

# God Is Good

A. W. Tozer:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.

We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.

## **Psalm 119:64-68 New International Version (NIV)**

**<sup>64</sup> The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your decrees.**

**<sup>65</sup> Do good to your servant according to your word, Lord.**

**<sup>66</sup> Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands.**

**<sup>67</sup> Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.**

**<sup>68</sup> You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.**

## **I Where Is Our Belief In God's Goodness?**

Is it in our Heads or our Hearts?

**<sup>3</sup> My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart,<sup>2</sup> for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.<sup>3</sup> Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.<sup>4</sup> Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.<sup>5</sup> Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; Proverbs 3:1-5**

Other scriptures that demonstrate the power and importance of believing in our hearts:

Deut 6:6; Deut 11:18, Ps 37:31, Ps 40:8-10, Ps 119:2,10-11, and Col 3:12-16

## **II Where Do We See God's Goodness?**

**<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who<sup>[1]</sup> have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.<sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also**

justified; those he justified, he also glorified.<sup>31</sup> What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?  
Rom 8:26-32

Other scriptures that reveal to us the power of God's goodness:

The story of Joseph Genesis ch 37-50

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. Gen 50:20

Paul's thorn in the flesh 2 Cor 12:7-10

Our power over temptation 1 Cor 10:13

## **What is your Testimony of God's Goodness?**

### **III What Do We Do With God's Goodness?**

6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Hebrews 11:6

Believe in Our Hearts: He is Good; He can't not be Good; He can only do Good; and His teachings are Good

**What would our lives look like and what changes would we see in our attitudes, priorities, and actions if we viewed our circumstances, interactions and opportunities through that Truth?**

# God and Your Brain – How He Changes It

Rita Hancock, MD (aka “Dr. Rita”) is a graduate of Cornell University and is a board-certified Physical Medicine specialist with sub-specialty board certification in Pain Management. She has been in full-time practice for fifteen years. Her most recent book is **Radical Wellbeing – A Biblical Guide to Overcoming Pain, Illness and Addictions**.

Dr. Hancock recently interviewed Dr. Andrew Newberg on his research about God and the brain. Dr. Newberg is considered a pioneer in the neuroscientific study of religious and spiritual experiences, a field frequently referred to as – neurotheology.

With the permission of Dr. Hancock, I’m sharing a copy of her interview with Dr. Newberg here.

## **Dr. Rita:**

Dr. Newberg, one of the main messages I got from your book, *How God Changes Your Brain* was, “No matter what religion you are about because your thoughts will change your brain.” Did I get it right that your thoughts literally change your brain?

## **Dr. Newberg:**

Yes, it is really a two way street. Your brain changes your thoughts and your thoughts change your brain. The more you focus on a particular belief or belief system, the stronger those connections become. If you focus on God being loving and compassionate, you increase the amount of love and compassion in your brain, and your outward behaviors. If you focus on God being vengeful and hateful, you increase the amount of hate and anger in your brain, and your outward behaviors. As the saying goes, neurons that fire together wire together, and this is true no matter what our beliefs are. The more we focus on something, the more it becomes a part of how our brain functions.

## **Dr. Rita:**

The Bible says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). Can you tell us about the research on how fearful thoughts vs. loving thoughts affect the brain and the body in general?

## **Dr. Newberg:**

Love generally activates the positive emotional and social areas of the brain (i.e. the precuneus and frontal lobe). The primary area involved in fear is the amygdala. This area lights up in our brain when we are afraid. Other areas of the brain such as the frontal lobe helps to regulate the fear response. So your quote is probably fairly accurate as far as the brain goes. When we focus on love, the activity in the frontal lobe actually can suppress the fear responses in the amygdala. So the more we focus on love and compassion, the less fear we will feel.

## **Dr. Rita:**

In your book, you talk about the potential health benefits of meditation and you aim at all religions. Since my work is geared specifically to Christians, can you please discuss the difference between meditation and prayer and talk about whether your results are relevant to Christian prayer?

## **Dr. Newberg:**

There is certainly a fair amount of overlap between meditation and certain types of prayer. We studied nuns doing Centering prayer which, as you know, is a more contemplative practice. These types of prayer practices certainly should affect the brain in similar ways as other types of meditative/contemplative practices. For example, in centering prayer, we saw increased activity in the frontal lobes and decreased activity in the parietal lobes (this is believed to be associated with the sense of self and decreased activity is associated with losing that sense of self and feeling connected to the universe or God. Other types of Christian practices affect the brain slightly differently. We performed a study on the rosary and showed that it reduced anxiety significantly. The combination of its meaning and the ritualized elements, probably suppress the activity in the amygdala (as above) and reduce anxiety and fear in people. Other practices such as conversational prayer activate social areas of the brain and, when combined with feelings of love and compassion, likely reduce stress and anxiety, as well as spill over to enhancing a person’s social interactions.

**Dr. Rita:**

In your book, you talked about habits that can actually prevent brain atrophy with aging and illness. Many of your suggestions (listening to soothing music, repeating meaningful phrases out loud, moving the body, and meditating on positive, loving thoughts) remind me of elements of church services! Thus, would you say that attending a positive and healthy church might be good for the PHYSICAL body? Does research support that?

**Dr. Newberg:**

Absolutely, it can be good. The more you activate the positive emotions, derive meaning and optimism, access social support, and engage the brain in music, movement, and contemplation, the better it is for your whole body and brain. Lower levels of stress and anxiety lower the amount of the stress hormone cortisol. Since cortisol suppresses the immune system, lower levels help improve the immune system's function, and reduce blood pressure and heart rate, all of which can be beneficial. But as you alluded to, if the person is hearing about fear, anger, and guilt, they may not experience the same types of healthful benefits.

**Dr. Rita:**

How do a person's past experiences with God affect his or her current perception of Him? And are those perceptions permanent or changeable?

**Dr. Newberg:**

Everything that has ever happened to us affects us and our brain. If we have traditionally felt that God was supportive and loving, then those neuronal connections will affect our future thoughts and behaviors. Similarly with the negative side. However, all of our beliefs are changeable, although it is difficult and usually requires a conscious effort, other than those individuals who have specific transformative experiences. But if a person continues to pursue a more positive experience with God, they are more likely to alter their brain function in a way that supports that positive way of thinking.

**Dr. Rita:**

Please talk about how fast your brain can change and what it takes to keep up those positive changes.

**Dr. Newberg:**

On one hand, the brain is constantly changing. On the other hand, it probably takes some time to change the overall way in which the brain works. But it probably is not as long as you think. Our studies of people doing meditation showed that after only eight weeks, a 12 minute a day practice changed the brain pretty significantly. But the more you keep working on that change, probably the more change you will see. It is like a muscle, the more you work out, the bigger it becomes. In fact, brain scan studies have shown that the brains of long term meditators literally are thicker than those who do not practice. We showed similar changes in terms of overall brain activity being higher in spiritual individuals who have done meditation or prayer for many years. But it is also true that you have to use it or lose it. If you stop focusing on a particular idea, the brain will lose that connection over time. That is good if the connection supports a destructive belief, but can be bad if the connection supports a positive belief.