

Surely God is good

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[0 : 00] And so he begins, surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. And it's a creed, a theological statement, surely good is good to Israel.

It features in quite a few of the Psalms and throughout the Old Testament. It's something that's said and sung regularly. But then he goes on to say, well, it doesn't seem like it.

Is God really good? The wicked prosper and revel in their success. He says from verse 4, they have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from the burdens common to man. They're not plagued by human ills. Therefore, they are proud. They clothe themselves with violence. And they do whatever they want.

They scoff, he says, speak with malice. And their mouths lay claim to heaven. And their tongues take possession of the earth. They say, how can God know, does the Most High have knowledge?

[1 : 02] They're so confident in their lives and all that they do that they scoff at God. And the psalmist, he says, envies them.

He envied them. In verse 3, I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. And it makes him say in verse 13, surely in vain have I kept my heart pure.

In vain have I washed my hands in innocence. What's the point of trusting God when actually it's the people who ignore him, who are free, who enjoy life?

There's a sense of if you can't beat them, join them. And perhaps that's a familiar feeling to us this morning. Or a familiar feeling from recently or in the past.

When we look around to our world and all the bad things that happen, and there doesn't seem to be any justice. There's certainly no instant justice. If you're a Monty Python fan, you'll remember some of their sketches which ended with what was supposedly a heavy weight landing on somebody's head.

[2 : 11] Would say a thousand kilograms or something. Like a big box. In fact, it was obviously just falling over the top of somebody. But we want that to happen. We know there are bad people.

We know who they are. And we want something to land on their head as instant justice. But it doesn't happen. Or people to be, for their schemes to come to nothing and to be fooled and worsted because of what they do.

Or we look at other people and the money that they have. They can afford the best houses and the holidays and all the stuff they want to buy because they're not giving to a church. They don't have to be honest in their business dealings.

They can collect more money. Because they're free on Sunday, they can work all the hours they want because they've got an extra day to relax and do things with their family. They can earn more money. They're free on Sundays.

They don't have to support other people in fellowship. They can hate their enemies. They don't have to accept any moral boundaries. They can live the high life. They can be low life.

[3 : 14] And they're free. And we can feel like that sometimes. And perhaps you feel like that this morning. And that is how the psalmist felt. That's the beginning of the psalm.

And he says in verse 16, When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me. It became oppressive to him.

He knew that he couldn't join the wicked, that it was wrong. But he also couldn't enjoy submitting to God's will. And his religion just became empty.

Just a set of rules that he knew and accepted. But he didn't love it. And he didn't value it. And ultimately he says in verse 21, My heart was grieved.

And my spirit embittered. And it's a terrible place to get to. And perhaps you're there this morning. Or you've been there and you can understand. This position of, in theory, being in the kingdom.

[4 : 15] But it's not feeling like a joy or a privilege or a pleasure. Because it all seems to be going wrong. But the psalmist says in verse 17.

He says, It was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God. He came secondly to the sanctuary. Now he's referring to the temple in the Old Testament.

That was the place where the people as a nation and individually met God to worship. It was the place of sacrifices for sin. And all the other sacrifices that were required.

It was the place where the high priest went once a year to, as it were, meet with God and atone for the sins of the people. And he came to the sanctuary and it all made sense.

And in New Testament terms, all those things point particularly to Christ, but especially to the cross of Jesus. Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, bringing salvation for his people.

[5 : 21] Christ is, Christ is the center of worship. We come to worship him, knowing that he has forgiven our sins and full of joy because of that.

We live our Christian lives denying self and dying to self and living for God, reflecting what Jesus did on the cross in giving himself as a sacrifice for sin.

And so on. The cross is the center. And the cross puts everything in context. As the psalmist came to the sanctuary, we come to the cross. We realize at the cross that sin is offensive to a holy God.

And the judgment is death. And it was so extreme and so necessary to deal with it that Christ had to die for sin in the place of his people.

And yet God did atone for sin through the sacrifice of his son. And having come to the sanctuary and seen everything in context, the psalmist realizes two things.

[6 : 24] Firstly, that the world is under God's judgment. As holy God will ultimately judge sin and condemn sinners.

So therefore, envy of the world is dangerous. He says in verse 2, he hints at this, as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold.

He says in verse 22, I was senseless and ignorant. There's a realization that this freedom that the world has is an illusion.

I remember being at school, just about remember still being at school. Do you remember being at school, that moment when the teacher goes out of the class for a few minutes? And at first, there's still silence.

And then a little light hum starts. And then the talking gets louder and louder. And perhaps things start to be thrown. And the class experiences what they think is freedom.

[7 : 25] But that teacher is walking down the corridor and will come in and will put an end to it all. And if whoever's behaving badly will suffer, they'll be punished.

That freedom they thought they had, the class thinks it has, is an illusion. And the world is in that position before God of thinking, I can do anything and it doesn't matter.

But God sees and God will judge. Peter, in one of his letters, tells us that sinfulness, a life of sin, is a flood.

And people may say, thinking like they're in a swimming pool, come on in, the water's lovely. But it's a flood. They're being swept away by it.

It's a terrible thing to be under God's judgment, to be carried along and yet believe that all is well. And if we're Christians, envying the world can lead us to compromise.

[8 : 28] It's like standing, I think, with one foot on the shore, by a river, and the other foot on a boat that's not moored. And that isn't a sustainable position, is it?

I don't know if you've ever stood on a boat with just the one foot when it's not moored, because the boat just drifts away. There's only one thing that can happen when the boat drifts away from the shore and you go down in the water.

You have to be either in the boat or on the shore. You have to be one or the other. And we have to choose. We can't let the envy of the world, a false envy of the world, bring us to that position of compromise where the only thing that can happen is that it goes wrong and we end up landing in the water.

And it's only in Christ, on the bank, that there is safety before God because of the judgment that is coming. So the world is under God's judgment, but also the psalmist realizes that the believer is rescued.

He says in verse 23, I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me into glory.

[9 : 44] So the believer is grasped, guided, and glorified. One of the commentators says, write that down in your notes if you're taking notes.

Grasped, guided, and glorified. Now some people think of God as being a bit more detached than that from people.

They think of us as people of being like little children, toddlers. There's a little lad pottering around for the service having a look at the mixing desk. Unfortunately not tall enough to reach the buttons yet, but a couple of months, watch out.

Toddlers potter around, don't they? And very little children, when they're first on their feet, they fall over all the time. They just sort of fall down on their bottoms and they get up again and then they potter off and they fall over again. And certainly with small children, you have to pick them up sometimes, don't you?

And set them on their way and they fall over and someone else picks them up. And people think of God like that as that we're like children pottering around and God picks us up every now and again and says, well, off you go. But the psalmist says it's not like that at all.

[10 : 49] God's whole purpose is with his people. It's behind us. It's around us. He doesn't leave us. He doesn't set us off to go on our way.

He's always with us. The psalmist says, I am always with you. But that's because God is always with him. God holds the psalmist by his right hand.

So God is leading and protecting in his might. He's not just sending the psalmist on his way. He's there. He has a grasp, a grasp on his people.

He guides with his counsel. He sets our direction through his word. And as we listen to it and we read it and it's preached and we listen and we discuss it and share our lives with one another, we discover what God means in his word and God guides us through all of that.

And God will take me into glory. God has prepared a place with himself for all his children. And his plan is working inexorably towards that future.

[11 : 57] Come back this evening for Revelation 21 and 22. I didn't know Philip was speaking on that but there's a tie in there. It's a wonderful picture of the future that God has prepared.

And he hasn't just got that future prepared in the hope that some people will make it. It is his intense purpose and desire and intention that his people will be there with him and he will take us by the right hand, grasping, guiding and will glorify.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul famously wrote this, that we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified.

Those he justified, he also glorified. And you'll be familiar with those words. And you'll probably be familiar with the thought, the realization, that all of those five stages are in the past tense.

[13 : 13] Not just justified, but glorified. Glorified. Those of us who are still alive. And yet it talks about us in the past tense. It's so certain that it will happen.

It's almost as if it already has. So there's a certainty. The believer is rescued, and because of God's purpose and God's actions, there is a certainty about the future.

So if we've met Jesus at the cross, and been to that place, the sanctuary, that the psalmist talks about, then we need to continue to tell ourselves every day, that God's way, and God's will, must be best.

Because he has rescued me, from this judgment that's coming, and bestowed every spiritual blessing on me, not just in this life, but in the world to come.

It's not just a thing to believe, or to say once, but to keep telling ourselves. We've said it so far in the service, I'm saying it now, but daily, we need to remind ourselves, that our Savior knows best.

[14 : 30] And the psalmist is telling us, through this psalm, to use those truths, to interpret our lives, and not let circumstances rule. I haven't had pause for reflection, of what I might have learnt, or should have been learning, over Christmas.

The young man, who's fallen prey to leukemia, finally, after many years, became a Christian, as has his wife. What else has God got, in these circumstances?

How will God use, the terrible circumstances, in Sri Lanka, in the glory of his kingdom, through his people, ministering there? We don't know, we may never learn, but we need to learn, to interpret

these circumstances, in line with God's word, recognizing that God, knows best, he has done away, with the judgment, for his people, and rescued us.

And to accept him, is good. And to accept his way, is good. And to accept the best way. We mustn't let circumstances, rule our minds.

No one is better off, without Christ. That is, the no God delusion. Everything God has given us, far outweighs, every difficulty, we might have.

[15 : 53] and far outweighs, every difficulty, that someone who's outside, of Christ now, is experiencing, if they would only come. It's the answer, at least at the beginning, of every answer.

It's not the thing, that will take away everything, God doesn't take away, pain and suffering, from his people. We know that. He helps us to realize, that it is a light, a momentary affliction, compared, to the judgment, that might come, and compared to the glory, that is, to come.

So the outcome, for the psalmist, is a complete change, of perspective. Look at verses 25, and 26, as he breaks out, in worship. Who am I, in heaven, but you?

And being with you, I desire, nothing on earth. My flesh, and my heart, may fail, but God, is the strength, of my heart, and my portion, forever.

The psalmist, no longer confused, complete change, of perspective, realizing, that God, is sufficient, and God, is sufficient, for us, through, what Christ, has done, on the cross.

[17 : 05] There is, no one, besides him. There is, nothing, that we can desire, or do without, manage without, cannot manage without, on earth. If we have Christ, then nothing, is everything, because we have him.

Harder to say, we may think, well, would I want, to give it all up, and live like, those students, in Sri Lanka. That's perhaps, a hard question, to ask ourselves. But remind ourselves, with the psalmist, that being with Christ, I desire nothing, on earth.

An attitude, to learn from, perhaps. And so, our attitude, to Christ, steers us, to one, of two, alternative, futures.

There's a film, you may have, seen, from some years ago, called, Sliding Doors. Familiar? The basic, story is, that, a woman, goes to work, in the morning, and, what we see, developed during the film, is two alternative futures.

In one, alternative future, she catches the train, goes to work, and her life continues, as it had been. And, in parallel, there's a second story, that is played out, which, what happens, when she, misses her train, I think, falls over, hurts herself, misses her train, goes home, and finds out, all kinds of things, that she never knew.

[18 : 32] And, the film, that story, plays out differently, to what would have happened. And, it's, and of course, it's playing with the idea, of what would, could things be, completely different, if some obscure, little detail, in your life, was different.

Well, it works in a film, it's very interesting. But, what the power of psalms, is telling us, and what God is telling us, is that our attitude, to Jesus, steers us, into two alternative futures, one of two, like that.

To accept, Christ, is to have, refuge. The psalmist says, I have made, the sovereign Lord, my refuge. To reject him, is the alternative, in verse 27, those who are far from you, will perish, who destroy, all who are, unfaithful, to you.

To reject Christ, is to lose, everything, even, including everything, we think, we already have. And yet, to accept him, is to have refuge, to be grasped, and guided, and on course, for glory.

Surely, God is good. Well, let's pray, before we sing. Heavenly Father, thank you for, this psalm, that was written, so long ago, but yet, still speaks, truth to our hearts.

[19 : 55] Thank you that you led, the psalmist, through these, circumstances, in order to teach us, and to record it, in your word, that we may learn, and so many of his, weaknesses, and mistakes, we see, reflected in our own lives.

Father, thank you that that doesn't matter, because of Christ, because you forgive us, because you have, a wonderful future, laid in store for us, because, of his salvation.

help us to live, our lives, which glorify you, and put him first, as we seek to die to self, and live for you, because of all that you have done, for us, and our Lord Jesus.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.