

“Why Do We Call it Good?”

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Good Friday, 2025 (April 18)

Scriptures: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalms 22:1–21; Hebrews 10:1–25; John 18:1–19:37

Why do we call it Good? What is good about what we just heard? I will not surprise you that the word good does not show up in our gospel reading for today.

Not much good can be said about the crucifixion. On its face, things go from bad to worse. Jesus is betrayed by a friend in the garden. Another friend decides to defend him by acting violently, an act that seems to misunderstand everything Jesus has taught and said, an act Jesus immediately condemns. Jesus is arrested and bound. He is brought before the high priest, a man who has already floated the idea that a good way to get the Romans off of Israel's back would be a symbolic execution. Peter, who had just shown enough zeal to kill in Jesus' name, can't bring himself to own up to even knowing him as he huddles outside the high priest's house in the cold, not even when a young girl confronts him about it. Inside, Jesus is subject to a kangaroo court made up of officials seeking to look better in one another's eyes. Outside, Peter is a coward once again.

Moving from the high priest to the Roman governor, Jesus is subject to another set of confused questions. Pilate seems to show simultaneously the least and the most understanding of the situation. He seems to on the one hand understand that this animus against Jesus from the leaders of the Jews is a political move out of jealousy, yet he seems to be the most clueless one in the story about what Jesus came to do. Talk of truth and kingdoms not of this world seem to fly over his head or beneath his

notice. He doesn't care. At the end of three years of pouring out his life in ministry, Jesus experienced antagonism from among his own people and indifference from those among the nations he would later tell his disciples to go out into. I am not sure which would hurt more. On the way to the cross, Jesus faced both.

Pilate plays along. He protests, but not effectively. He strikes a deal. His apathy means he is won over by a chanting crowd, who shout for the criminal Barrabas to be released and for Jesus to be crucified. And just for good measure, the chief priests claim that they have no king but Ceasar, as David's heir stands there, hands tied, condemned to die. We are now a long way from the awed crowd of 5000 fed, perhaps longer still away from the shouts of "Hosanah to the SOn of David" that greeted Jesus just a few days before.

Then come the details of the cross. Numbered among the criminals, clothes won by wagers, pain, a heartbreaking farewell with his mother, sour wine, death in a place named after a skull, a stabbed side.

How can you call any of that good? Why do we call this particular Friday good?

Jesus asked a similar question in the midst of his ministry, a question whose answer I think helps us understand how an injustice such as the Cross can indeed be good.

A rich young ruler approaches Jesus in Luke chapter 18, a young man whose heart seems to be not far off from the Kingdom, because he recognizes the specialness of what is happening in Jesus' ministry. He has a question, and he tries to convey his

respect for Jesus in how he addresses him: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” You know the rest of the story, how Jesus answers his question and how the young man walks away sad. But before we get to that, Jesus has a question about the title he’s been given: “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”

If you look closely enough, you will see that Jesus is making a claim about himself here. He does not deny that he is the Good Teacher, he just clarifies what that claim of goodness means. “You’re calling me good. Remember now, no one is truly good except for God.” Goodness is found where God is found. That’s how a teacher can be called good, that’s how a life can be called good, that’s how a Friday filled with death can be called Good.

If Jesus were not God, then the Crucifixion is nothing but bad news. At best, he is just another one in a long line of failed liberation attempts of Jewish freedom fighters, this one running afoul not only of the Romans, but the Jewish authorities as well. The best that could be said would be that he inspired others in their attempts to gain their freedom. But is that good?

If Jesus were not God, then the crucifixion is, at best, sentiment at the cost of extreme human suffering.

But the reason we call Good Friday “good” is the same reason the rich young man was correct in calling Jesus “Good Teacher.” When we are talking about Jesus, we are talking about God.

This is the author of Hebrews' take on the cross, for in our reading from Hebrews we do have the word "good."

After a discussion of the Israelite sacrificial system in Hebrews chapter 9, chapter 10 begins in this way: "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near."

The law and its sacrifices, point toward the good that was to come. "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." The good that was to come is the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, ending the cycle of animal blood spilled for sins, rendering such offerings moot for all eternity. As Jesus says on the Cross, "It is finished."

For the writer of Hebrews, the cross is good because of who it is that steps into the place of the sacrifice. The sacrifices in the temple, necessary for the people to live in obedience, were never meant to be a permanent solution to the problem of human separation from the Creator. How could they?

Hebrews echoes what we see throughout the Old Testament, that God is not ultimately in need of or satisfied by sacrifices of animals. They won't fix the cosmic wreck that sin and death have made of the world. They are not in the ultimate and complete sense, good.

But Good Friday is good. Because God himself comes to die to set things right, to end the sacrifices, to bridge the gap between Creator and his Creation.

The suffering of the cross can be called good because it was God who endured it. In turn, those indwelt with his Holy Spirit, are empowered to go and do good in the world, even in the face of suffering. Listen to how Hebrews describes how we ought to live in light of Christ's sacrifice on the cross:

"...since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,..."

Because of Good Friday, we who are baptized into Jesus' death are assured of our standing before God, cleansed from all evil, and full of hope in the Faithful One. And in the confidence in this goodness available to us because of Good Friday, we are spurred on to do good in the world, knowing that even when we suffer, God can redeem and bring out what is good from what was meant for our harm. Because of Good Friday, even our suffering can be redeemed and turned around. Now that, in a world marked by suffering, is something we can say is good.

That goodness is available to you. Good Friday is good not least of all because all of the details of the cross were endured, by Jesus for your sake. He died for all, but he also died for you. When you read those agonizing details of the crucifixion, be assured that they were borne because of God's love for you, because of God's desire to call you his own. If you have not yet opened your heart to that love, the invitation stands wide open. He is waiting. If you have said yes, if you are among God's beloved children, rejoice, yes even on Good Friday, and give thanks for the love that made it possible for you to be reunited with your Creator.

Why then can we call this Friday good? No one is good but God alone. And when God steps into the depth of human brokenness and suffering, not even that darkness can consume his good light.