

Justice, Heroes, and Jesus

SCOTT HOEZEE

Los Angeles Times reporter, Sonia Nazario, wrote a book some years back titled: *Enrique's Journey*. The story told in the book began one day when Nazario noticed that her Guatemalan housekeeper seemed sad. She asked what was wrong, and then heard a story that alerted her to a situation she never knew existed. The housekeeper's son, like untold thousands of youth from Central America, was trying to get to America to be reunited with his mother. She had come to this country to send back money for her family, but now her son was undertaking a dangerous journey, riding on top of train boxcars, to get to the United States. She was worried about her son and had no idea where he was. Well, once Nazario heard about this, she began to investigate the situation, traveling to Central America to reveal the fact that, indeed, thousands of children were facing horrible dangers on thousand-mile journeys that stemmed from economic injustice in our world. Sometimes, we cannot learn about injustice until we take a good look around us. Today on *Groundwork*, we will continue our conversation on the theme of justice, and we have a special guest to help us do just that. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the third of four programs on *Groundwork*, where we are thinking about the biblical theme of justice; and so, in the first program we looked at the link between justice and God's righteousness; in the second program we explored the pursuit of justice, and how sometimes the lack of justice leads us to lament; and we also thought about Sabbath keeping as a way to restore some justice to our world.

DAVE BAST

Right; the whole series, really, spun out of a book that, Scott, you and I both read. A book published in 2016 called *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance*, and the book's co-authors are Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson; and it just so happens that Kristen Johnson is a good friend, and Associate Professor of Theology and Christian Formation at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and we have her with us today and in the next program. So, Kristen, welcome.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Thank you; delighted to be here today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Good to have you with us. So, what we want to talk about in this first part of the program, Kristen, now that we have you here...we have been thinking about the book...maybe just talk about how you and Bethany, your co-author...kind of what led to writing this book, and particularly since we like to dig into scripture here on *Groundwork*, maybe what were some of the key texts—Bible texts—that you and Bethany went to or launched off of to get into this project?

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

For me, the book goes back to right after I graduated from college I had had the opportunity to spend about four weeks in London with John Stott and one of his organizations. It was a program trying to bring people about my age from all over the country together to grapple with scripture and to connect that to the world. And that was really the first time I was given tools to study scripture. So I went back and... I had always, since I became a Christian, had read devotionally every day, but I hadn't really done that with any guides. So, I was reading Isaiah and I was using a book from John Stott's series, *The Bible Speaks Today*, and it brought the whole book to life for me; and what I noticed early on, right in Chapter 1, themes of justice and righteousness are all over the text. So, for example, we start at verse 11:

"The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings." (Skip ahead) ^{1:15b}"Your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. ¹⁷Learn to do right; seek justice; encourage the oppressed; defend the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." There are passages like that all over...Isaiah.

DAVE BAST

Right. And I think we looked at the connection between worship without justice and how God reacts to that, and Isaiah is another great...Isaiah 1 is another classic example, and it is really social justice that is in the picture here, not just personal wrongdoing or individual sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In that passage that you just read, Kristen, as well you have that mention, you know, that it comes up all over the place in the Old Testament, although it is reflected in the New Testament: The widow, the orphan, and the alien, or the stranger within your gates—the foreigner—that Israel was supposed to make extra provision for those vulnerable groups.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Yes; and what I couldn't figure out when I was reading it is why had I not heard about this before? I had been very active in church and youth group and college ministry, and I could not recall a single teaching or sermon related to justice that had ever been presented as something that was close to the heart of God; and in Isaiah you get this sense...this isn't just something we are supposed to do, this is part of God's character; and therefore is supposed to be something God's people care about; and the depth of that connection was something I was interested in exploring.

DAVE BAST

I mean, it is kind of frightening in a way because it is often sins of omission that put blood on our hands according to Isaiah, not just sins of commission. It is not just going out and killing somebody, but it is failing to act on behalf of the person who is destitute or defenseless or helpless; and God says: You have blood on your hands; and we say: What; me?! I didn't do anything. But it is failure to do something.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, and I am assuming this is true of Bethany, your co-author, as well. You mentioned you were reading that and saying: How come I never heard this before? And it is one of those things. I remember years ago doing a series on the value of the physical creation to God; and I had never heard sermons about ecology or the value of creation and God's delight in creation; but it is sort of one of those things that once you realize this is a big biblical theme, you see it everywhere, and that is, I think, what you are saying would happen with justice. Once you kind of go at the Bible with that lens, all of a sudden you say it is everywhere. How did I miss it?

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

In fact, when we started the original idea for this book, we thought we would have one chapter on scripture and justice; and as we started writing we thought: There is too much here. We cannot limit it to one chapter. It became the framework for the whole book.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

I think what was interesting to me was my experience post college, never having heard about justice, my eyes were opened to how much it was in scripture. Then fast forward about twelve years and I am working at Hope College and every student I am meeting with is passionate about justice, and they want to move to Africa, and help with AIDS, and clean water and it was beautiful; but the contrast was so severe, and I was interested in sort of exploring what happened in between; and also, didn't always sense that these students could connect that passion to scripture and to their life in Christ. They were Christians, they had a sense this mattered, but the digging deep—the deep roots—weren't there; and then meanwhile, Bethany, who had married a friend of mine from college, worked for International Justice Mission. She was noticing the same thing, and she wrote a little piece about the justice generation; and one of the images she uses is that when you first discover justice in scripture and injustice in the world, your passion can be like a firework; you are ignited to care, but fireworks fizzle and fade out; and what does it look like to really equip people for the long haul? So, that is really what we came together to try to do, to explore in scripture, within the heart of God, why does justice matter, and what does that mean for us?

So, sometimes we think about what we have done as looking at *who* questions and *why* questions: Who is God; and therefore, who are we called to be as God's people who live according to God's will and ways? And why are we to seek the things of God in this world?

DAVE BAST

Right; so in a sense, there is a lot of fermentation in our culture today, especially among young people; and a lot of it centers on ideas of injustice and unfairness and the need for change; but if that is all it is, as you say, it can tend to fizzle out. It just becomes another Internet fad or another thing they tweet one another about. So, young people, including young Christians as you saw them, were becoming passionate about injustice, but they were getting it maybe more from the culture than from the Bible, and part of your goal is to change that in order that it will be a more long-lived, deeply rooted, life-changing kind of discipleship thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and it is interesting; historically there is a curious flip here, because in the Reformed tradition there was great suspicion toward justice movements, social gospel. Early in the 20th Century a lot of Reformed people said: We are not going to do those social gospel programs. We are going to focus on scripture and be orthodox; and then there is this interesting flip; and so, yes, my kids are 20 and 24 years old and they are part of that generation that just sees advocating for the vulnerable is a natural thing to do as a follower of Jesus; but right, the attachment to scripture isn't always there. So I think your and Bethany's book really helps to show where this comes from in the character of God; and then of, as God is of course, incarnated in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned that you met Bethany through her husband, who was a friend. How did the idea for the book actually come to be, and how did you agree to write it together?

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Well, I actually had already started working on it and had the idea both, as I mentioned before, to look at why did this shift happen that people today are more passionate about justice than in your day or my day? And then also to really look at scripture and the heart of God. And once I read this little piece Bethany had written, and we would interact every once in a while, at weddings or different events we would see each other, I thought this would be much richer together. She has worked in the field with International Justice Mission, she has given her life to this. She can really help me think through what does this look like on the ground? And one of her roles with International Justice Mission was to create biblical teachings for their interns and others to be able to do just what we are talking about, connect this passion to scripture. So she really wanted the opportunity to dive deeper and look more fully at what the biblical text had to offer.

DAVE BAST

Wonderful; and the collaboration was born and it has now borne fruit. Well, there is one chapter that we want to talk about in particular as we focus on the idea of our life as Christians. It is called *Live as Saints (Not Heroes)*, and we are going to explore that further in just a moment.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are joined today by Kristen Deede Johnson, Professor of Theology and Christian Formation at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and for our purposes, more significantly the co-author of *The Justice Calling*. So, once again Kristen, thank you for joining us.
Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Very glad to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the things that we want to look at in this program is what in the book is your 5th chapter, actually; it is *Live as Saints (Not Heroes)*. Talk a little bit about that chapter, and then maybe where it came from; and ultimately where we are going to go in this program is to explore a little bit a central trio of images for Jesus and our imitation of that; but maybe just summarize a little bit what is in this chapter, and then we will kind of dig into some of those specific titles for Christ.
Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

This is one of my favorite chapters. I think a lot of us who are drawn to justice have this hero sensibility about us, especially in the Western context. We have been shaped by these superhero stories: We are going to save the day; we are going to rescue the victims; and that can seem like a really motivating way to begin; but if you really look closely at the role of the hero, there is a lot of weight on the shoulder of that hero. If they are not in precisely the right place at the right time, they cannot make the rescue. Often they act alone. More recently I think some superheroes come together; but one of the things we are trying to say is: This is not all on our shoulders; in fact, if we bear the weight of the justice calling on our shoulders, we will not make it very far. The weight is too much, and the burdens are too big. We have to come together, rooted in Christ, as the people of God; and “*saints*” is not language I think we resonate with. We tend to think of that as sort of holier than thou or very pious; but actually, according to scripture that is our identity. It is a translation of: We are God’s holy and beloved people. So I think the hero ethic sometimes comes with a sense of we have to do it all and we have to prove it all; and we are trying to say actually this is a gift, that we get to join in with God, who has already done the most important work of saving the world in Christ; and who continues to be

active in the world through Christ in the Spirit. So we come together...together...not on our own; we come together in and through Christ, and we do this out of who we are, in gratitude for all we have been given; for the saving love we have received we give back and we join in with God's vision in this world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the chapter there is this set of terms that has long been associated with Jesus: Jesus as prophet, priest and king—key offices in the Old Testament; and Jesus as the Messiah, we believe, embodies all three within his very self; and one of the things in the Reformed tradition, in the Heidelberg Catechism, we are told that we share in those offices of prophet, priest and king; and in the book you and Bethany explore that triple identity of Jesus; bearing within himself, or fulfilling really in himself, those three offices, has a lot to do with justice; and therefore, if we do what disciples are supposed to do, which is imitate the Master, we will also live more just lives.

DAVE BAST

So, starting with the idea of Christ as priest—our great high priest—in what way does that connect with justice and with us?

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

I love the priesthood of Christ—I love all three offices; and one of the things that we started to think through as we were working on this chapter was that some of us tend to identify more with one office or the other. So maybe you really focus on salvation and so you focus on the priesthood of Christ because that is really where his salvific role comes to full fruition; and he died for us once for all according to Hebrews. We have to hold that together with his other offices. All together we get this full picture of all that Christ accomplished, and as you said, Scott, all that we then are called to do as God's people; but never losing sight that the most primary work is in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, we want to dig into scripture, so maybe a passage from Hebrews, which is the great New Testament book on the priesthood of Christ. Here is Hebrews 7:23-8:2:

7:23²³Now there have been many of those priests (meaning human priests) since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them. ²⁶Such a high priest truly meets our need; one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens; ²⁷unlike other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all (*hapax*—that is a great New Testament term) when he offered himself. ^{8:1}And the point is this (says Hebrews), we do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven ²and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord.

So, talk us through that a little bit, that wonderful passage from Hebrews.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Such a rich passage, and related to the saints/heroes theme. One of the big things we learn from this is we don't have to save the world. It has already been done in Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

Christ came to set all things right; and that includes our relationship with God. So, he has made things right for us; and it also includes making things right in all the world. So, every form of evil, everything turned away from God's good intention, has been restored in Christ. So that work is not on our shoulders...

DAVE BAST

Right.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

We can look to Christ, who has done it; and the beautiful part of the very end of what you read, that he continues to serve in the sanctuary. So, we are fundamentally rooted in Christ the Savior, who has saved; and even now, as we go about our work, Jesus is still active. He is still serving.

DAVE BAST

Interceding for us.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

And still interceding for us and still interceding for all of the victims of injustice around the world. We are not the only ones who care about this. God fully entered into the brokenness and still continues to intercede and wants that redemption for all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and the priest, of course, even in the Old Testament... the priest was always sort of the intersection point between heaven and earth. The priest was the intersection point between God and humanity and wanted to bring them together through sacrifice and so forth. Jesus has done that; and of course, as you said, Kristen, if we want to be priests ourselves and bring them to the priesthood of Jesus, we cannot just say God loves you if we don't do anything to show love toward them ourselves by alleviating their suffering. It is a little hard to make them believe that God loves them if we don't show them love by helping them in their circumstances. So that is the priestly function of Christ. He is also a prophet...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the prophet, of course, is the one who brings the Word of God into our lives. So we can think about that image, too, for a moment.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

The prophet is such a significant reason why we look to the example of Christ. Prophets in the Old Testament, we know, represented God. They spoke the words of God to God's people. They taught, and Jesus was a teacher. He was the exact representation of God's being in Hebrews, or the image of the invisible God. This is God in the flesh, who most fully shows us who God is, and most fully lived as God's child – the Son to the Father. So in all of Christ's prophetic role we see what it looks like to live as children of God.

DAVE BAST

And then specifically, if a priest is focused primarily God-ward in his ministry on behalf of humanity, a prophet is focused primarily human-ward, coming from God to speak that word of truth to power, maybe; and we see Jesus doing that as well.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

So, if we look at the Sermon on the Mount, a beautiful, classic text, this is part of Jesus' teaching ministry to us—to his disciples—to humans: ³Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew 5) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

It goes on and on. The beauty of Jesus' prophetic teachings is that they again don't just put it all back on us. It is not just: Here is how you should live; or: I am the perfect model for you to follow. It is: Here is how you should live, and I have actually lived all of this on your behalf when I lived as a human in your place. I was the poor in spirit, I did mourn with those who needed mourning. I did hunger and thirst for righteousness...and we know you have talked on previous programs how justice and righteousness in the Greek are from the same root; so, you hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness...

DAVE BAST

I have food that you don't know about, he said to his disciples, to do my Father's will. That is hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

For righteousness, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is just...I mean, in those beatitudes, too, it is a way that when the word of God from the prophetic ministry of Jesus comes into your life, you look at the world through a different lens; and so, in the Old Testament, and Jesus is an heir of this, of course, and indeed, one of Jesus' great, great, great, great, great, great grandmothers was the figure, Ruth, who was a Moabite widow. So she was in two of the three vulnerable categories of widow, orphan and foreigner...Ruth was looked at through a different lens by Boaz and he saved her because the most vulnerable are the most important; and that is what the prophetic word brings to us.

DAVE BAST

So, we have a couple of minutes left, and we want to talk about Jesus' kingship, too. He is in charge. He is the one who is ruling; and that obviously says a lot about the way the world ought to be ordered.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

All of the prophetic teachings point us toward God's kingdom—their visions of the kingdom of God—and Christ as king, again, such an important and encouraging thing to know, that Christ has been victorious and Christ reigns. We can see this in Ephesians really beautifully.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, just briefly from Paul's soaring words from Ephesians 1: ²⁰⁻²³paraphrased ²⁰God raised Christ from the dead; ²¹and Christ now is far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked. ²²God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the Church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

And so, indeed, Jesus—now prophet, priest, and king—he rules, and in our previous...we have talked before about the kingdom of God, and where the kingdom exists, that is where God's will is carried out, and God's will, again, is consistently revealed in scripture as being very concerned for the vulnerable...the poor.

Kristen Deede

JOHNSON

And I love the present tense of those verbs, too. He rules, he continues to rule. So as we seek God's kingdom again, we are not on our own. We are not the heroes who all of this is on our shoulders. We are operating

within the kingdom of God and praying God's will be on earth as it is in heaven; and then trying to actively seek that, remembering that ultimately Christ has conquered every darkness even though we don't see it yet.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we don't see it yet, but, not only the present tense, but he is *above* all, and not just above all...*far* above. I like that little addition, too. There ain't nobody higher than he is, and someday the whole universe will see that truth revealed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we had a special guest today, Kristen Deede Johnson.

We always like to know how we can help you to dig into the scriptures, so we have a website, groundworkonline.com. Visit the website and suggest topics and passages for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-heroes-and-jesus>

Printed on February 4, 2025