



Summer at Woodland Hills

Part 1 – Living in the Goodness of God

Rene Schlaepfer

Thank you so much. We are so glad to be here. I have heard so many great things about Woodland Hills and about Ted. Incidentally, the worship team was amazing. Can we just thank Matt and the singers and the instrumentalists? That was so powerful. I was back there with just tears. I was just getting choked up.

I want to start by introducing my family. Here's a picture of all of us. Our three grown kids are all in their twenties. The oldest two are married to some great people and the youngest, David, is turning 21 this summer and getting married this summer. Not in this picture are the two most important members of our immediate family, our two young grandsons. That's Freddie and that's Danny, and they are the best. How many grandparents do we have here today? Isn't it the best? Being a grandparent has just changed my life; I just absolutely love it.

I am privileged to kick off your summer speaker series and I want to talk about something that I think is pretty much the most important thing for Christians to hear right now. And that is how to live in the goodness of God, how to walk every day with an awareness and a belief and a confidence that God is a good God and that God is going to be good to you and that God is going to take whatever happens to you today and he's going to turn it into something good. Do you believe that? Can I hear an amen about that?

I am seeing a tragic illness just strike churches in America today and that is Christians that I know, Christians, in my church, Christians at churches I visit across the country, are lapsing into a very bad habit. That's being negative, being negative about what's going on in our country, being negative about what's going on in their church, about what's going on in their lives. And pastor after pastor, speaker after speaker have told me the same thing. We have never seen American Christians struggle with fear and negativity more than they are right now. Consequently, I think there is not a more important topic for us to address than how you and I can live as the Bible calls us to live, which is in a daily awareness of the goodness of God to us.

I'm going to start with a story that illustrates what I mean. It's a story about a great friend of mine named Dan Adragna. Dan became a Christian at the church I'm privileged to pastor, Twin Lakes Church in Santa Cruz. When he was in his mid-30s, single dad, electrician, successful at that profession, raising a couple of teenagers at home... When he became a believer in Jesus, Dan just got a joy in the Lord that was remarkable. I mean you just could not wipe the grin off his face.

That joy, that belief in the goodness of God was put to a severe test one Christmas Eve. Dan and his teenage daughter were heading to our church and he just could not stop coughing. He had been dealing with this cough for several days. Finally, his daughter said, "Dad, I really think you should go to emergency room of the hospital and get this checked out." He said, "No, (cough, cough) I'm completely fine," but he couldn't catch a breath. Finally, he thought, *Alright, I'm just going to go to the emergency room.* He sat down on the waiting bench that they have in most emergency rooms. As he sat down, he fainted, passed out. He didn't wake up again for a matter of months. As it turned out, what Dan had was a severe form of viral pneumonia. In fact, it was the same kind of pneumonia that killed the famous Muppets guy, Jim Henson; that was the strain that he had. It's fatal in most cases and it was complicated by Dan's diabetes.

Dan was in this coma for a matter of months and all of that combined to produce a severe case of gangrene that was invading Dan's body. It was horrible. Twice, nurses told me in the family waiting room at the hospital, "Prepare the family because Dan is not going to survive the night." But somehow, Dan rallied. He coded, that is flatlined three different times and they revived him during that months long period that he was in a coma.

To save his life, because of the creeping gangrene, they eventually had to amputate all the toes on his right foot and then all the toes on his left foot. Then his entire right foot and then his entire left foot. Then his entire right leg from the hip down. And then his entire left leg. It crept up into other extremities. The tips of his fingers, the back of his head, the tip of his nose. They were just carving him to bits, trying desperately to save his life. They lacerated his larynx, his voice box with the trach tube that went down into his throat. They were just trying to keep his heart beating.

Finally, in early March, with no medical intervention whatsoever, Dan's eyes blink and he wakes up in that hospital bed. He looks down at the body I just described to you. Now what would your reaction be if the last thing you knew it was Christmas Eve and you had a nagging cough that your teenage daughter told you to get checked out? And the next thing you knew, it was March and you looked down and that was the result.

Dan's attitude is just incredible. I went to visit him one the afternoon that he woke up. Here's the first thing he said to me. I said, "Dan, buddy, how's it going?" He said, "Well, Rene..." In the voice lacerated by the trach tube, he said, "Well, Rene, I'll be honest with you. I woke up, I looked down, and I realized I'm not half the man I used to be." That was literally his first line. Now I'm not saying it hasn't been tough at times for Dan, but his attitude has just been incredible.

He now has prosthetic legs. The science of prosthetics has advanced so much that when he's wearing long pants, you cannot tell they are prosthetics. He can run, he can skip, he can walk in a way that's just indistinguishable from somebody with biological legs.

Again, his attitude and these prosthetics... His joy as just gotten him into trouble at times. He was visiting an amusement park near our church, Six Flags. You guys have Six Flags all throughout the Midwest as well. He and his friend went to visit, and they decided they wanted to ride a roller coaster called Invertigo. Let me just show you a picture of Invertigo. It is one of these extreme roller coasters.

There are about three things you have to understand about Invertigo to understand this story. The first thing is when you get on Invertigo, you realize you're facing a ride that shoots right out of the gate at top speed, right? It's instant. Then you go through all these loops and twists and turns for a long time. And then it shoots up almost vertically and stops suddenly right here, and then it goes backwards through all those tracks it just went through.

Another thing you have to understand about Invertigo is that when you sit down to ride Invertigo, you don't ride next to the person you're riding with, you ride facing the person you're riding with. I don't know why they designed it this way. I guess so you could watch each other scream in abject terror; I don't know, but that's apparently entertaining.

Then the third thing you have to understand is that when you ride Invertigo, your cars aren't on the track; they are under the track, so that your chairs are suspended. So, when you ride on Invertigo, you're going through all these loops and twists and turns while your legs dangle.

So, here's what happens. Dan comes up to me before our first service one week and he says, "Rene, I have to tell you what happened to me yesterday at Invertigo." Dan and his friend decide they are going to ride on it. They get in the single rider line, so they are split up. He gets on wearing long pants with his prosthetic legs. He's sitting across from about a 4th or 5th grade girl who he's never seen before in his life. He sits down and goes, "Hey, how's it going?" She's kind of shy and doesn't say anything. He's all smiles and excited about the ride.

They counted down three, two, one, blast off. Boom! They go out at full speed. Instantly, Dan tells me, his legs whip back over his shoulders at a biologically impossible angle. And Dan's just shrieking and roaring. He's facing the direction the ride is going and the little girl is facing backwards and she's just looking at what's happening in front of her like, *What am I witnessing with my own eyes here?*! Then they go into the loops and twists and turns and Dan's legs, now loosened up, are spinning. Do you remember the Road Runner's legs in those old cartoons? He says they're just pinwheeling. Then they go up almost vertical and Dan's pants whip forward and then his prosthetics launch out of his pants legs, over the little girl's head, into the clear blue California sky. Kind of like twin Polaris missiles from a submarine.

Imagine walking into Six Flags at that moment and you're talking with your friend, "What ride do you want to go on." "Let's do Invertigo." And you look and there are human limbs flying off the ride. "Let's just go on the merry go round." What did people think?

So, now, they have to go backwards through the ride. Dan's facing backwards now. The little girl is facing forward. And Dan's now empty pant legs are whipping toward her like flags in a stiff breeze. Dan says she's just grabbing her own legs, screaming, "NO, LORD, NO!!!" They come to a stop at the end of the ride and Dan says as soon as the safety restraints are released, that little girl just takes off screaming because she's traumatized. Dan's not going anywhere. He's just sitting. Waiting for his friend to find his legs, which he did, and they were fine. But the rest of the afternoon, Dan is looking for this little girl to try and explain to her what she just saw.

I said, "Well, Dan, for crying out loud, why didn't you just tell her before the safety restraints went off?" Here's his answer "Rene, I tried to, but I was laughing too hard."

Wouldn't you love to have Dan's attitude toward life? I asked Dan one time, "Dan, where do you get your joy?" Here's what he told me. He said, "Rene, my whole life is a living example of Romans 8: 28." You know that verse, right? ***And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.***

Here's how it happened in Dan's life. He is now a Rep for Wheels for the World. He and his wife, Melinda, travel all around the world, bringing wheelchairs to people in underdeveloped countries. This is Dan right here with his prosthetics. Dan tells me, "Rene, my life situation opens doors to people in ways that never would have been possible before. God has completely changed my life 100 times for the better. Through this tragedy, he has worked something good."

That's what it looks like, that's what it feels like to be living in the goodness of God with a rock-solid confidence. God's got this. God's got me. God's is good. But I look around and see so many Christians forgetting how to do this even though the Bible tells us set your thoughts on things above. Set your mind on Christ. Whatever is good, excellent, praiseworthy, you think of these things.

We are becoming addicted to the negative. We're becoming stressed out, traumatized. Why? I'll tell you my theory. These days, we are being deluged with data. Check this out. Every single day, you and I, on average, get 128 text messages. That includes notification from your sports apps, your news apps, and so on. Plus, we get about 5,000 ads. So, that equals distraction plus dissatisfaction because all these ads are designed to make you feel dissatisfied, to make you want whatever they are advertising. Plus, every day, you get almost constant bad news. Good news doesn't make the news. My minor in college was journalism. I was in broadcasting for 12 years before I became a pastor and you know the old slogan, "If it bleeds, it leads." That's just the way it is.

So, this equals depression. Check this out. A man named Dr. Graham Davie is a British researcher who specializes in the impact of media. He says, "Media exposure can exacerbate or contribute to the development of stress, anxiety, depression, and even PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)." That is huge. And that's what you and I are experiencing. That's what I am witnessing as a pastor even of people in my own church because we have never, in human history, lived at a time when humans have all this input at once. Consequently, we are living lives of distraction and dissatisfaction and depression like never before.

So, how do you counteract that? Around Santa Cruz, California anyway, we hear a lot of people talking about how the cure to this is mindfulness. That's a popular word. *Mindfulness*. That means living in the here and now, being present instead of constantly being distracted by all this stuff. I agree generally with this, but I think what we specifically need, more than just mindfulness in general, as good as that is, is living in mindfulness of God's goodness to us every moment of every day. Living in the goodness of God. Over and over in the Bible it tells us to do this verse. Set your thoughts on things that are excellent because this is a very serious issue.

Very quickly, what happens when I forget God's goodness to me? This is not a lightweight issue. I read an article online that talked about the 12 major consequences, but let me just highlight three.

- 1) I lose a sense of wonder. All of these text and ads and news blare so loudly that they drown out the kids laughing and the birds singing and the waves splashing and the spirit whispering right here right now. We lose sight of the fact that the Bible says ***Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights.*** You're surrounded by God's gifts every day.
- 2) When I forget to live in the goodness of God, I stop asking God for help. I get this idea that God doesn't care, God isn't good, God is stingy, God is kind of a tightwad. So, when I'm not living in the awareness of the goodness of God, my relationship with God stagnates because you're not praying, you're not expressing your needs to God, so you're not growing in that vital relationship.
- 3) When I forget God's goodness – and let me be bold and again state I'm very concerned because I see this symptom running rampant throughout the American church today – I become pessimistic about my future. You lose hope. But look at what David said in Psalm 27. ***I would have despaired unless I believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord.*** Dan didn't see the answer to how God would use his amputations for good right there in the hospital bed on day one. But he lived with an awareness, a consciousness that God was good, and he was absolutely confident God was going to even use that for the greater good. And David said, "I will wait for the Lord and will be strong and take heart and take courage because I believe God is good."

Somebody once said, "Hope is anticipating God's goodness." I really love that. And I can't think of a better verse to learn how to live in the goodness of God than Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is the antidote to bad ideas about God or forgetting the goodness of God. In the time we have left, I just want to quickly look at just the first verse, just this one line is enough to change your life, to destress you, to reset your perspective. Here it is; you know it. ***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*** Let's say that together out loud. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Do you believe that today?

I want to make this verse pop for you this morning. So, let's just focus on three key words very quickly. First, the word *shepherd*. This whole psalm is a poem about a shepherd and his sheep. The problem is most of us have never really been around any sheep. Most of us don't know any shepherds.

I did a little bit of research. What do shepherds think we civilians need to know about their job. First, what do they think we need to know about sheep? Well, I could summarize everything they said in three words: sheep are **dirty**. Did you know that almost every other animal on the planet cleans itself? Just think about this. Cats, of course, bathe themselves. Dogs clean themselves. Racoons wash their hands. Elephants give themselves showers. Birds take baths. Not sheep; they literally cannot clean themselves. They get filthy, they need a shepherd just to give them a bath.

Second, sheep are **dumb**. They are not exactly the Einsteins of the animal kingdom and this is probably not a surprise to anybody here. The way I heard one shepherd express this was so funny. Ed Winton, a shepherd out in West Texas put it this way. "Sheep are just born looking for a way to die." In other

words, if there is a way to get themselves killed, they will find it. They get into predicaments they cannot get themselves out of; they need rescue constantly.

Sheep are dirty, dumb, and **defenseless**. Did you know that sheep are one of the only animals without any defense mechanism? Look at this. Nothing about this creature is intimidating whatsoever. Somebody said, "Think of it this way. Almost every other animal on the planet is a pro team sports mascot," right? Of course, the predators are all represented: the bears, the lions, the tigers, even the marlins and the ducks and the banana slugs (the mascot of the university of California, Santa Cruz). Not sheep, because nobody is going to be intimidated by this, right? Somebody once said, "Can you even imagine a school with a sheep mascot? What would the cheer be? 'We are the sheep. Victory is yours to keep.' " What would they say?

So, when we are compared to sheep in the Bible, it's not exactly a compliment, but it's true. And that's why we need a shepherd. Here's what shepherds do. Shepherds nurture because sheep are dirty; they can't take care of themselves. Psalm 23 goes on to say, ***He makes me rest in green meadows. He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength.*** You might feel exhausted, spent. Remember to live in the goodness of God who wants to help you relax.

This was so hard for me to understand. I was so legalistic. I worked so hard to earn God's favor early in my Christian life that I could have sworn it said, "The Lord is my shepherd, he makes me *mow* the lawn." No. It says the Lord is my shepherd, he gets me to lie down on the lawn. Then shepherds guide because sheep are dumb, and they would get totally lost without the shepherd. David says, ***He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.*** Get into word.

If you're like me, nothing stresses you out like indecision. Well, you've got guidance from your good shepherd about everything that's important in life right there in the word. So, shepherds nurture and guide and shepherds protect because sheep are defenseless. David goes on to write, ***Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.*** Listen, you're going to go through some dark valleys, I guarantee you that. But he's going to be with you. He won't leave you because he's good all the time. That's what a shepherd does.

Now, look at who my shepherd is. The *Lord*. This is the second word I want to dive into. In the English translations, it's LORD (all caps). That stands for Yahweh. That's a word for God in Hebrew which comes from the verb *to be*. It simply means *I am or the one who is*. The idea it's getting across is the LORD – let this blow your mind – is the only being in the universe who is independent of anything else for its being. Philosophers would say he is the only non-contingent being. Kind of like an artist is not dependent or contingent on his painting for his existence, Yahweh isn't dependent on anything because Yahweh is the Artist, the Creator of everything we know.

Now, just try to take in what this means. I read this week that if you could transport the most powerful telescope on earth out to the Alpha Centauri System – that's our nearest neighboring star – and you turned it around and looked back our way and tried to find Planet Earth, you'd be so far away that the Earth could not be seen even with that powerful telescope. That shows you how great and glorious

creation is and the one who spoke all that into being is the LORD. What I'm trying to get across is who could possibly better care for you than Yahweh? Here's the really good news. Jesus says, "That's me."

In John 10, Jesus says, "***My purpose is to give your life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep.***" All we've learned about the shepherd, he says, "That's me." One of the most common, ancient ways that Christian art portrayed Jesus was as the Good Shepherd. Can you make that out? You see this in Roman catacombs everywhere. It's Jesus with an injured sheep on his shoulder. That's how your good God cares for you.

When you understand this, it leads to a powerful result which is the third word I want to look at. I shall not **want**. What do you want? Try to finish this sentence. "I'll be happy when _____. " When I'm healed, promoted, married, single, a homeowner, rich, successful, famous, have more stuff, get a degree, get a job in my chosen field... However you fill that in, consider this. If that never happens, could you still be happy. If not, you need to think about who you have in your shepherd.

Paraphrasing Max Lucado here. He says you have a God who hears you, the power of his love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you, all of heaven ahead of you. You have grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle for every darkness, an anchor for every storm, everything you need. And what can take that away from you? Can any cancer infect your salvation? Can bankruptcy impoverish your sanctification? Can an earthquake touch your heavenly home? Not when they LORD is your shepherd. Here's the key concept today, **the secret of contentment is absolute trust that God is good, and he will be good to me today and forever**. Even if you don't understand what he's doing, remember it's always for good, ultimately.

Now, let me close with this because maybe you're thinking, *Okay, you've convinced me the Lord is my shepherd and he's powerful, but I'm still not convinced the Lord is really good.* It's says the Lord is my shepherd, but maybe if your honest, you don't really think of him as good. And I can relate. For many years, this verse, Psalm 23: 1, gave me no comfort because I thought if the LORD, Yahweh is my shepherd, I'm a pretty dumb, dirty, and defenseless sheep and when I act like that, he probably gets furious with me. Do you ever think of the Lord like that? *I probably make him so mad and disappoint him so much, he just wants to beat me with that rod and staff.* If that's your struggle, I want you to check this out.

There's a guy that my wife and I found out about who lives in Israel. He's got a drone and he uses it to capture video of life there in the Holy Land. One afternoon, he happened to catch an unstaged video of this sheep wandering off away from the rest of his flock. This little guy gets so far away. The other 99 sheep are presumably safe and sound in their pin, but he's still missing. So, the shepherd has to go looking for him. This guy kept his drone flying thinking, *What's going to happen to this little sheep?*

Now, how do you think the shepherd is going to act when he finds this guy? I want you to watch and listen to what happens next. He's so tender, isn't he? So gentle. He makes sure first that that little sheep hears his voice, his call, and then he approaches, gently and tenderly leading him home. Do you get that this is how the Lord treats you when you've been wandering off? If you've been wandering off somehow, God doesn't yell at you, he doesn't beat you up. He wants you back and he tenderly, gently

leads you home. Maybe you've even been hearing his voice this morning through the worship and through communion and through this message from the scripture. That's his voice. Follow him home. You're welcome there. He loves you. He's longing to put you on his shoulder right now. If you're hurt, if you're wounded, if you're being a dumb, dirty, and defenseless sheep and have gotten yourself lost, he says, "Come on home, let me love you because I am your Good Shepherd." Let's rush back into his arms right now.

Would you bow your heads and your hearts in a word of prayer with me? God, thank you so much that your word promises us that you're a good God. And Lord, we just want to confess that so often we forget that, and we live like either you're not a good God or you're not a God or you don't love us. We just want to confess right now that we are sheep, all of us have gone astray, we have sinned, we need a shepherd and God. Thank you that you are that Shepherd to us. How our lives would change if we just lived with daily hope, minute by minute hope in the goodness of God.

My prayer is that, all over this room, individuals are just praying, "Lord, I want to be in that flock that you lead. I turn my life over to the direction of the Good Shepherd." Maybe some, for the very first time, are praying, "Help me to follow you and to be mindful of your goodness to us every day."

In the name of our Good Shepherd Jesus we pray, amen.