

Is God good?

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[0 : 00] And Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not enter into temptation.

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed, saying, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him. And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow. And he said to them, Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

Thanks, John. Well, good morning. As mentioned, my name's Benji. I'm one of the assistant pastors here.

[1 : 10] And why don't I pray for our time together before we start? Dear Lord, thank you that you went to the cross. Thank you that your son died there for us. Thank you that we can see that you truly and really are good.

Amen. This is a question, and I'm sure because, you know, some of you are here, it's one that you've been asked. Is God good? That I think many of us will ask in a variety of different ways. In fact, there's probably as many ways of thinking about this question, is God good, as there are people in this room. Is God good in the face of my own personal suffering? A very relevant and honest question.

Is God good, though, in the face of COVID? Is God good in the face of war? Is God good in the face of global disparity of wealth? The ascension of the powerful, the oppression of the poor?

Or perhaps you might ask it in a different way. Is God good if the Bible is misogynistic or homophobic? Is God good if the Bible is not pro-choice?

[2 : 12] There are a thousand and one different ways that we can ask that question. And what is goodness? And once we think we know what it is, does God meet our criteria of goodness?

Is God good? Is he good? Now, for many of us, we might reject that we even need to think about God at all when we think about good and bad.

However, this morning, this passage shows us, and I want to argue, that not only is God good, he is the definition of goodness himself. Not only is he good, he is the definition of goodness himself.

Jean-Paul Sartre, an atheist and one of the fathers of existentialism, said this about morality, and I thought this was very insightful. He said, The only problem with this, and I hope that that was kind of tweaked in your mind as you heard that quote, is that if we're honest with ourselves, none of us live as though everything is permitted.

None of us live that way. We all make decisions about what we think is good or bad. And there's no exception when we think about God. Is God good?

[3 : 37] Is he good? In fact, I would imagine that some of you, when you heard Laura's story, would have thought, no, God is definitely not good.

Yet Laura has somehow come to the exact opposite conclusion, that God really is good, supremely good. The definition of good, in fact.

But of course, in any question about whether or not God is good, we're faced with the same question, aren't we, if we're honest, about ourselves. If Sartre is right that all is permitted if there is no God, then we can call ourselves good and be done with it.

But none of us live that way. None of us live that way. We know deep down that there is objective good and bad. And we need to think carefully, don't we, about where we fall on that spectrum.

If we ask the question, is God good, then we must ask the question of ourselves. Am I good? Are we good? Well, in our passage this morning, the Bible gives us, wonderfully, a definition of what goodness is and whether or not God himself is good.

[4 : 48] And it does it in an outrageously unique way. And this is the thing I really need us to pay attention to this morning, because this is the only point I'm going to be making. So if you hear anything I say this morning, please let it be this.

It poses humanity's greatest problem, and then it shows us God's great solution. It poses humanity's greatest problem, and then shows us God's solution.

And this is key to our question, isn't it? Because if God solves humanity's greatest problem, then the Bible argues he is good. Then he is good, I will put it to you.

Because, and I really need us to hear this this morning, the Bible says there is a problem more evil than sickness. More evil than illiteracy. More evil than COVID.

More evil even than death itself. And that leads me on to my first point. Man's greatest problem, they cannot save themselves.

[5 : 45] Man's greatest problem, they cannot save themselves. Now our passage that we've just had read wonderfully from John, and I do encourage you to keep that little gospel open, and it's yours to take away afterwards.

Our passage is the last moment Jesus has before he goes to die. The last moment he has before he goes away to die on the cross. So we see in verse 39, have a look with me, line 39 in your little gospels.

And Jesus said to them, oh sorry. And Jesus, he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to this place, he said to them, pray that you might not enter into temptation.

So we see that Jesus goes up to pray, and he asks his disciples a very simple, very easy request. Stay awake and pray not to enter into temptation. And he goes only a stone's throw away. Do you see that again in verse 41? He withdrew from them about a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed.

[6 : 50] The disciples, therefore, could probably still hear Jesus. They could certainly still see him. And all they had to do was stay awake and pray that they would not enter into temptation.

But yet, what do we see that they do in verse 45 and 46? Have a look with me at the end of our little section. And when Jesus rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow.

And he said to them, why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation. They couldn't even stay awake. In other words, they couldn't even follow the most basic of requests of Jesus.

They couldn't even resist the most basic of human urges. Their Savior and their Lord is about to go away to die on the cross. And they could not even stay awake at his request.

But worse than this, they've been told to pray that they would not enter into temptation. Have a look with me again at verse 40. And Jesus said to them, pray that you may not enter into temptation.

[7 : 58] And I suppose the most obvious temptation, first and foremost, would have been the temptation to sleep, which they failed. But we know from the rest of Luke's account that not only could they not even keep their eyes open, Jesus was asking them not to be tempted to desert him, to stay with him until the bitter end.

And yet they all, every single disciple, without fail, deserted Jesus when he died on the cross. Peter, in fact, the best of the disciples, which we see literally in the very next scene, denied Jesus three times.

Jesus wasn't even willing to give up his reputation for Jesus, let alone follow him perfectly. Now, we've got to be clear here that Luke is using this in his eyewitness account to make a point, to make a point about all of us.

That at the lowest point in Jesus' story, the moment where he is about to die as a slave on the cross, mankind was so utterly weak that they could not even stay awake.

Man was so utterly helpless that they could not even pray not to enter into temptation. And I want us to hold this picture in our mind's eye. Jesus, on the eve of his death, on the cross, sweating drops of blood but a stone's throw away, and his closest followers fast asleep.

[9 : 24] It's such a stark picture of humanity, isn't it? And Luke wants us to really feel that image, to make a wider point. He's showing us, in this example, that ultimately, mankind cannot, they cannot save themselves.

Completely unable to do away with even the most base of desires, like tiredness. But most of all, Luke wants us to see that all of mankind fails.

Fails at the requests of God. Jesus, God himself, asks them, please, just stay awake. And man falls asleep. You might well be thinking at this stage, Benji, I don't really understand how these disciples 2,000 years ago, falling asleep, has anything to do with me.

And that's an excellent question. But it relates because it is a snapshot of all of our acute weakness. A weakness to do anything for God. And if you think about it, and just think about our world for a second, I hope you see that that makes sense.

Despite incredible technological advances, a vaccine in a year, billionaires in space, surgery that can change our physical appearance, we have still not managed to drop the most basic human desires.

[10 : 41] Selfish man, as we see all too well, still incites war. Selfishness still reigns in our financial system. Politicians do not do what they say. And power and suppression and brutality just seems like the norm.

Yes, we are so very advanced in so many ways. Yet also morally, so very, very juvenile. We have not in so many ways grown one millimeter morally since the first man.

And before we think just in terms of morality, against the backdrop of all of that, against the backdrop of Jesus' disciples falling asleep and our own failure, death laughs at us.

We have no idea, do we? None whatsoever about what happens when we die. And given all the thousand years of human history and all that we've learned and all that we've read and all that we've written, we are still not a millimeter closer to finding out.

Man cannot resist their most basic selfish urges. And man cannot turn back the ever-ticking hands of time. And man certainly, certainly cannot save themselves.

[11 : 52] Yes, to return to this image of the God-man on his knees, weeping and sweating drops of blood for the state of the world, and his disciples as stones throw, fast asleep.

It's a very accurate picture of our world. Man is utterly helpless. And if we zoom in for a second, let's just forget the world, let's forget all of those things out there, and just think about ourselves.

We see that we cannot save ourselves either. Can we even save one person, the person we know best, ourselves? And the answer is, of course, no.

How close are we to the ideal we have of ourselves in our minds and the person that we want to be? How many of us still, just in March, have our New Year's resolutions going?

How many of us have been entirely consistent, even just this week, to our own words? How many of us ultimately can stop death itself? Yes, even with all the wealth and education in the world, are we not all ultimately just fighting to be the richest person in the graveyard?

[13 : 03] No, Luke paints a very accurate picture of man. As far as Luke is concerned, we cannot even ignore our most basic human instincts. But worse than that, Luke takes it further.

We cannot even follow the most basic command of God, stay awake. This is man's biggest problem, the Bible argues, and I would like to argue this morning.

That we cannot even follow our basic instincts, we cannot even follow God. That we live our whole lives in a world that he has made and sustains, ignoring him.

And for those of us who wouldn't call ourselves a Christian here, that's all the Bible means by sin, by the way. That's all that that weird word means, ignoring God. And when we realize that, when we realize that that is what sin is, we realize that all of us, through and through, without exception, myself and yourself included, are sinners and rebels to the core.

Man's greatest problem, they cannot save themselves. Why? Because of their sin. And this leads me on to my second and final point.

[14 : 12] Man's greatest problem, they cannot save themselves. Jesus' death on the cross, God's great solution. Jesus' death on the cross, God's great solution.

Finally, I hope we've understood what the Bible is trying to argue is man's greatest problem. And I would love you in the question time, do ask if you have an issue with what the Bible says about what our greatest problem is.

Because note that it isn't illness, it isn't illiteracy, it isn't war, it isn't selfishness even. But that mankind is sinful, and cannot save themselves.

And make no mistake, we see in the distress of Jesus, just how much God hates our rebellion. He hates it. Have a look with me at verse 42.

This is Jesus praying to the Father. Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.

[15:13] And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly. And his sweat became like great drops of blood. But falling down to the ground.

The agony is difficult to read, isn't it, for those of us who love the Lord Jesus. The cup here is a metaphor for the anger of God at humanity's sin. That's all it is. And Jesus is begging God, begging him, please God, please, if there is any other way whatsoever, take this cup away from me.

Any other way to deal with man's sin than me taking that judgment. Any other way at all. Please, please do not give it to me. Now you might well be thinking, Benji, why can't God just take away that judgment?

Well, for the sake of time, simply I want to say, because we know all of us that justice is good, don't we? If Sarah Everard or me too has taught us anything, it is that we know that justice is good.

And God is not ambivalent to our sin and to our rejection of him. His perfect justice, his perfect character, demands retribution. And here, Jesus is holding hell in a cup, holding it to his lips and looking into its depths and he is desperate, desperate to not have to take that punishment on himself.

[16:38] It should shock and appall us that the thing Jesus was terrified of was not crucifixion on a Roman cross. Can you imagine not being scared of the crucifixion, but rather he is scared of taking God's anger on himself?

In other words, the fear and anguish that Jesus felt was not at the execution, but bearing God's anger at our sin. Man's greatest problem, make no mistake, is that they cannot save themselves, not from death, but from God himself.

And that is where God should have left us, all of us, unable even to stay awake. And that is a picture of all of us in this room. We should have faced the right judgment we deserve for living in God's world, ignoring him.

But, that is not where God left us. Because note the stunning, unbelievable, outrageous words of our Lord Jesus Christ in verse 42.

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. Are there any more precious words in all of human history than those words?

[17:49] I don't think so. Just compare the disciples again to Jesus at this point. Hold that image, please, in your minds. I, once again, Jesus the God-man, on his knees weeping, the disciples beside him asleep.

Jesus asked them to stay awake. They cannot even do that. They say no to Jesus. Compare that, though, that God asked Jesus to take the full weight of his judgment through death on the cross and Jesus does not say no.

He says, yes, Lord. Yes, Lord, not my will, but yours be done. We yawn and say no to Jesus. Jesus sweats drops of blood and says yes to God as he walks to the cross.

Really, the question that we're asking, whilst it's a justifiable one, is in one sense absolutely wrong. Is God good? How can we even ask that question in one sense?

God being good is not in question when we look at the Lord Jesus Christ in this picture. No, rather, man is not good. Man has no right to ask that question, let alone judge who or what is good.

[19:07] Jesus, yes, Lord, I will die. Man, no, Lord, I will not stay awake. The comparison is shameful.

And so here we see man's greatest problem and God's good, great solution. Man deserves judgment. God could have left us there.

Yet Jesus does not leave us there. God solved our biggest problem. He is most surely, surely good.

To conclude, the Lord Jesus looking at the cup of God's anger instead of walking away from the cross, which he could have done, make no mistake, he could have done, drank it to the dregs as he died on the cross for us.

And because of that, anyone, anyone here who puts their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ can have their greatest problem solved. They can become right with God, their punishment paid, and when they die, which all of us will, they will be welcomed home.

Is God good? Well, I suppose it depends on how you frame the question. But the greatest problem of man is that they cannot save themselves from God. The cost of their sin is too great.

[20 : 27] If we were asking the question this morning, is man good? The answer would be no. No, they are not. Yet wonderfully, outrageously, Jesus staring into hell itself said, not my will, but yours, and walked on his way to oblivion so that we do not have to.

Is God good? Yes, he most certainly is. Why don't I lead us in prayer as we close and then I'll hand back to John. Dear Lord, thank you so much for the death of your son.

Thank you that we see truly there the love, the goodness, the greatness of our Lord. Please would you help us to have continued trust and love in him. Amen.