

# God is Good Even When it's Bad

*By Bobby Schuller*

Well today I want to talk about serenity in the storm. It's a series we're on. Last week we talked about the importance of serenity in the life of a disciple, a student of Jesus, that we can't do the things Jesus has asked us to do, like love our enemies, care for those who are in need, walk in faith and courage if we're always anxious and angsty and worried and thinking about tomorrow, that part of the covenant promise is for God to give us a serene mind, confidence, peace of heart and mind, and I believe God wants that for you today, and He can provide that to you through His Holy Spirit.

Now one of the first and most important things about this is actually philosophical, theological: the understanding of God's provision, His providence. Remember providence, which theologically we always think of as God's big grand plan, comes from the word provision. It means that God will provide for us. He'll give us exactly what we need when we need it. He'll give us our daily bread. He'll provide for us in times of danger in the storm, and if we can believe in that providence, we truly will gain a sense of peace.

So today I want to talk about that providence, especially as it has to do, not just with our life, but with our death. Now some of you here are a little older, some of you are younger, but you have sickness, or

maybe you've lost close ones in your life, and maybe you feel a sense of worry about your own death. You wonder is God really going to be there for me. A lot of Christians worry about hell, if you grew up in a very strict thing. And I want you to know that if you trust your life to Jesus Christ, you don't have to worry about that. That heaven is your home. And that heaven, for the disciple of Jesus, is a lot more like waking up than falling asleep. I think, amen, thank you, Jim. That heaven is going to be something you will truly enjoy. That life is not short. That life is very, very, very, very long. And that you don't have to live every day anxious about death and sickness; that you may endure some of those things, you may face some of those things, all of us will face death, but you can trust in that that you won't be alone. You won't be. The Lord will be with you and He'll take you home.

And so today I want to talk about how that impacts our whole society to truly believe that, and how that impacts our life, and what heaven really means in the Bible. It's not just a place. It's something that's always going on, something we can experience. And to believe truly that no matter what we go through, everything can happen for a reason. Everything that happens in our life can be part of a bigger whole.

Now I heard this amazing quote years ago from my old hairdresser. She said "everything happens for a reason." And I thought that's profound. It's profound. So I was, in this particular instance, I was dating this hot girl named Hannah Presley, who yes is related to Elvis,

sitting over there. And we were only dating at the time, and it was time for the big Bobby reveal: that is it was her cousins wedding, and I was going to come as the plus one, in a very cheap tuxedo, but a tuxedo none the less, and she was like okay, you're going but you have to get a haircut. So I had this girl that always cut my hair, always did a great job. And so I'm like okay I'm going to her and she was cutting my hair, and of course she was not a Christian, I knew her personal life. I knew that because she's a hairdresser. Hairdressers tell you all about their personal lives, even when it gets uncomfortable.

And she went on and on, and was talking about something that was to her horrible, to me didn't sound like that big of a deal, but she said 'well everything happens for a reason.' And at the time, and I still am, I was passionate about people coming to faith, passionate about sharing the gospel, so I used that line, which I believe is true – everything happens for a reason, to like convert her. I was going to proselytize her.

And so as this 19/20-year-old who's getting kind of an important haircut, I decide to evangelize my not so Christian hairdresser. And I start asking for what reason does everything happen, you know? Whose reason is it? And if you died today, do you know where you'd go, and this kind of a thing. And I don't know if I asked that last question, but I really did talk to her for a long time and I really thought I was doing a good job with talking about the gospel and about my faith, and left there feeling really good. But later as I looked in the mirror, I wondered by evidence of

the haircut itself, if really she was enjoying what I was saying. Here's a picture from that night. You can see Hannah looks great. That is a real.. that is an honest to goodness real picture and by evidence of the picture, I feel like maybe she didn't receive as much of the Lord's gospel as I thought she did.

And actually my mother-in-law, as mother's-in-law go, decided to.. these are the only reason I have this picture, decided to commemorate the moment by making it a Christmas ornament. Nothing says Christmas like a bad haircut in a tuxedo. So that hangs on our tree every year to remind me. So again, I don't know what happened to her, I don't know if she came to the Lord, but I came to a new hairdresser next time to get my haircut, someone who would truly listen. And I also learned, and this is a bit of free advice: never proselytize your hairdresser. Just let them do their thing. Tip well.

All right. So this is something that people say, though, isn't it. It's something that everyone sort of says, especially here in the greater Southern California area. There's a lot of sort of religiosity, spiritualism, this kind of thing, and you will hear secular people and unreligious people say all the time – everything happens for a reason. And you wonder if people have thought that through. Maybe you've said it.

Well I want to tell you that everything does happen for a reason, and God is on your side, and that reason is good. And we don't understand it now, even our death, when we experience it as passing

through a door from sleep to wake, from not understanding to understanding, from anxiety to peace, from frustration to joy, to celebration, to fullness of life, you'll see you didn't have to worry that whole time about your death or the death of those you love, and the ones that you love, just see them again.

So today I want to say that you can trust your life and your death to Jesus Christ. He cares so, so much about you. And just as if you had the power to keep your own children alive, wouldn't you do it? Of course God will keep you alive. Of course God will care for you. And of course you don't have to worry. Nobody wants you to go to heaven more than God does. Trust in Jesus Christ. If you're a friend of God, He's going to let you in, don't worry about it.

And so today I want to talk about that, and I also want to talk about this idea of the presence of God. That if heaven is anything, it's the full presence of God, right? It's the full on experience of God who is love, just total love, total joy, total peace, total consciousness, total awareness.

Psalm 91, which Hannah read today, is one of the most famous Psalms about God's presence, and about God's protection, and how we don't have to worry. Now let's see how many people were paying attention. Who wrote Psalm 91? Hannah said it. Did you hear? Choir, come on. You're cheating.. you've already heard this whole sermon. I

didn't ask you. It's Moses. Yes, Moses wrote it, not David. And David actually included it.. I'm just kidding, you can say Moses next time.

Psalm 91, according to the Midrash, Psalm 91 is a psalm of Moses which a lot of people may be surprised that it's not some random Psalmist or David himself who wrote it, but it's actually an ancient psalm. It was ancient when David included it in the Psalm. It was something people had sung for a long time, especially when they were afraid, especially when they were worried about something that was going to happen, or especially if they had to go to war, or if they were facing an enemy or facing a trial or sickness. This Psalm 91 it's a psalm of covering, a psalm of protection. And the Psalm is 100% rooted in one thing and one thing alone: God's presence. God isn't far away. He's here. He's with you. He's on your side.

It's important, too, when you read this that it's not David who wrote it, although clearly David loves it. He's the one who probably included it in the hymnal that we call the book of Psalms. But tradition says at least, and maybe history, that Moses himself wrote it and he wrote it at an interesting time. He wrote it when he had this amazing encounter in the tent of meeting.

Now before we get there, Moses is an important character. You're probably picturing Charlton Heston, and that's right. Charlton Heston is the closest.. I think God wrote that movie and He picked Charlton Heston.

The book of Exodus, of course, is a story of God's people, the Jews; the Hebrews who are freed from slavery at the hand of Pharaoh and led by Moses into the Promised Land. And a huge part of the story is they come to this mountain. The mountain is called Mt. Sinai. And they can see up on the mountain this cloud that's full of the glory of God. And Moses says I'm going to go up there and talk to Him. Moses ascends the mountain and God's people and Moses make a covenant. He receives the Ten Commandments, and a number of rights and things to do to show that the covenant is in full play, but at the heart of it is God's promise to His people that I will be with you. It's the promise of God's full presence and glory.

And so Moses has this exchange where he's going up and down this mountain, and the stiff neck people, the Hebrew people are just constantly like we want to go back to Egypt, or we want other gods, or we want to do this or that, and they've entered into covenant. And then there's this whole idea of a return to an Eden type existence. It's this amazing thing. And as Moses is up in the mountain talking to God, all of a sudden, because these stiff necked people are sick of waiting for him, they make a golden calf and begin worshipping him and then fall into some kind of revelry, which is probably some horrible like super pagan, off the wall thing, and there they are, they can see the glory of God on the mountain, and they just fall into this incredible thing. They're already breaking the covenant they just made with God.

And so there are all these big plans, and God sees this from the mountain, and He says to Moses: Moses, this is what they're doing down there. And He says to him, I'm just going to destroy them all, and I'm going to start over with you. And Moses like begs God. He makes two points and says God, if you destroy them all, what about the covenant that you made to their father Abraham? You'll be going back on your covenant. And number two, if you destroy them all, what will the nations think? They'll say this is what God does to His people and whom He's in covenant with.

And so God relents and Moses goes down, and though he punishes, he brings judgment against those who instigated this crazy thing, God renews His covenant with His people and promises His presence with them. And in that moment, He gives all these drawings for this thing that's going to be called the tabernacle where they're going to experience God and His presence is going to be there and that's going to become the temple, and the temple's going to become you. But that's another sermon.

But before this, at the end of this is Psalm 33, Moses comes down from the mountain, he's so disappointed at these people, he's gone through this horribly traumatic event, and God says to Moses I'm not going with you to the Promised Land anymore and the reason is because of God's mercy. He says to Moses if I go with these people, they're going to tick me off again and I'm going to kill them all. It's not specifically

what He says, but that's basically it. He says if I go with you, these stiff necked people, they won't last a day and I'll wipe them out. He says so instead I'm going to send an angel with you. And Moses just upon hearing this, falls into like a deep depression. And his heart just begins to break. And he tells the people God's not going with us. Instead He's going to send an angel, and it's because of His mercy. And all the people, they take off all their ornaments, and all their jewelry, and all their fine clothing, and they all begin to weep because they know that it's their own fault. They broke covenant with God. And because of God's mercy, not His judgment, He's not going to go with them.

So Moses is in this place. And then the Bible says that Moses had this thing called the tent of meeting. It wasn't the tabernacle yet, but it will be eventually. And Moses decides in the night, it's away from the camp. So they have this camp where everybody is, and then there's this tent that he created. And he set this tent up so that anybody, if they wanted to talk to God, they could go there and meet Him. But whenever Moses went to the tent of meeting, some amazing thing happened and people knew to look for it. He would enter the tent and then something called a pillar of cloud would form over the doorway to the tent, and God and Moses, the Bible says, would speak to each other face to face as friends would be speaking. Isn't that amazing?

One of the most amazing things about this passage, too, is it seems that God only does this after Moses enters the tent and then

blocks the entrance. It's almost like Moses can't leave until God's done with him. Have you ever felt that way in a time of prayer or powerful worship where you're just like I can't leave this place? And Moses says to God, God you need to go with us! I don't want an angel, I don't want a book, I don't want rights, I don't want songs, I want you. I want you. I need you with me. We need you with us. Don't abandon us. Don't leave us alone.

And God is moved by this, and He changes His mind. And He says to Moses "my presence;" there it is again, that word; "my presence will go with you and I will give you rest." What a great promise. Not only will God be with him, but he's going to take away all of his worry, his anxiety, his fear, and yes, they're going to be fighting, and yes they're going to face pestilence and snakes and war and all of this crazy stuff. It's going to be an adventure but God is never, ever going to leave him.

And it's in this moment that Moses writes Psalm 91. "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest" there's the promise "in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust." And on and on it goes. Hannah did a great job reading it. Thank you, Hannah. But this is at the heart of it that God's presence will keep me safe. God's providence, God's presence, it will always be with me.

And then a little interesting tag to the story. Moses then, who's so moved by this, says to God I want to see your face! So even though the

Bible says they were speaking face to face, it seems as though this cloud was actually covering God's form somehow, or God's image so that you could see maybe something in it, but he couldn't actually see God. He says Lord, I want to see your glory! I want to see your face! And of course God says to Moses, I can show you my glory, but not my face because anyone who were to see my face would die.

And so this interesting thing he says I have this rock that has a big crag in it, and I want you to go into this rock and I'm going to cover the opening of the rock with my hand, and as I pass by, you'll see my glory and then I'll remove my hand and you can see my back and the back of my head. Isn't that interesting? And so this happens. So there's this experience where God like shows Moses part of Him but not His face.

It's so often when I think of Moses, I don't think of a David type character, but you can see in this story Moses and David really are a lot alike, in my opinion. Yes, Moses is the law bringer, the one who has all the rules, and yes, he has all of these things, but in this story it just seems so clear to me that the thing that Moses wants is God's presence. That the thing that Moses wants most is to bring this Eden type tree of life experience back to earth, and is yearning to be with God. And not just himself, he wants his people to know God and to know Him personally.

Moses, like David, has a heart after God. He wakes up in the morning thinking about God and goes to bed thinking of God and wants

to know more about God and wants God's presence more than anything. And this is at the heart of this message that God's presence is the best place to be. This should be the desire of every disciple of Jesus Christ is to be in His presence. To be in His presence, to experience Him. And we can't do it all the time, and there's lots of times where we doubt, and there's lot of times we pray and God doesn't answer, but the desire should be there and it's a right desire because nothing helps us with our serenity and our fear and our worry and our morality and all of our issues more than God's presence. Nothing brings more joy than this.

And this is what I want you to hear. This is heaven. I think a right answer of heaven is the presence of God. Eden is heaven, what Moses experienced in that tabernacle is heaven, maybe you've experienced it in a time of worship or deep prayer, and all of those are touch points of the big place heaven where we go when this part of our life is over.

See the thing that takes away our angst and our fear of death is not studying more and reading more, or not being told things more, it's actually experiencing heaven before we die. That's because heaven's not just a place, it's an experience. If you experience heaven on multiple occasions, you will find that the fear that you have about what happens after I die, and what happens if I get sick, and what happens for my kids and for my parents and all this stuff, it begins to diminish and even go away because you're full of the life and the presence and the joy of God.

And you'll be able to say to yourself and others, you don't need to be afraid. Nothing to be afraid of. You don't have to worry.

I remember once I had a deep and profound experience like this that still informs my life today. It's the only experience I had like it. When I was in Forest Home at a Christian camp in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, so I don't know what is that ten/eleven years old, something like that? And I remember being there and praying and I was praying on this boulder, it's the middle of the night with a camp counselor. We were praying together and I just went.. and it was a tough time in my life. And I just went into this deep incredible experience of prayer, and I had this, I don't know what to call it, amazing experience where it felt like I was totally surrounded by light, like I wasn't there on the rock, I was like somewhere else completely. And it was so awesome and incredible. And I remember later saying that it was like Jesus gave me a hug or something like that. Sometimes as an adult, when I try and remember it, I think about it as almost like when you step out of a movie theater into a sunny day, and your eyes don't adjust and everything is light. I even wonder if I had had this experience longer if maybe I would have like seen something or, I don't know.

But all I do know is that my counselor ended up shaking me because I had been praying like this for like three or four hours. And to me it felt like a minute or two. And this is a true story. And I'm almost afraid to share stories like this because it doesn't seem credible, but it is.

That's my experience and it has had a big impact on my spiritual life ever since.

Maybe you've maybe not had something like that, but you've had moments where in worship or prayer you experience heaven, you experience God's life. And this is what we need to remove all the angst and fear we have, especially about death.

So our fear of death is something that actually drives our society. Fear of death leads to so much of the brokenness in our community. Do you remember the time when you realized that you were mortal? Have you ever experienced some dread of death for you or your family or something like that? I remember when I was in Oklahoma for a family reunion, my Grandpa Durham, so my grandma's father who was a Nazarene minister and a wonderful man, he was just such a sweet guy, and I got to spend a lot of time with him while we were at this family reunion.

And when we were leaving, we lived in California, my mom said you should say goodbye to grandpa Durham because he was in his late 80's or early 90's at the time, and she said you know we won't be back here for years, and so you may not see him again. And for some reason, when I said goodbye to him, I didn't want to leave because as a child, I had this fear that like if I left, he would die. And I kind of like freaked out. I really got really scared, terrified, worried, and I think a lot of the angst that adults carry, I was showing full bore as a child. And I was

crying and weeping and we finally left. And the good news is though he lived to be like 100, and I saw him lots of other times in Missouri and it was fine. But I think of that, and I remember that many of us, we have this fear of death that we carry around in our bodies.

There's a wonderful book by Earnest Becker written in the 70's. It won a Pulitzer Prize called *Denial of Death*. He was an anthropologist, and he was putting forward a theory that what drives a lot of the nasty stuff in societies was actually not what Freud said, which was repressed sexuality and all this weird stuff, but it was what Hume and later Kierkegaard, or earlier Kierkegaard said, and that is that it's this fear, this dread that many of us carry of annihilation, or just not existing of death.

It was interesting because in his thing, he says that what's happening in society is people are putting together these grand hero stories about themselves, or about their group. And he calls these things immortality projects. That if I can be a part of something heroic or something grand or meaningful, then my death will have meaning and actually my life will sort of carry on after I'm gone in my memory. The Romans really endorsed this a lot. Caesar would say things like this: you live forever as long as people remember your name, kind of a thing. And Becker actually believed that this was at the source of society's greatest conflicts were two immortality projects colliding with one another, so much so that people were willing to kill over it.

And so he claimed that it was actually our fear of death leading to immortality projects that caused wars, bigotry, genocide, racism, etc. That this was really at the heart of all these things. And then he goes on to say that this dread is something that many of us forget that we have that we carry it unconsciously, and he says Freud was wrong. And you know who he says is right? You may not know this name. You probably don't, but he says Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was right!

Now Kierkegaard is one of my favorite thinkers and writers. And he's kind of like the philosophical version of Rembrandt, who we had last week. A lot of dark, a lot of light. Kierkegaard was the same way. He was a Danish philosopher and theologian and a deep thinking Christian man. And Kierkegaard proposed the same thing. He said 'I open my eyes and I saw society as it was and I laughed.' And he's saying that cynically. He's saying.. he was a wealthy man and by his 20's he had seven siblings, six of them had died. He was just surrounded by death and trial. He himself struggled with health problems. And as he looked around, he just said like this Danish state church, this is a joke. And all of your rights are a joke, and all of your clergy is a joke, and all of this is fake. And it keeps getting darker. He's like society is laughable, and all of your pretense is laughable, and everything I look at.. all these institutions and everything. So he has this really dark, dark nihilistic postmodern sounding language about his whole world. And he says what you're all trying to do is make your life valuable because of your angst – your fear of death when deep

down inside you know none of it has any meaning at all, right? So it sounds like Nietzsche or Sartre Derrida or something.

And all of these guys loved Kierkegaard until he gets to the solution. And what's his solution? It's Jesus Christ! He tells everybody none of this matters! The only thing that matters is Jesus Christ. Run to God. Know God. Abide in God. These institutions won't do it, these books won't do it, these meetings won't do it, none of this will do it. There's only one thing that will do it and that's the man Himself, Jesus Christ with you. Only He can take away your angst, your fear, only He can give you life. And of course Sartre Derrida they like the old stuff, but they don't like the solution, do they. They don't like the message. And yet he's the one who coined this phrase, Kierkegaard, take a leap of faith. Take a leap of faith. Just as you are jumping into the water. You can't read about water if you want to swim, you have to jump in. You might say what if I drown? Well I'll tell you, Christ is jumping with you.

So maybe you're here today and you're afraid. I want to tell you that Kierkegaard is right. And Earnest Becker actually said Kierkegaard is right, but I just can't believe in God. It's actually very sad. Later on in life, Earnest Becker would go on to have a number of exchanges with actually a youth pastor through letters and through that before his death of colon cancer, he himself kind of returned to faith in his Jewish orthodox roots, which is saying something.

But all this to say I think Kierkegaard is right. I don't think Kierkegaard is the first or the last person to say it. I think David said it, and I think Moses said it, and that is that we need the presence of the Lord. And so I want to encourage you that God wants to meet you in your own tent, whatever that is. He wants to meet you in a prayer closet or a private place, in your car, in the shower, wherever it is, God is willing to meet you there, and I think all of us as believers, if we want to be free from this angst of death, free of this angst about what happens if this happens or that, we want true serenity of mind, we need to know and be confirmed in our hearts that God is with us, that He's a part of us, and we need a true experience of God's life.

So He's waiting for us. He's waiting to see you. He wants to hear from you. He's not angry at you, He's forgiven you and so I say what Kierkegaard says – run to Jesus Christ and you'll be saved.

So Father we pray to you, and many of us are saying Lord, we've never had the deep encounter with you. Lord, I thank you that we can, and I pray, Father that if there's someone in this room or on television or online who's watching now, and they want that, they want that tent experience with you, if you're in that room, just in your own heart, ask for it from the Lord. Lord, I'm asking for it, we all are, and we thank you, Lord, that you want to meet us, and we ask that you would, it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.