness, love, and care for her.

In college she met John, who was deeply in love with God and pursuing His ways, and they eventually married. However, when her husband was in medical school, he began to make some ungodly decisions. They had two small children when Barbi discovered he was having an affair. During those wilderness days, Barbi kept reminding herself that God is good, even when her situation wasn't. She asked God to be her "manna" for the moment. For years she affirmed God's goodness, staying faithful and praying for John. In time, his heart came home to God and to Barbi. They had two more children, whom she refers to as Mercy and Grace, fruit after a barren time of the soul.

The financial pressures of medical school loans and providing for a growing family kept John working night and day in the hospital emergency room. One day, her mother told Barbi, "You're just worn out. You need a vacation. I'm going to take you and the children to Florida for a week." Grateful and exhausted, she climbed on the plane with her mother, her sister Jodi, and all four children.

When they reached cruising altitude, Barbi noticed that Gabbie, her two-year-old, had spiked a fever. Then she began to convulse. Holding Gabbie, Barbi called out, "Is there a doctor on the plane? We need a doctor." In response, an elderly physician made his way up the aisle. As Gabbie continued to seize, Barbi held her little girl, who represented the fresh love and new life in her marriage. Passengers hovered. Gabbie convulsed for more than thirty minutes before the pilot was able to make an emergency landing. An ambulance met the plane on the airfield, and paramedics worked on the little girl. When Gabbie woke up, the doctors told Barbi that her daughter had miraculously suffered no mental loss or brain damage.

Later Barbi's sister asked her, "What does it mean that you have resolved God is good?" When Barbi asked what she meant, Jodi went

on to tell her that while all the passengers were standing, watching the event, “between fifty and hundred times you repeated, ‘Sweet baby, don’t leave me, but I have *resolved* God is good.’” Barbi had no recollection of saying these words, but she knew what they meant.

Long before the crisis with Gabbie, Barbi had chosen to stand on what she knew to be true about God, regardless of her circumstances. His goodness had become part of the fabric of who she was and what she believed. When faced with a fresh crisis, she unconsciously resorted to what she knew to be true of God. She lives in the circle of God’s goodness.

Wouldn’t you like to do the same?

What’s Ahead

For the last ten years, the two of us have immersed ourselves in knowing the goodness of God. This book is a summary of what we have learned and shared with each other along the way. Throughout the following chapters, we will look at some aspects of God’s goodness and how you can savor and embrace each of them. You will see how He transforms us into women who can rest in the circle of His absolute goodness, whether we’re living in an oasis or a desert.

In our first book, *Holy Habits*, we wrote about some spiritual practices that have become an integral part of our walk with God, and we’ve done the same here.

Shelly:

Soon after we moved back to the United States after living twenty years in Latin America, my hair began to fall out. I found hair in the shower, in the sink, and on the floor. Every time I swept my hair off the tile floor in our new home, I worried about becoming bald. Then one day as I was sweeping up my hairs, I remembered Matthew 10:30, “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” Suddenly

I realized that God knows how many hairs I have left! What incredible goodness and love, that He would care about something so insignificant when the entire universe is under His watchful eye.

As the immenseness of God's loving goodness washed over me, I realized that I could use my hair loss as a trigger for a holy habit: I decided that every time I found a hair, I would remind myself that He knows how many hairs are left on my head and breathe a prayer of thanks for His amazing goodness and love. As I practiced that holy habit, my focus shifted from the loss of my hair to the One whose goodness surrounds me.

We've discovered that the choice to cultivate a holy habit usually takes no more time — probably less — than the worry and preoccupation we can allow ourselves to fall into. At the end of each chapter, we have included some holy habits that can help you pay attention to God and His goodness. The first is a verse of Scripture we encourage you to memorize. In addition, choose at least one holy habit and practice it daily. (Don't try to do them all.) We also encourage you to answer the study questions that go along with each chapter.

Like Moses, we have cried, "Show me your glory!" Is this your heart cry as well? Join us as we seek to learn to live ever more fully in the circle of God's goodness.

Good Savior, as we embark on this study, help us grow to recognize Your abundant goodness surrounding us. Teach us how to live. We don't want to miss what You want to do in our lives. We long to become so aware of Your goodness that even in our subconscious it is the bedrock we stand on when we face the storms of life. Thank You for making Your circle of goodness available to us.

Holy Habits

- Verse to memorize: “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8).
- When you eat, deliberately take a second to let yourself savor the flavor of the food and thank Him for His goodness in giving you taste. “Taste and see” (Psalm 34:8).
- Every time you lose a hair, thank God for His goodness in keeping track of every single one on your head.
- Resolve that God is good. When you are tempted to focus on what you can’t have or don’t have, look around at what you do have. Thank Him, with your will, for all the things that He has given you.

Responding to His Word

1. Everybody is tempted to question God’s goodness. How have you done that?
2. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asked God to show him His glory. God’s reply was that He would pass His goodness before Moses. Where do you see God’s glory in His goodness in your life?
3. Psalm 72:19 says that the “earth [is] filled with his glory,” and Psalm 33:5 tells us that the “earth is full of the goodness of the LORD” (KJV). Do you see His glory/goodness anywhere in recent natural disasters that have taken place? Make a list of what comes to mind and thank God for those things as He points them out to you.
4. Read Exodus 33:19-22 and 34:5-7. Note that in chapter 33, God announces what He is going to show Moses and then shows him in chapter 34. List what those verses tell you about who God is.

5. Read the list of characteristics God revealed to Moses. Note which is the easiest and which is the most challenging for you to believe is a part of His goodness.
6. What can you do to cultivate an awareness of God's goodness? Glen and Shelly got a book to learn more about birds. What can you use as guides to become more aware of His goodness?
7. Meditate on the following words from an ancient hymn. How do you think God's goodness and the other aspects of His character can "bind" our hearts to Him?

*"Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee"*³

8. The psalmist says that we can experience the goodness of God through our senses. Psalm 34:8 calls us to taste and see that the Lord is good. How might you "taste" the goodness of God? Write a prayer asking God to open each of your senses to His goodness.
9. Write a resolution regarding what you choose to believe about God. Put it in a prominent place and declare it regularly as a reminder.
10. How do you respond to the description of holy habits? Are there things you do already that could be called holy habits? Do you know of things that other people do to remind them of God's character? What are they?