

SEEKING

OUT

GOODNESS

*Finding the True
and Beautiful
All around You*

ALEXANDRA KUYKENDALL

“In *Seeking Out Goodness*, my friend Alex reminds us all that, in the midst of darkness and misery, we can still see God. This book is a call to action for us to seek, and we shall find.”

Dr. Heather Thompson Day, author of *It's Not Your Turn*

“Lately I’ve been wondering if it is possible to find unity among people who believe, think, and act differently from one another. And then I picked up Alex’s book. *Seeking Out Goodness* offers a trail map to those of us who feel lost in the wilderness of cultural division. If there is any way forward, it is found here in these pages. It does not offer trite solutions but rather gospel-centered answers that come from authentic and thoughtful experience. Alex reminds us there is hope—for the church, for our communities, for our neighborhoods, and for the complexities found in our own homes. This book is just in time.”

Krista Gilbert, home coach, author of *Reclaiming Home*,
and cohost of *The Open Door Sisterhood* podcast

“Cynicism is the spirit of our age, but we will not be able to resist it passively. We need intentional steps for cultivating life where the world sows death, and Alexandra Kuykendall has provided it in these pages. With one eye on culture and the other on Scripture, this is a message for our moment!”

Sharon Hodde Miller, author of *Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to Be More*

“As long as I can remember, Philippians 4:8 has been on repeat in my brain. A powerful and stirring verse, Alexandra Kuykendall calls it a ‘road map for seeking out goodness.’ Wow. Yes, please! I can’t think of a better sister than Alex to lead us through this concept with love, humor, kindness,

wisdom, and courage. As one who is blessed to call Alex friend, I can say she is the real deal. This book is part journey, part confession, part education, and a whole lot of opportunity for change. I found myself challenged to think about goodness more deeply, as well as to bring more of my issues, habits, and struggles straight to Jesus. Be prepared to be brought into truth through story, practical application, contemplation, and exercises that will yield beautiful change in you. Go big, friend, and dive into this book with the expectation of finding goodness!”

Kate Merrick, author of *Here, Now* and *And Still She Laughs*

“How do we not only understand this cultural moment we are living in but also learn to enter in to it? In *Seeking Out Goodness: Finding the True and Beautiful All around You* by Alexandra Kuykendall, you will find the answer! This is such a needed book that is full of thoughtful and practical wisdom to join God in what he is already doing in the world. ‘The darkness is real,’ writes Alexandra, ‘But so is the light. And we know the light will overcome the darkness.’”

Patrick Schwenk, pastor, cohost of *Rootlike Faith* podcast, and author of *In a Boat in the Middle of a Lake*

“With the wisdom of a big sister and the heart of a trusted friend, Alex Kuykendall offers an invitation for readers to choose a different kind of path. It’s a path marked by beauty and goodness, a path that runs toward the God who is the very definition of finding grace and mercy in the most unlikely of places. Given the topsy-turvy, upside-down world many of us find ourselves living in, *Seeking Out Goodness* is a necessary read for all of us today.”

Cara Meredith, author of *The Color of Life*

“In a time of societal divisions and social media–fueled outrage, Alexandra Kuykendall’s *Seeking Out Goodness* is a biblically rooted challenge to look for where God is at work in both the big and small moments of our lives.”

Matthew Soerens, US Director of Church Mobilization and Advocacy, World Relief

“*Seeking Out Goodness* is such a needed and timely book for exactly where we find ourselves in this current cultural moment. The principles found in these pages are timeless, but the examples and stories shared are relatable and helpful to followers of Jesus here and now. Alex Kuykendall is the real deal—living and modeling a life of integrity, truth, and beauty. The words penned on these pages bring together biblical truth, practical application, and refreshing encouragement for all those who find themselves weary in these challenging times.”

Vivian Mabuni, speaker, podcast host, and founder of Someday is Here; and author of *Open Hands, Willing Heart*

SEEKING OUT GOODNESS



Other Books
by Alexandra Kuykendall

The Artist's Daughter

Loving My Actual Life

Loving My Actual Christmas

Loving My Actual Neighbor

SEEKING OUT GOODNESS

*Finding the True and Beautiful
All around You*

ALEXANDRA KUYKENDALL



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*For Gabi, Genevieve,
Gracelynn, and Giulianna
You find what you're looking for.*



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INTRODUCTION

you find what you're looking for

The morning's news headlines were a terrible welcome to a new day. CNN's home page flashed these bullet points, begging me to click and get more:

- A man fell to his death while taking pictures on a cliff in Arizona. Authorities discovered other remains while recovering his body.
- Man pleads guilty to aggravated murder of University of Utah student in exchange for life sentence.
- A Texas family sued to keep their baby on a ventilator. The hospital says the child is dead.
- A dangerous virtual cult is going global.

I closed my computer. Everything felt like bad news. Every headline brought more bleak information. Every Twitter take was tearing apart the opposite opinion. Every discussion

dripped with sarcasm and dismissal of any idea that differed. Politics. Pandemic. Economic divides. Racial tensions. Violence near and far. *Surely the world hasn't shifted to a place beyond hope*, I thought. *There must still be some good news for us as people, some love to experience, some goodness to be found.*

A few minutes later as I scooped coffee grounds into the pot's filter, I couldn't shake the thought that the world is begging for good news. Jesus says, "Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matt. 11:30 MSG). On most days I do my darndest to follow Jesus, and yet I am anything but light and free. It feels more like I am dragging the world's despair. With each step the load weighs heavier and my muscles are more fatigued, making it difficult to stay motivated, to keep believing goodness exists. Despite moments of overwhelm, I'm not ready to give up looking, because though I know life is hard, I also know it is beautiful.

I call myself a kitchen anthropologist because I stand in my kitchen in Denver, Colorado, and observe the world around me, trying to make sense of why people are doing what they are and how that reflects on what they believe about God and one another. This morning was no different as I considered where God was still at work. Writing this book is part of my kitchen anthropology. I hold no special credentials other than a lot of observing and listening and seeking out goodness in the middle of my ordinary days. I think on questions like, *How is God moving in this situation? Why do I think so? How are we, people who follow Jesus as Redeemer, especially prepared to deal with this right now?*

I took my coffee back to my home office and looked out the window to the beginning hints of a sunrise. Early

mornings are my time because that's when my house of five other people is quiet and I can think. Out the window I could see the sky changing—pink, orange, and blue intensifying as the light got brighter. God was slowly turning up the dimmer switch on the day. I saw the colors through the branches and leaves of my neighbor's tree. The tree and all its parts looked black against the orange and pink. The contrast helped me notice both more easily. What I noticed depended on what I chose to focus on. My gaze out the window didn't change, but if I looked for the sunrise, the tree became a frame for the vibrant color. If I focused on the tree, the outline of the branches came into quick clarity. I was looking at both simultaneously, but what I was "seeking out" determined what I saw.

What We Know of God

This is a book about noticing. God's goodness is already here. We don't have to pretend it up, talk it into existence, or believe it to make it real. We know from Scripture that God is good, and we know he is the same today as yesterday and will remain the same tomorrow. So his goodness hasn't changed. We believe him to be a loving Creator who makes all things new through his grace and redemption. And because we know this about him, we can look for his goodness in all places, and we can point to it when we find it so that others can see it as well. We are meant to amplify who he is. Think of holding up a magnifying glass to his acts of love, his beautiful creation, his opportunities to love him back and love others with refreshment, so that we can remember that goodness is still here. "Every good gift and

every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17 ESV), so every single good thing in this world can be traced back to him.

We remind ourselves and fellow Jesus followers of the truth so we can spur one another on to live out the great commandments of loving God and loving others. This in turn will remind others of the hope found in Christ. We are not that hope. He is the hope. Our job as kitchen, cubicle, classroom, hospital (or anyplace we find ourselves) anthropologists is to find echoes of his character and reflect them back to a world in need of good news. God’s character—his love and mercy—is certainly good news.

If this feels a little woo-woo right now, hard to get your mind and hands around, this book is meant to make the process more concrete. Examples of what this has looked like for me and for others are mixed with practices to help you in your search so we can learn together what it means to seek out goodness. My hope is when you’re done reading, you will have a better vision for what is good. It will jump out at you like the twists and turns of my neighbor’s tree branches against the sunrise, because you have focused in on what you are looking for and can extract what is good.

Philippians 4:8 tells us where to center our thought life. This verse will act as our structure as we intentionally focus on finding goodness: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” The promise follows in verse 9: “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Paul is telling his fellow Jesus followers to think on this list of goodness

and then reflect those traits with our own actions. God will be with us in every part of the process.

As we use Philippians 4:8 as a road map for seeking out goodness, we will see how God demonstrates these qualities, how we are finding them around us, and how we can reflect them back to the larger world.

We Find What We're Looking For

If you're like me, the world feels exhausting right now. Everything has become controversial, a battleground for partisan fighting that reflects nothing of what God says he wants for people. On top of the intense cultural moment, each of us carries the stress of living our actual lives. Parents are sick, bills need to be paid, kids have to be educated and raised to be productive citizens. The amount of responsibility we each carry within a climate that feels toxic and combative is nothing short of overwhelming.

And yet we have good news. It's the good news that has followed humanity through every generational trial: God is with us. He has not changed. Though the political talking points, the community conflicts, and the pandemic devastation may have an intensity we haven't experienced before, he has. He has been with people through every human trial because he is, well . . . God. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 21:6), and he is not going anywhere. Though the ground we stand on feels unstable, he is unchanging and steady.

Because he does not change, we know his goodness remains here. If we are to survive the heaviness that fills our days, we must seek out what is good. The darkness is real.

But so is the light. And we know the light will overcome the darkness (John 1:5). So here is the million-dollar question: How? How do we seek out what is good when we feel paralyzed by what is difficult? How do we lift our heads enough? How do we make sure to hold on to the light in the midst of the darkness? That is what this book is about—how to search for, find, and recognize God’s goodness.

A Prayer for SEEKING

*Lord, we know you make all things new.
You bring the sun up every day and the moon every
evening.*

*You are dependable in your consistency
And surprising in your new growth.
Your goodness is both reliable and refreshing.*

*Open our eyes to where you are already at work.
Remind us with each discovery that you will not leave
us and you still have more to give.*

*Help us to have new vision, a clarity that brings your
goodness to the front of our minds
So that we may know more of you today, on this very
ordinary kind of day.*

*Let us find you in the vacuuming, raking, and
scrubbing,
In the wiping of tears, bottoms, and counters,
In the early morning light and midnight darkness,
In the typing, driving, walking, snoozing, baking of our
days,
In the boredom, lovely, thrilling, and angst,
In the wild and wonderful, the bland and predictable.
In every part of our lives may we see evidence of who you
are.*

*Holy Spirit, do a work in us so that we may reflect a
teensy portion of God's goodness to our circles of
people and creation on this planet.*

Help us to reflect mercy,

Help us to offer grace,

Help us to be reconcilers,

Help us to be hope bearers,

*So that those who are also seeking goodness will find
your essence in us. May we not be barriers to your
good news but amplifiers of it.*

We trust you with this journey.

In Jesus and through Jesus we pray.

Amen.

QUESTIONS *for* REFLECTION

1. Where do you feel bad news most strongly? Where is there pain that overwhelms you? Is it old pain or new pain?
2. Do you believe there is goodness to be found? Why or why not?
3. What have you been seeking out? How is that reinforced by what you've found?
4. How have you seen good news? How does seeing it help you find more good news?
5. When considering what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy, what do you think will be the easiest for you to spot in the wild? What will be the most challenging?

Mining for the Gold

“Nonna’s grandfather came from Ireland. You could focus on him.”

Ten-year-old Gracelynn had just come home from school and was anxious to get started on her new assigned project: a report on a person from her family who had immigrated to the United States. My grandfather on my mother’s side was the son of an Irish coal miner. He was the first person to come to mind.

“Okay, him.”

Sometimes fourth graders are easy to please. And so we chose the mystery man we were labeling as “Nonna’s grandfather,” Gracelynn’s great-great-grandfather. She was pleased. Now the first step was to find his name.

“William Hogan,” my mom said when I called her. She said it with authority, so I was sure she was going to be a great resource on this assignment.

“Great. What else can you tell me?”

“He worked in the coal mines near Gunnison. He died when Dad was three years old. Dad was the youngest of ten.”

Gunnison is a town on the other side of the Rocky Mountains from our home in Denver. It’s a place where the city folk head to go white-water rafting or camping. The hint of Colorado’s history is palpable, with ranches that still operate and a mountain valley

where it's easy to imagine settlers looking around and deciding to stay.

My mom's knowledge of William Hogan stopped at the few pieces of information she gave me over the phone: his name and where he lived and his occupation at death. She knew her own father's name and birth date. I had a vague memory that she'd told me as a child that William had left a brother on the docks in Ireland. One brother was boarding a ship to the United States and the other was headed to Australia, both off on their respective adventures with no way of keeping in touch. No cell phones or emails, no forwarding addresses. As a child, I thought that story sounded slightly romantic and exciting. Now I hear desperation to make choices that would result in the grief of saying goodbye forever. It was time to do some research to find the details we needed for the project.

As any amateur genealogist would do, I went to the internet, a place where mining is required—a sifting through of what is untrue, unessential, and unimportant to find the gems I was looking for. I told Gracelynn I would help her find the facts, together we would make educated guesses about the details, and she could write out William's story.

We learned about coal mining in Colorado, the potato famine in Ireland, and travel to the New World. And then with all my internet scrolling, I found gold: A cemetery record in Gunnison, Colorado, that showed the birth and death years that lined up with my mother's memory. Then photos of a grave plot and shared tombstone for William and his wife, Sarah, my mother's namesake. Finally, the photo that made me gasp out loud as I realized what I'd discovered—the back of the tombstone had three engraved names with birth and death years. William and Sarah buried three of their children. Our search revealed that William Hogan's life was not only filled with the backbreaking work of

climbing through the coal mines of our beautiful Rocky Mountains; it also contained the worst type of grief, losing a child, three times over. This final photo was not what I was looking for, but it gave me a whole new understanding of this man's experience in his "new world."

It wasn't lost on me as I clicked from site to site that we were mining for information about a miner. The process of mining is seeking out. It is often a toil to whittle away at what is unnecessary to discover what we're looking for. It isn't always the joy of the gold rush, the "cowabunga" of the big surprise; it is the disciplined step of looking for the next thing and the next thing. It is having eyes to see where God is at work, even if it doesn't seem obvious at first glance. It is finding treasure in the middle of what looks like a mountain of rock. It is venturing into unknown places, often dark and dangerous spots, to get what is valuable. It is separating what is good from what is not.

While my great-grandfather's mining work was difficult and sooty, it reminded me that the search for good can be hard. It is not meant for those who are looking for the easy, clean route. It is also the work of faith, because we must believe there is something worth seeking out if we are to go to all this trouble. We trust that there is a possibility that we will find treasure.

Part 1



the TRUTH,
the WHOLE TRUTH,
and NOTHING BUT
the TRUTH
(so help me, God)

Whatever is true . . .

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

Truth is so rare, it is delightful to tell it.

EMILY DICKINSON

I sat in the jury box trying to focus on the judge's opening instructions. I heard only snippets of his monologue. "A few days . . ." "No talking about the case . . ." "Breaks throughout the day . . ." I was too distracted by the

thoughts of my four-year-old and nursing baby at my sister-in-law's for the day to give my full attention to the courtroom happenings.

In the days that followed, my fellow jurors and I listened to expert witnesses with fancy credentials talk about medical protocols and medical records while technicians read phone message logs. We learned about kidneys . . . lots about kidneys. We watched the clock and covered our stomachs with our notebooks when we could feel ourselves getting hungry and our tummies started to grumble.

I'm kind of a natural juror. I like the thought of "experts." I enjoy hearing both sides of a story and then deciding where I stand on the question at hand. I also like the idea of getting to the bottom of something and finding the truth. I took notes, studied faces for emotion, and wondered when our next break would be so I could call my sister-in-law Lindsay to check in again.

The lawyers gave their closing arguments, and I walked into the jury room with confidence that this was a done deal. We could decide in ten minutes of deliberating, where we would just confirm to one another that this medical malpractice case was a big waste of our time and lots of resources. A good and easy "not guilty" verdict.

You know where this is headed. I was quick to learn that we didn't all see the evidence presented to us pointing to the same obvious result. Here we were, twelve jurors with twelve different life experiences, moral codes, and cultural filters to interpret the same information in front of us. We agreed on a forewoman to lead us through the process. The group discussion started with a respectful tone and was kicked off by a few brave souls volunteering to speak into the

awkward silence. We felt the responsibility of our decision, and we all had our own versions of the nursing baby waiting for us at home. So we wanted to take our time to do right by both parties and also get out of there as quickly as possible.

The respectful tone faded, and I could hear strain and stress in people's voices. As it turns out, sifting through evidence to discern the truth can be hard.

Since the beginning of time, people have been searching for what is true. The pursuit of truth forms our cultures, informs our decisions, and shapes our understanding of how and why life exists. We can cover some pretty big questions in our search and have many sources to draw from. As Christians, we believe the Bible is God's inspired Word. It has authority. As does the Holy Spirit, who speaks directly to us and others. We are embodied souls, and our lived experiences reflect what is true of the world, the good and bad. Ultimately, we believe Jesus when he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). We turn to all these sources knowing they will enhance one another and reflect the same large story of the gospel with different hues and textures. In a world of "fake news," the foundations of our faith give us guideposts of truth as we walk through our days.

When searching for goodness, we are on the lookout for what is true (and what is not!). Philippians 4:8 starts right off with "Whatever is true." The problem is figuring out what exactly *is* true. We can't help but look at life through the lens of our personal experiences, which shape our biases, assumptions, and preconceived ideas. This is how we end up with animated jury deliberations. So we try to examine things from multiple angles to see if we're missing

something (the genius behind our peer jury system). We go back to the foundational truths of who God is and who we are in relationship to him. We keep our eyes open for truth because we want more of God, and we start with the truth that God is good.

The “not guilty” verdict I thought was so obvious turned out to be our decision in the end, but there was a lot of discussion to get us there. Agreeing on truth isn’t automatic and almost always takes work.

We Don’t Need to Be Afraid of the Truth

As a mother of four daughters, I’ve moderated a number of she-said, she-saids.

Girl 1: Mom, she _____ [hit me, looked at me mean, took a bite of my cereal].

Girl 2: I did NOT!

As details come out, I often find that someone’s first version is not exactly the full story. The longer the partial-truth teller holds on to her unsubstantiated version, the more uncomfortable she gets because partial truth is unsatisfying, and hiding the truth takes a different kind of emotional work.

Let’s pause here, right at the beginning of part 1, and decide we need to be honest during our search for goodness. If we believe God to be who he says he is—just, faithful, merciful, loving—then we can pursue truth with freedom. We don’t need to pretend away or deny or hide from what is happening around us because God’s character doesn’t

change. Will full honesty be comfortable? Not always. But our pursuit is for truth, not comfort.

If we trust God's character is unchanging, we can offer space for other people's questions and doubts because we know what is true will not change. We can also give ourselves permission to ask questions, seek reliable sources, and maintain curiosity as we learn more of the infinite God and how he operates in our finite world. We can hold to what we know is true and with humility loosely grasp the details that are still unknown. In this process we may find God's goodness in unexpected places because we've put preconceived ideas and presumptions aside and allowed God to show us his truth in new ways. We will offer others a more honest faith when we share where we have doubts.

To think on what is true sets our minds in the right place. It grounds us, keeping us away from things we fear or worry about that are not real. Much of our lives is spent considering, problem solving, and worrying about things that aren't even true. One of my daughters might cling to her version of a story because she is worried she'll get in trouble or will look silly if she is honest, but hiding from the truth is way more painful than any consequence had she just come clean and apologized. These distractions keep us from noticing, experiencing, and celebrating what God has for us that is true. Truth helps us find goodness.

The Truth Is Good

In church circles we often talk about balancing truth and grace. In this contrast the truth is usually presented as the harsh schoolmarm (reality), while grace is more like the

grandma baking cookies (warm and soft and full of forgiveness and all). Truth is seen as the unfiltered photo with the gray roots and wrinkles, and grace is the filter that removes the unsavory. Truth becomes synonymous with confronting sin, perhaps throwing in some judgment and a dash of shame. In other words, truth is not fun. In this way it has gotten a bit of a bad rap, like somehow it is the bad news part of the Good News. But grace is also truth, and the Good News—God so loved the world that he came—is really good. We can reclaim truth to include good.

The world is a harsh place. We don't need to seek out that reality. The world is also full of beautiful moments and evidence of God's love. Both are true. The beautiful is no less true than the painful. Sometimes we like to play hierarchy of truth. Going back to the bad news part of the Good News, we assume the harsher the tone, the more true it must be. Uh-uh. In our everyday reclaiming of truth, we can look for the beautiful: a full pantry, dragonflies, babies who flail their legs when a sibling is in view, the sound of wind in the treetops, and a perfect flip of a cake out of its pan. All true. None harsh. All God's good gifts for today.

The good and the hard impact each other. They reverberate, changing each other's tone, shaping how we experience both, but the pain of this world doesn't negate the beauty, no matter how much we're told it does. In John 8:32, Jesus reminds the crowd outside the temple that following his teachings will be the key to freedom from their sins: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Jesus is the way, *the truth*, and the life, after all. It is knowing the truth about God and living from it that will move us from

hurt, grief, and disappointment to see what is true and beautiful.

The Truth about God

It makes sense that we start with what we know to be true about God. He is kind of the main way we're going to find goodness. God's Word, which was inspired by him and written for all people in all times, is a good place to start. When I was talking with my friend Francie, she reminded me that we can filter things through God's metanarrative of creation, separation, reconciliation, and redemption. This is the larger story of God at work that is echoed throughout time and place. We see this pattern in humanity's larger story, but we also see it repeated over and over in our own stories. The micro reflects the macro. When looking for what is true and beautiful, I ask how a situation or circumstance fits into God's metanarrative. It helps me see what is true.

Scripture is God's living Word, meaning it can penetrate our spirits in a way that it wouldn't if it was just a bunch of old writing. We are meant to engage with it, meditate on it, *think on it*. It is the truth we can turn to over and over again that will point us toward hope. Scripture gives words to who God is. Here are a few things it tells us about God:

God is holy (Isa. 6:3).

God is love (1 John 4:8).

God is consistent and unchanging (Heb. 13:8).

God offers grace and mercy (Eph. 2:8–9).

God provides (Matt. 10:29).

PRACTICES FOR CONSIDERING GOD

Choose one of the descriptors of God listed on the previous page and do one or more of the following:

- » Close your eyes and ask yourself what that word means to you.
- » Pray the entire phrase as you breathe. Inhale: *God is*. Exhale: *loving*.
- » Write the phrase out multiple times. Consider the words as you write them.

- » Consider how this truth impacts your heart, your circumstances, and your upcoming decisions.
- » Remember a time when you haven't known this to be true of God. Write how you felt.
