

Whether God is Good

by Paul D. Adams

[Tish Harrison Warren](#) offers important insight into what appears to be an inescapable predicament. Here's the issue: In the throes of real pain and genuine suffering, we struggle to make sense out of the goodness of God (assuming there is some sense to be made under such pressure). This predicament favors no one and applies to everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, theist or atheist, or even apatheist (the persistently indifferent). No one is free of this recalcitrant, existential angst presented by the predicament. Here's the situation in the form of a question: *Do we allow our circumstances to frame our deepest commitments about the goodness of God's character or do we hold to the goodness of God's character so it frames the interpretation of our circumstances?*

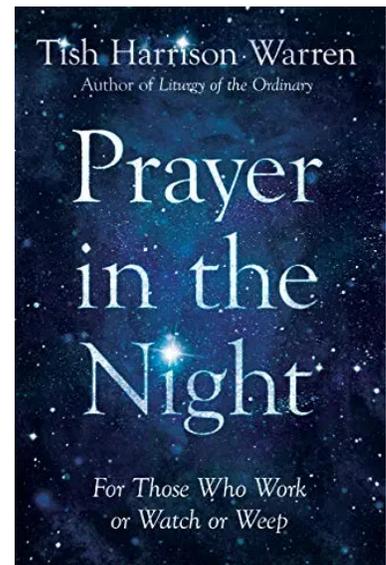
For believers in God, there's one aspect from her [Prayer in the Night](#) that I will address. Even though some might pick apart her point, find some theological or philosophical nuance not addressed, or that should be addressed, the initial tug this has on my heart is acute. Her perception penetrates deep and resonates with something important that speaks to me, so I will unpack it here. It is my hope that it will speak to you.

She writes:

My friend Julie (Hunter's wife) is an artist. Her watercolors hang in my kitchen. Years ago, when her son was very young, he had to have surgery. Like any parents whose child is going under the knife, my friends were anxious. Before the nurses wheeled their son into the operating room, Julie looked at Hunter and said, "We have to decide right now whether or not God is good, because if we wait to determine that by the results of this surgery, we will always keep God on trial."

If the question of whether God is good or not—or of whether God is kind or indifferent or a bastard—is determined solely by the balance of joy in our own lives or in the world, we will never be able to say anything about who God is or what God is like. The evidence is frankly inconclusive. If the story of my own short life and feelings determines God's character, then he is Jekyll and Hyde. This way of approaching God becomes a never-ending game of poker. For every breath-taking splash of a whale's breach, I raise you a forest fire obliterating acre after acre. For every Monarch migration, I raise you ticks spreading Lyme disease. For every mother enraptured by her child's first smile, there is another mother whose newborn struggles for his final breath. For every inspiring act of human goodness, there is another person scheming against the weak. In all our lives, from the happiest to the most tragic, the circumstantial evidence for God's goodness is divided. There is beauty and there is horror.

We cannot hold together human vulnerability and God's trustworthiness at the same time unless there is some certain sign that God loves us, that he isn't an absentee landlord or, worse, a monster. But we cannot divine such a sign from the circumstances of our lives or of the world. We have to decide about what we believe who God is and what he is like. We have to decide if anyone keeps watch with us. It is unavoidably—even irritatingly—a decision based on doctrine, first principles we return to again and again, the story we define our lives by. (pp 27-28)



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What is vitally important to everything else going on here is the admonition to *decide beforehand* whether or not God is good. Our intellectual commitments about who God is are one thing; the timing of when to embrace and employ them is quite another. Why? Because “the circumstantial evidence for God’s goodness is divided” and, quite frankly, we cannot control all our circumstances, no matter how hard we try. Granted, some things turn out precisely as we hoped. *But clearly some things do not.*

Who is God *when this happens?*

What is God like *then?*

It seems to me that a good liturgy to build into my life, a habit or mindset to help shape my disposition *prior to* getting on with my day is embracing what I believe about who God is and what he is like. Perhaps my morning routine should include an intentional decision to renew afresh my commitment to the belief that God is good, despite whatever experiences or circumstances the day offers. By doing so, then the inevitable “circumstantial evidence” does not and will not keep God in the dock (h/t C. S. Lewis). Especially important is ensuring that my daily commitment to God’s goodness is not held hostage by those “evidences” that persistently, and often covertly, seek the upper hand and compete for my allegiance. “We have to decide about what we believe who God is and what he is like. We have to decide if anyone keeps watch with us.” Otherwise, my story unfolds as a tragedy of failed design, fleeting purpose, and feigned significance. Yes, circumstances are part of my story, *but they do not write the story!* Behind and before, through and alongside my story must be a sustaining metanarrative—a narrative within a narrative—grounded in the commitment to believe that God is good, no matter what.

Still, I confess that circumstances may be so difficult, even drawn out over such a long period of time, that I question the goodness of God. And, I submit **this is not wrong!** Those familiar with Scripture won’t be surprised to learn that holy writ is never surprised by lament or grief. The Psalmists tell us this much (Psalm 6:3; 10:1; 38:9-11; 42:7; 130:1). Even Jesus expressed deep anguish as he echoed Psalm 22:1, questioning the very presence of God in his darkest hour (see Mark 15:34). Strangely, I’m cautiously comforted that, alongside Jesus, I’m given a kind of divine permission to lament and to weep and to question. What is most important, and the point I wish to draw out here is that, as I circle back at the end of my day, I end at the same place I began, namely, that God is good. When I renew daily—even hourly, if needed—my commitment to this “first principle,” then everything else will come into focus, gradually but certainly. Naturally, my repeated commitment to belief in God’s goodness will not change circumstances, but it will surely serve to put them in their place, locating them *under* the goodness of Almighty God and thereby reducing the angst of this inescapable predicament.

*I recognize there may be a symbiotic relationship between God’s goodness and our circumstances such that the one is used as a kind of agency that impacts the other resulting in an appearance of change to both. This post, however, will not go into such depth. I only raise the possibility to pique further interests.

For more resources in this vein, see my series, [God Has a Story, Too: Reflections on Suffering & Evil](#).