

Does God love Saddam Hussein?

Saddam Hussein was born on April 28, 1937, son of a poor peasant family in Iraq. In 1947, aged 10, he moved to Baghdad and, 10 years later, he joined the Baath party, an Arab socialist party.

When they were able to seize and stabilise their power in 1968 Saddam quickly became vice-president of Iraq, at the age of 32.

- He nationalized the oil industry.
- He instituted a nation-wide literacy project, making Iraq one of the best educated countries in the Arab world and achieving an award from UNESCO (explain).
- He improved the country's health-care system to be one of the best in the region.

In 1979, Saddam became president of Iraq. On the day he took power at his party's conference he accused 60 of the government's most senior ministers of treason and had them shot. Not surprisingly that silenced most of the opposition.

In 1980, Saddam invaded Iran, strongly supported and aided by the United States and the United Kingdom. During the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam used chemical weapons on Iranian troops and on Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. By 1987, Iraq had developed the fourth largest army in the world, with medium range missiles, chemical and biological weapons, and a nuclear weapons development program, funded by oil exports and all with the approval, or at least the complicity, of the major Western powers.

Then, in 1990, Saddam invaded Kuwait. A US-led coalition liberated Kuwait the following year and imposed economic sanctions, weapons inspections and no-fly zones on Iraq. The war decimated Saddam's military forces and Iraq's economy. His refusal over almost 10 years to cooperate with UN weapons inspections led to US-British bombing raids in 1998 and, of course, ultimately, this year's war.

It has been widely reported, though never conclusively proven, that Saddam has diverted humanitarian funds from the Iraqi people to his personal fortune. As far as we can tell from his lifestyle, even in the days when the West loved him and he could go where he pleased, it seems that Saddam is relatively uninterested in money.

But he is absolutely obsessed with the idea that people should admire and praise him. Almost any poem praising Saddam sent to Iraqi television during his rule was broadcast irrespective of its literary merit.

I am not here today either to support or to vilify President Saddam Hussein. There is no doubt, even if only 10% of the accusations made against him by his own people, by former senior members of his government and by foreign intelligence agencies are true, that he is responsible for some utterly wicked and terrible actions.

Some of the things that Saddam Hussein has done are unimaginably awful. They should make us shudder. But our task today is not to construct a biography of Saddam Hussein.

It is to look at the character of God, specifically, the God of the Bible, the Christian God, who I believe is the only true God – the God who is really there. And in order to help us think about this question of whether God loves Saddam Hussein it's important to keep a couple of facts in mind:

The first is that no matter how wicked Saddam is, and I believe he is very wicked, he is a human being, with all the contradictory and complex emotions and actions that we see in every human being. There is plenty of evidence that Saddam in his early years did much good for the people of Iraq. He is cultured, intelligent, kind to those who are loyal to him and genuinely believes himself to be a liberator of his people.

The second thing we need to remember is that Saddam's regime was, for many years, kept in power by the people that we, the population of the UK, elected. And there are other wicked regimes around the world that still are kept in power by our country and our government. And, since we live in a democracy, that means by us.

The reason we need to remember those things will, I hope, become obvious as we go on.

So – does God love Saddam Hussein?

In many ways it's a peculiar question for me to be speaking on at all when you think about it.

After all you wouldn't come up to me and say "Does George W Bush love his wife Laura?"

How do I know? I'm not George Bush – he should really speak for himself, shouldn't he?

Whether **I** think God loves Saddam Hussein or not, is of no ultimate relevance and probably very little real interest to anyone.

So the real question is how can we know what God thinks about President Hussein?

Well to find out what God thinks we're going to turn to the place where God speaks to people. The place where he sets out his plans for the world, his like and dislikes, his character. And of course that place is the Bible.

Specifically we're going to look at two incidents involving Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ. And Jesus has authority to speak on such matters in a way that no one else does. Because Jesus is God himself, come to earth in human flesh to reveal God to us with unparalleled clarity. What Jesus says, God says.

So then, what does Jesus, the one who is God, have to say about Saddam Hussein? Well obviously the answer is nothing, not directly. Jesus didn't really talk about Saddam Hussein, or Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Churchill, Thatcher, Blair, Bush, me or you.

Not in the sense of naming people by name – and a good job too or the Bible would be an excessively long book wouldn't it? Maybe you already think it's an excessively long book! But Jesus **did** talk an awful lot about what it means to love and be loved by God.

And if you'd like to pick up the little piece of paper that you should find lying on your seat, which is an extract from one of the gospels, the biographies of Jesus' life, we'll see what light Jesus can shed on our question.

You'll have noticed, no doubt, that Jesus in this encounter isn't talking about God's love for us but about our love for God. What Jesus is doing here is setting out God's standard for people who want to have a relationship with God.

As Jesus outlines these two greatest commandments he is telling us something of the character of God – he is explaining to us what God is like. And it turns out that God is not, as we often imagine him to be, a bit like a massive Father Christmas in the sky, just doling out presents to everyone. He is not the kind of God who just sits around in heaven and lets anyone in, no matter what kind of a life they've led.

The God of the Bible, the God who is there, is a God with moral standards. And they aren't just high moral standards – they are perfect moral standards. What does God expect from people? What does the one who created us rightly and justly expect from human beings? Well the answer's right here: That we will love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. That we will love our neighbours as ourselves. That's God's moral standard.

And the Bible is very clear that God hates departure or deviation from those standards.

God hates wicked people. So how's Saddam doing?

Well, it has to be said, that it's not looking good. On the second commandment it is absolutely clear, isn't it, that Saddam Hussein has not loved other people as himself. He has tortured, killed and abused thousands and brought suffering to millions.

On the first commandment it's not looking good either. It seems that President Hussein has not worshipped the God of the Bible. As far as we can tell President Hussein worships only one person – himself. He is at the centre of his own universe.

And Jesus himself said that those who truly love God, those who listen to God's word and respond to what it says will come and trust in Jesus.

And it seems, as far as we can tell, though obviously it is not given to us to see into people's hearts, that Saddam Hussein has not done this.

But before we say, ah well, that's it, game over for Saddam, it's worth reflecting for a minute on how we match up to those standards that the Lord Jesus set out. Love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself.

How are you doing? Have you loved your neighbour as yourself?

Never taken or even desired to take something that belongs to someone else?
Never hurt anybody?
Never gossiped about anyone?
Never excluded anyone from your circle of friends because they weren't cool enough?
Never cheated in a romantic relationship?
Never risked the life of someone's child by driving faster than the speed limit?
Never deprived an artist of the money they've a right to by copying a CD?

And that's just putting it negatively. I guess we'd find it even harder to say we've fulfilled what Jesus asks if we put the question positively: have you always done absolutely everything you could do to protect, care for and look after others? Let's face it none of us have ever loved our neighbour as ourselves. Probably not even for a day. Certainly not for a week.

So what about the 1st commandment – the one Jesus said was the most important moral duty in all the universe: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Have we done that? Have you accepted the things God says about himself in the Bible? Have you obeyed his commands and kept his laws?

Have you tried to live your life to glorify only him and not to promote yourself and your own ambitions? Of course you haven't. I know I haven't.

And the Bible teaches that every single human being on the face of the planet, no matter how good they think they are, no matter how good other people think they are, has done exactly the same.

We have all failed to keep God's standards. We have all broken the two greatest commandments in the universe.

We have all, to use the Bible's word, sinned. We might think of that as a slightly old fashioned world. But it's not to do with living with someone you're not married to. Sin means, as I've just outlined, rejecting God's law. Failing to love God with heart mind, soul and strength. Failing to love our neighbour as ourself. That is sin.

Now from our perspective, that might not be a problem. After all, as far most of us are concerned, standards are relative. What matters to me, for my own feelings of moral self-righteousness, is that I think I'm better than average.

That however bad some of the things I do are, however much I fail to love both God and other people, that it's OK really – because that person over there is worse than I am.

For many people that is the role that people like Hitler or Osama Bin Laden or Saddam Hussein or maybe for some of us, George Bush, take on in our world. These people make us feel that there is someone bad to blame for all the problems in the world – and that means we don't have to look at the contribution we make to the mess the world is in.

That's why it's important for us to see that none of these people are entirely and utterly wicked. And none of us are entirely and utterly good. The world is not divided into good people (like us) on one side and wicked people (like Saddam) on another. Because every one of us is capable of both great good and great wickedness.

As one writer has put it: "The dividing line between good and evil runs right down the middle of every human heart."

The problem we have is that God's standards are absolute. That's not to say that he doesn't distinguish between different degrees of wickedness – of course he does. But it is to say that God cannot stand **any** sin. The Bible says that his eyes are too pure to look on evil.

And we have all sinned. So, shockingly, we're all in the same boat. The same boat as each other – the same boat as Saddam Hussein. Now you might find it offensive that I should say that you are in the same situation as Saddam Hussein.

But it's true. The things he has done wrong might be more public than yours. They are almost certainly greater evils than you have done. But all sin, whether **we** think of it as big or little, is sufficient to alienate us from a perfect God. We have all fallen short of God's standards, rejected his rule and treated other people without love.

The consequence of that is that we all stand under God's judgment. When we die we will face God and he will find us wanting. Saddam Hussein is sinful. And so are you. And so am I. And God must and will punish all sin. So does that mean God doesn't love us? After all if everyone is sinful wouldn't that mean that God didn't love anyone?

Well no it doesn't. And we'll see why if we turn back to our little slips of paper and look briefly at another incident in Jesus' life recorded for us by Mark. You might think that men from the Inland Revenue are not popular. And you'd be right. But that is nothing compared to how unpopular tax collectors were in Jesus' day. In C1st Israel they were Jewish people working for the Roman empire. So not only were they doing a job which is unpopular at the best of times. But they were doing it to tax their own countrymen to fund an army which was occupying their own country. Oh, and most of them were corrupt and on the take as well.

So here's Levi, a man who has clearly not loved God with all of his being or loved his neighbour as himself. And Jesus is talking to him. Now hang on a minute. Isn't that a bit inconsistent? After all I've just been saying that Jesus' standards are incredibly high. This is the God who is too pure to look on evil – and he seems to be inviting it round for dinner!

The religious leaders of Jesus' day – the teachers of the law who called themselves Pharisees – certainly though it was a bit out of order. Why are you eating with such scum they ask? They're the bad guys – surely you can't love them? What does Jesus say?

Jesus' reply, though he doesn't use the word love, makes it clear that he does love wicked people – people like me – people like you. Jesus came for sick people. And he doesn't mean people with colds. He's talking about morally sick people. People who stand guilty before God because of our failure to keep his standards.

Now Jesus isn't saying that there are some healthy people who don't need him – we've

already seen that the God is clear that there are no good, no righteous people, that we have all turned away from God and are guilty as charged.

It's not that there are some sick people that Jesus has come for and some healthy people that don't need him. He is saying that of all the people in the world, all are sick, but only some realise that they need a doctor.

You see the Pharisees had failed to keep God's laws too. But that wouldn't recognise it. They thought that because of all their religion they were OK. They thought they didn't need a doctor – they were healthy. They were wrong, but that's what they thought.

But the tax collectors, the sinners, the people Jesus was hanging out with. Well there was something different about them. They knew that they were wicked. They knew that they were not right with God. They knew that they were guilty before him. And so they turned to Jesus as their Doctor. The one who could make them right with God.

Jesus came to call sinners. Contrary to much of what you may have heard in school assemblies Jesus didn't come for good people. And a good job too – because there aren't any good people. Jesus came for bad people. He came so that anyone, no matter what they have done, anyone who recognises their wrongdoing and turns to Jesus can be made right with God.

And the whole story of the Bible is focussed on showing how it is that Jesus makes it possible for us to be made right with God. When Jesus died, on a cross, God himself took on the punishment for sin that we deserve. God couldn't just say our rebellion didn't matter – because it does matter. Sin must be punished. God must be just. But in Jesus, God himself took the rap for us so we could live.

That means that, just as there's no-one who is good enough to meet God's standards so there's no one who is too bad to be forgiven.

So does God love Saddam Hussein?

Yes he does. Not because of anything Saddam has done – for he has done much that is wicked.

But God does love him. And he shows that love by sending Jesus to die so that the possibility of forgiveness by trusting in Jesus might be open to Saddam, might be open to everyone in the world.

And in case you think that the fact that God **would** forgive Saddam Hussein if he put his trust in Jesus means that God has gone soft on sin, let me tell you that that is not true.

When he died on the cross Jesus was separated from his Father, the Father he had lived in a perfect relationship with for all eternity. As well as the physically excruciating torture of dying on a cross he experienced all the wrath and judgment of God for sin and wickedness and rebellion.

If President Hussein trusts in Jesus he will be saved. He will spend eternity in heaven with God. And it won't be because God has gone soft on sin. It will be because Jesus has paid.

Does God love you?

Yes he does. Not because of anything you have done – for you done much that is wicked. God loves you because he sent his son to die so that the possibility of forgiveness by trusting in Jesus might be open to you. And that doesn't mean that God has gone soft on your sin.

All the bad things, the wicked things, that you have done. All the not loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. All the not loving your neighbour as yourself.

Well when he died on the cross Jesus was separated from his Father, the Father he had lived in a perfect relationship with for all eternity. As well as the physically excruciating torture of dying on a cross he experienced all the wrath and judgment of God for sin and wickedness and rebellion.

If you trust in Jesus you will be saved. You will spend eternity in heaven with God. And it won't be because God has gone soft on sin. It will be because Jesus has paid.

Each of us is faced with a choice. We can be like the Pharisees in our story. The people who think that we are OK, that we can earn our own way to be right with God. We will be wrong. And we will have to pay for our sin by spending eternity separated from God in a place Christians call hell.

Or we can let Jesus pay.

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