

Justice, Lament, and Flourishing

DAVE BAST

Injustice—the exploitation or oppression of innocent and defenseless people—these are terrible problems in our world. When we hear or read stories of things like human trafficking, sex slavery, mass rape, child abuse, we shudder and want to look away; but a commitment to God’s justice requires that instead we pay attention; that we pray, and then that we do something; but what can we do? Well, we will talk about that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Scott, this is the second program now in our series on biblical justice, and the idea for this series really came out of a book published in 2016, co-authored by Bethany Hanke Hoang, and Kristen Deede Johnson, who happens to be a friend; and so, it is a good book. It is called *The Justice Calling*. We are going to be talking about concepts—about the biblical idea of justice in this program; and then in the next two programs, the last two of the series, we welcome Kristen Johnson to join us and lead us in our further exploration of this subject.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in the first program we established biblically that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is this snug link between the righteousness of God, morality, goodness as God defines it, and justice in our world; linguistically, biblically, theologically, the Bible again and again says: You want to know what it means to live a life of justice? Look to God and do what you see in God. And for us Christians now, as we saw in the last program from the New Testament, all of the righteousness of God is now concentrated in Jesus, and we receive that righteousness as a gift when the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts after we are baptized.

So, that was our first program; and now in this program we want to explore a little bit how that living out of justice will find expression through our prayer life, through our actions, through our obedience to the Law of God.

DAVE BAST

So, we really talked, as you said, about that linkage between God’s character, God’s righteousness, and justice or righteousness in the world, and how it is more than just criminal justice...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

It is more than just punishing crime or trying to catch wrongdoers or put them away or protect society from the depredations of bad guys; but it is more action on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves—the have-nots of the world, especially people who are mistreated or abused in some way; because I think we all know the way the world works, sadly, a world that has been broken by sin; a world that is fallen; a world that

is dominated by people, all of whom are in some way or another selfish. So, these problems tend to snowball and become huge and intractable; and sometimes people contribute to their own exploitation. That is a reality as well; but more often, they are victimized by the people who run the show; the people with power. So, in the Bible, God's concern is especially expressed, often for the poor, the widow and the orphan; but those stand in for other categories. It is really anyone who cannot defend themselves; who doesn't have access maybe, doesn't have the education, doesn't have the money, doesn't have the influence, doesn't have the pull, doesn't know the right people. You know, most of us, if we run into a problem, know somebody we can call, you know; but what about others? So, that is the category of people who we are thinking about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus even once told a parable about somebody like that, just to show that indeed, Jesus is deeply connected to the Old Testament and to thinking about orphans, widows, and strangers in our midst. Luke 18, this well-known parable:

¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said, "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared for what people thought. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' ⁴Well, for some time he refused, but finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.'"

DAVE BAST

⁶And the Lord said, ⁷"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly; but when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Great story! That is a great story, I love that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a great parable, and it is often one that trips people up a little bit because we like to try to make one-to-one, neat correspondences in parables between real-life figures and others, and in this parable it kind of looks like God is equal to an unjust judge who doesn't fear God nor care for people? Well, you don't want to quite make that tight linkage. Obviously God is not an unjust judge, but having an unjust judge here is to make a larger point, and Jesus often did this. It was often called the *a minore ad maius* way of arguing...

DAVE BAST

Now you are throwing Latin again, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I know, but from the little to the big; and so here Jesus is saying...

DAVE BAST

I like to call it the how much more argument.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How much more...but right, even an *unjust* judge in this world will give people justice if they keep at it long enough...how much more won't God, who isn't unjust, give justice when we are persistent—when we keep pursuing it? And that seems to be the idea: keep at it, keep at it. Justice is important to God. It should be important to us, so keep at it.

DAVE BAST

The other place where we can go wrong, I think, in interpreting this parable is to say it is really about prayer and the message Jesus seems to be sending us is if at first you don't succeed, try, try again, you know. Just keep on asking for whatever it is that you want, that you are bringing to God: Healing, a better job, a new

house, a new car. Just keep on asking until he finally relents and gives it to you; and God isn't like that. That is not what Jesus is setting up as the message here. Notice that it is justice that this widow is crying for, and she is the paradigm of the defenseless—of the helpless. Where are the male relatives in this story? Nowhere to be seen; she is alone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; she is a widow.

DAVE BAST

The judge...twice we are told he neither fears God nor respects people. He doesn't care about human opinion, about public opinion. He doesn't care about religion; but she just keeps at him, crying for justice, and how much more will God not give justice to those who cry to him. So, it is really about a persistence of faith, of belief that God will deliver, and that we need to keep praying; we need to keep crying out to him for him to act, for the judgment to come, when he will vindicate those who have been mistreated and abused.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, the fact that justice is front and center in this particular parable tells us everything we need to know in terms of Jesus continuing to link himself up with the Old Testament prophets. In our first program in this series, we looked at prophets like Micah and Amos, and Jesus is right there with them. God is invested in justice. God wants to see justice flourish on the earth.

DAVE BAST

So we want to look at ways that we can pray the way that widow did, and cry for justice; and we are going to turn there 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are talking about justice—the second part of a four-part series on justice, Dave; and one of the things we want to focus in on this segment kind of got set up a little bit in the previous segment with the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18, and that is how do we incorporate a sense of longing for justice into our prayer life? And in this still broken world, one of the ways a longing—a hankering for justice—is going to show up is through the biblical mode of lament.

DAVE BAST

5 A very important idea in the Bible; one which is under represented, certainly in Christian worship, much of it; and even in our own personal lives—our devotional lives; but prayers of lament play such a big role in scripture, and lament isn't just crying, you know; it isn't just being sad.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is a specific way of praying that we see in scripture that ought to be triggered by the circumstances in the world as we see it in its brokenness or in our own lives. The Psalms especially teach us how to pray like this. There is a whole book in the Old Testament, we might point out, called Lamentations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Lamentations, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, we come to Psalm 74. It is questioning of God, and right in the first line one of the characteristic words of biblical lament is the word why; so the Psalmist cries out:

¹God, why have you rejected us forever? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture? ²Remember the nation you purchased long ago... ³Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins (all this destruction) the enemy has brought on the sanctuary. (He is crying out, he is lamenting for the way the Temple in Jerusalem has been burned; and then he goes through these verses that describe how that happened.) ⁴Your foes roared... ⁵They behaved like men wielding axes. ⁶They smashed all of the carved paneling with their axes and hatchets. ⁷They burned your sanctuary to the ground. They defiled the dwelling place of your name. ⁹And were given no signs from God; no prophets are left and none of us knows how long this will be. ¹⁰How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will the foe revile your name forever? ¹¹Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them. I love that last verse. If he were speaking in contemporary terms, he would say: God, take your hands out of your pockets. You are just standing there watching this. Do something. Why, God? Why don't you stop this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, this is a perfectly legitimate way to talk to God; and one of the reasons, I think, Dave, you mentioned earlier, that we don't lament much in our public worship services, we don't make room for lament is, I think some people have concluded it is not polite. You cannot yell at God; you cannot ask God why; you cannot ask God how long; I mean, you know, just take it. God is sovereign and you are not, but the Bible says: No, no, no, no, no. If you think there is injustice, if you think the evil are getting away with something, you've got to say that to God; you've got to lament; and so, it is expected, biblically speaking, that a good bit of our prayer life, and indeed, something like, I don't know, thirty percent, thirty-five percent of the psalms—of the 150 psalms—are psalms of lament. Clearly, God expects to hear from us if we think something is amiss. So, it is perfectly okay to lament, and in a world as filled with injustice as this one is, I think the Church should be lamenting a whole lot more, and one of the ways we might do that is if we let ourselves become more aware of some of the things you mentioned at the top of this program, Dave. There are horrible...even in our own country and in our own communities of sex trafficking and human trafficking, abuse of people, exploitation of those who are already poor. If those don't make us say to God: How long before these people see justice? Then something is wrong with us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and actually, one of the strengths, I think, of the book Hoang and Johnson wrote, *The Justice Calling*, is that it gives many examples, many stories, many illustrations, even some statistics about things that are actually happening today in various parts of our world, some of them in our own country, that are just wrong—so terribly wrong—that they make us cry out: Why? Why, God; why don't you stop this? How can you permit this to go on? Just as the Psalmist did when he looked and saw things that weren't consistent with God's character. We keep coming back to this idea: Justice is a reflection of the character of God, the righteousness of God; so, where it is rampant—where injustice is rampant in the world—we kind of expect God to act, and we call him to do it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, that is a challenge for the contemporary Church; and one of the things that... So, I work at Calvin Theological Seminary, and I work closely with the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship at Calvin College, along with its leaders like John Witvliet and Kathy Smith and Kristen Verhulst; and one of the things we have emphasized in our annual symposium on worship in recent years is that we need...as particularly as kind of an insular, isolated North American Church...we need to learn how to pray globally; and one of the things that is going to be required of a pastor or a worship leader to compose prayers globally is, you have to read the news. You have to know what Christians in Pakistan are going through. You need to know what Christians in South Sudan are going through; and when we become aware of the injustice of the

world, the genocide in Darfur, the slaughter of Christians in so many places of the world, as well as just overall government injustice in so many countries...well, becoming aware of that is the first step toward incorporating it in congregational prayers; and if you do that you too will be joining the Psalmist in saying: How long, Lord? How long do those poor people have to suffer under the yoke of that dictator over there? Over that government that takes international aid and buys new cars for the president instead of grain for the children. How long?

DAVE BAST

Right; well, and you just said another great question...you have put your finger on it. In the prayers of lament in the Bible they ask why, but they also ask how long? So we read this in the Psalms, Psalm 6, for example: ³ My soul is in deep anguish, “How long, Lord; how long?” ¹“How long, Lord,” (says the Psalmist in Psalm 13.) “Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face? ²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts, and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Which loops right back to the parable of Luke 18: Give me justice against my adversary; and if your ears are tuned to a New Testament frequency especially, that word *adversary* suggests *the* enemy behind all human enemies, the Devil, who is behind so much of this injustice in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, if you are looking for biblical resonance, how about that phrase: How long? Lest anybody think, well, that was just Old Testament stuff; those are the Psalms; it was a long time ago. No, no, no. Remember these lines from Revelation 6:9-11 when John says:

⁹I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and the testimony they had maintained; ¹⁰they called out in a loud voice, “How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge their blood?” ¹¹And then each of them was given a white robe and they were told to wait a little longer until the full number of their servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

So there is a New Testament vision of what is going on in heaven right now, where the martyred Christians are also picking up the language of the Psalms: How long before you make it right, God? How long?

DAVE BAST

Yes; and the fact is that lament is important, first, I guess, because it is honest; you have made that point, Scott; but also because it shows we haven't given up faith. We haven't lapsed into cynicism or inaction or despair. Like that woman, we are persistent in our cries. You know, Jesus ended that story with a very haunting question: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? What he really means, I think, is: Will he still find us longing for and praying for justice, both in terms of this world and ultimately of the world to come? Will he find us looking for God to come and deliver and bring his peace? The Bible can help us not only pray for that, but look for it and work for it as well, and the answer may surprise you how and why we can do that, and we are going to turn there in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork* and this program on justice; and we have been talking about...we were just talking about praying, and particularly praying in the key of lament; decrying the injustice we see and asking God to act: How long, O God, before you are going to set things to right?

So, you chided me for doing Latin earlier Dave, but I am going to do it again. *Ora et labora* is a well-known phrase of the Church: We pray and we work; *ora et labora*—prayer and work. So, for this final segment we want to turn to the work part. What can we do practically, and where do we look for guidance in, not just praying for God to bring more justice, but actively bringing it ourselves?

DAVE BAST

Frankly, I don't think you can sincerely pray for something and not also want to try to do something about it; to be, in a sense, an answer to your own prayers. So, where do we look for guidance in seeking justice? We

said in the first program that God's character is really the ruler against which we measure all ideas of justice. We kind of line it up like the plumb line with who he is and what he is about; and he revealed his character in some very practical ways in the laws that he gave his people, Israel, in the Old Testament in particular. I mean, we know that the whole Law can be summarized: Love your neighbor as yourself...love God with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said that; but in specific ways, as we get down to particulars, if we turn to some of those clean pages toward the beginning of the Old Testament, you know, the ones we skip over because it seems so full of mundane, even trivial things. In books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy there are wonderful principles and regulations that can guide us in the pursuit of justice in our own world and day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, even though these were Old Testament prescriptions, Jesus made it clear that there has to be continuity in the Church today; and if you look at the Law of God, one of the very interesting things that comes up again and again and again in Leviticus and in the Law of God is that God wanted Israel to, as much as possible, create a level playing field for everybody; and the only way...in a broken world where we are all natively selfish now...the only way that was going to happen is if all of us took extra steps to make the playing field level. So if you were a farmer you weren't supposed to cut the edges of your field. Leave it so that people like Ruth, the biblical character of Ruth, could actually go and glean; and in terms of not abusing the earth, or not even abusing other creatures, and giving everybody a level playing field, there was the Sabbath, and the Year of Jubilee; and I always found it so interesting that God's desire for everybody to be treated well was that both the Sabbath laws and the Jubilee laws say not just: Hey, you human beings, you people, you know, you man, woman, you know what? One day a week and one year every 50, you just take it easy and take care of little old you. No, and God always says: Oh, and be sure your animals get a day off, and in the Jubilee year let the land rest, just let the land take some time off. It is like...land? Animals? But yes, God wants everybody to kind of have a fair shot.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, these positive actions that the people of God were commanded to do that sometimes strike us as being impractical, you know: Wow, what are you going to eat? If you don't plant crops in the seventh year, and you let it lie fallow...well, God said: I will take care of you. It is going to produce enough so that you will be able to have enough. It was really a means of practically exercising your trust that God would provide. The same with giving—with tithing—you know, that is not a law in the sense of, boy, if you don't do this God is going to get you. It is a way of saying: I trust that God will provide for my needs and that I can be generous and give to the poor. I can give so that others will have enough. And the Sabbath day... Many of us were raised in kind of a legalistic, sabbatarian culture, which has gone away, perhaps for the worse, not for the better; but it seemed to us this kind of onerous...oh, I can't do this, I can't do that. God really intended it as a very positive thing to make sure you didn't abuse your workers. Give them a day off so that they don't work seven days in and out for you. You cannot treat them like robots or like machines. You even have to give the animals who plow for you that seventh day off so they can rest; and it is all for human flourishing. It is all for their benefit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Interestingly, we have pointed this out before on *Groundwork*; we know that in the Old Testament there are two versions of God's Law, Exodus 20, and then it gets repeated for the new generation in Deuteronomy 5. They are identical except for one part, and that is the Law of the Sabbath. In the more familiar version: Exodus 20:8⁸Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy, ⁹for in six days the Lord your God created the heavens and the earth. In Deuteronomy, it says: ^{5:12}Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...¹⁵for remember you were slaves in Egypt and God led you out of there. In other words, Sabbath is the one commandment that ties in with the Bible's two biggest themes, creation and redemption—creation and salvation; which just shows you how important it is that we structure our world and our lives so that everybody gets that break, everybody is treated well, everybody has a chance for rest, and through that for delight, and through that for flourishing.

DAVE BAST

Yes; anti-exploitation. So, pretty obviously, if you know the Ten Commandments, and if everyone did obey the Ten Commandments, there would be a lot less injustice in the world. You wouldn't lie or cheat or steal. You wouldn't kill, you wouldn't hurt, and you could expand all of those—each of those commandments, too. You would honor God, you would worship; but even the more obscure rules and regulations, many of them—most of them—were in one way or another pointed toward human flourishing—toward the establishment of shalom—toward making the world the way it is supposed to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; even those laws that said don't insult a deaf person and don't put something in the path of a blind person...that is in the Bible. These little laws which kind of add up to be: Be nice; and yet...

DAVE BAST

And take care of the needs of the handicapped...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

We might say, very contemporary.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly what God wants us to do, for justice means shalom and the flourishing of all of God's people. Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, and I am here with Dave Bast. We always want to know about future programs; so go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and you can make suggestions for future topics and passages.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-lament-and-flourishing>

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