
Justice & Shalom

BOB HEERSPINK

We have been talking about what doing justice looks like in various aspects of Christian life. Today we look at what the Bible says about the goal of justice. Do our individual acts of justice add up to anything? What type of world will this lead to? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

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

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, a while back the last episode of the television program, *Lost*, aired; I wasn't a big fan of *Lost*, but I had people in my office who were really, really into it.

DAVE BAST

I had people in my family who were...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, people shaped their lives around that program, I found out, in terms of catching that program every week; and they were certainly going to catch that last episode.

DAVE BAST

Well, and the newspapers and the blogosphere were filled with speculations about what did it all mean?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and so I went online, actually, because I wanted to know what did this program really say?

DAVE BAST

Is there some significance?

BOB HEERSPINK

And I found out that a lot of people weren't actually sure about what the program was about even after it was over; but one blogger I thought said something very interesting. He said: you know, life on the island was an expression of the real world; and things on the island typically did not go well. He said: In the real world, typified by the island, nothing worked out at all. Decisions people made, beliefs they decided to hold, nothing ever seemed to work. The real world, he said, is a broken world – a world ruled by entropy, uncertainty, and failure.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that any Christian – anyone with a biblical world view – has to resonate with that quote, because the real world is a broken world...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it has been.

DAVE BAST

And the idea of entropy, that everything is running down... The great G. K. Chesterton once said that this is a world where if you have a white post and leave it alone long enough it turns into a black post. Where failure seems to mark so many of our projects, where life ends in death; and to me, one of the questions is why does this bother us so much?

BOB HEERSPINK

It is like this is not the world we were created to inhabit.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and here is the point: If we are just creatures of chance who evolved out of a materialistic universe, why does that not seem natural to us? C. S. Lewis once said that a fish doesn't feel wet because water is its natural environment. Why do we feel out of place in a world marked by failure and death? The Bible's answer is because we are not created for this. This is not the way the world was meant to be by God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, we have been talking about social justice issues, and you know, there is a certain sense in which we say: Well, what is the goal of it all? You know, here we are; we are seeking to be justice people, but does it really have an outcome that would make us optimistic about the future? And that is where, when you go to scripture, you find that, indeed, God has some big justice plans, as it were, out there for what lies ahead.

DAVE BAST

You and I have a friend, Neal Plantinga, a fine theologian who wrote a book a few years ago about sin called *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*; and I love turning that title around and thinking about the world as it *is* supposed to be; and as you say, the Bible has a vision for that. Here is one place where it paints a glorious picture. It is Isaiah 65, where God says:

¹⁷“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind; ¹⁸but be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create, for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy and her people to be a gladness... ^{19b}No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. ^{20a}No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old man who does not fill out his days... ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ^{22a}They shall not build and another inhabit or plant and another eat; ²³they shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity; for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord and their descendents with them. ²⁴Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

BOB HEERSPINK

What a phenomenal picture of what God intends the world to be. You know, this is not grim justice. This is a world that just explodes with joy and beauty and delight. In fact, I love at the beginning of that passage, where we are told that we will rejoice in this world, but that God rejoices; that the delight that we have in what is described here, this new heaven, this new earth, is a delight that God has in his creation that we will echo in our own lives.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is literally a picture, isn't it? I mean, this has been called the peaceable kingdom.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; above our fireplace at home – my wife is an art teacher and we have a lot of art around the house – we have a print of Edward Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*, that really describes this scene. I think that is the key word that gets at this passage: Peace. Especially the Hebrew word *shalom*.

DAVE BAST

Shalom means much more than just peace, as in the absence of war or putting an end to conflict. Shalom has a positive sense to it. It means human flourishing, it means community, it means the way things are supposed to be; and if you look at this passage, you see that much of the description is negative, first of all, the things that aren't there: Crying and weeping and calamity and distress and frustration. All those things that mark our world now, but they are absent when God makes the new heaven and the new earth; as he says: I will create a new heaven and a new earth.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yet there is so much more here than just absence of war. You know, when we think about peace in the world, we are just trying to get nations to back off and get into their own corners and leave each other alone; but here peace becomes something that just reconciles the peoples of the world with one another. It reconciles us to God. It reconciles us even to the creation. That description of the animal world transformed because of God's grace.

DAVE BAST

I think another thing I see here, or that I take away, is the sense of potential. The world of perfect justice...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Of God's righteousness being realized, of shalom, is a world where every human being reaches their full potential. No more is there an infant who dies prematurely or an old person who doesn't live out their time. Now, I don't take that necessarily literally because I think this is talking about the new creation and eternity, but I think the sense that is being given us here is the sort of perfect growth or everlasting growth into what we were meant to be.

BOB HEERSPINK

But then the question is, okay, is this ever going to become real? You know, I can see people reading this who aren't Christians and say: It is a beautiful picture, but it is just fiction. It is never going to be. As Christians, we really have to say: When are we going to see the world look like this? And I think the Bible has some help in understanding when this prophecy is going to be fulfilled. We will have to talk about that when we come back.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

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

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, we have been talking about God's big future based on Isaiah Chapter 65, the new heavens, the new earth, and how this is a place of delight; it is a place where shalom has really dawned, but then the question is: Okay, when is this going to happen?

DAVE BAST

Well, the short answer to that is, when he comes again. God says: I will create a new heaven and a new earth; and in a way, it is a picture that really transcends our capacity. It is meant to spark wonder in us and a sense of awe; but I think what it will actually be like... you know, eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man to conceive what the Lord has prepared for those who love him. So, as I puzzle over some of these details, I just think it is going to be something beyond my ability to grasp.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it is a vision of the future that God will unpack in his own good time; but it does mean that God brings it and not us.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think one of the key things for us if we are buying into the biblical vision of shalom – of the world the way it is going to be – the world as it is supposed to be – is that it helps us to sort of take with some skepticism some of the human claims and human activities that are going on around us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we are always seeing ways in which human beings think that they can build this perfect world on earth. Technology, for example, came in, and technology was going to save us; it was going to create a world that was going to be one of peace and goodness, where everyone was going to flourish; but it hasn't happened.

DAVE BAST

And some of the more radical notions that are put forth by scientists or secular people really, people who don't believe in God, are just absurd. You know, they are going to create eternal life; they are going to cure all disease; they are going to take our minds and somehow put them in a computer. I remember hearing one science program on television where the guy said biology is messy. We have got to transcend biology. He means flesh and blood. He means, you know, like our bodies; and the vision of the Bible is very much a physical world with physical beings. We believe in resurrection, in recreation and restoration.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is a physical world.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And what God is going to restore is a world that is fully a whole, and that is our bodies as well as our spirits or souls.

DAVE BAST

And I don't know what that means in detail. I don't know if you have puzzled over this, but if wolves and lambs are living together in peace, then something big has changed, because normally wolves eat lambs.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And so, how can that be? A non-meat-eating wolf? What is that going to look like? I don't know.

BOB HEERSPINK

But we do know that it is coming, and if you go to the book of Revelation, there in Revelation 21 the last word is: Behold, I create new heavens and new earth. The new creation descends from above, and he is

coming; God is coming, and what we cannot create ourselves, God will do.

DAVE BAST

I remember a conversation I had with the late Lew Smedes, a wonderful Christian ethicist and writer, and he said, thinking about the world and the evil and the frustration and all the fallenness, he said: you know, I don't think so much about the question why, which is a typical philosophical question: Why do these things happen?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

He asks God, not why but when. He said: That is my prayer. My question to God is when are you going to come and fix things? And that is something for all of us, I think. We pray: Thy kingdom come. We pray: Come, Lord Jesus; and what we are really looking for is this new creation – this new heaven and new earth when all of the old is passed away and the sorrow and sighing flee and the tears are dried and things are the way they supposed to be.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you know, that can become a copout, too. Simply to say: Well, we are just kind of hanging around waiting for God to return and make everything right. In the meantime, we are kind of sitting on our hands. Peter Kreeft has a cartoon up on the door of his office I once read, and it showed two turtles having a conversation with one another, and one says: you know, I just want to ask him why doesn't he make everything right again? Why doesn't he correct all injustice and bring about a world of peace? And the second turtle replies: Hmm, sometimes I wonder whether God might ask that question of us. You know, what is our responsibility in the world today to live out of this vision; to live out of this future – this hope?

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a legitimate question. I certainly do think that we need to probe further into our relationship with the coming world of shalom and peace, and our responsibility for sort of living into it, but also what happens right here and now, and what is the Church supposed to be about?

Before we do talk about that, though, let's ask about how our listeners can join us in this conversation on our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures with us. There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture and how it interacts with their lives. Plus, we look to you to help us think about upcoming programs. Finding us is easy, just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

So Dave, we have been talking about the peaceable kingdom; this vision of a new heaven and a new earth; and we have said it is God's doing, and it will be here when God comes; and of course, Revelation 21 gives a phenomenal picture of that new creation coming to earth; but what about today? Does this say anything to the way we work with our neighbors, we operate within our families?

DAVE BAST

Yes; do we just sit around and wait for it to happen and kind of hope for the best, and meanwhile, the Church's business is to try to save souls – to pluck them out of the world and pray for the Lord's return. Well, I certainly don't want to deny the importance of proclaiming the Gospel, saving souls, and praying for the Lord's return, but I think we need to understand a basic truth about the shape of Bible history, and the

future that is already here, in some sense, but is not yet completed, or consummated. Let me just read another passage from Isaiah – another part of this vision, from Isaiah 35. It says:

^{4b}Behold, your God will come... he will come and save you. ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy... ¹⁰And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, so that passage is talking also about the new creation, but there are verses there, I think, that remind us that God didn't just come once...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

He comes twice.

DAVE BAST

Think about that passage in connection with Jesus' ministry.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The miracles that he did; how he opened the eyes of the blind, how he healed the lame, how he dispelled the sorrow and sadness of death for some; those were all... What were those miracles of Jesus? They were signs of the kingdom. I don't know, have you ever wondered: Why didn't he just heal everybody right away?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Have you ever puzzled over that? I have.

BOB HEERSPINK

And your answer?

DAVE BAST

Well, I am asking you... What do you think? Well, I will tell you honestly, I raised the question. I think it was because he was showing us these things as signs of what would one day happen everywhere and to everyone, but for some reason, not yet...not yet in God's plan.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, as we think about a passage like this, the new creation, we have to say: Okay, the kingdom is coming, but the kingdom is also here. There is going to be this kingdom of shalom, but we know Jesus is our peace; and he has come to pour peace upon the earth; so, suddenly, what I am seeing in this passage from Isaiah is something that motivates me to be a shalom-bringer in the world today.

DAVE BAST

Well, think about how, in so many ways, we carry on the ministry of Jesus, and we may not have miraculous power, as he did, to cure with a word, but the whole history of medicine, of Christian medical mission to the world, in a sense, it is making the lame to walk again in some cases, and the blind to see. To me that is a wonderful example of how Christians can sort of also be signs of the kingdom and flesh this out and carry it out throughout the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think about shalom as flourishing; then the question that comes to us as Christians is: How can I make my neighbor flourish? How can I bless his or her life? And that can be done in some very small ways. It doesn't have to be done by the official Church doing yet another program. Simply bringing a meal to my neighbor... a sick neighbor who needs encouragement; making a visit to someone who has recently gone through some crisis, maybe a death in the family, is a way of bringing peace; it is a way of carrying shalom, and it is allowing that person to have just a little bit of a taste of what is to come.

DAVE BAST

I like that idea, that it is a small thing, a small scale thing. We work for shalom in our personal relationships. I wouldn't limit it to that. I think we also need to be advocates for the bigger picture of justice and flourishing and fairness and wellness – wholeness – throughout society; but the interesting thing to me is there is nothing about government here in any of these pictures, about government making this happen. It is the people of God who live into this vision.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we are citizens of the kingdom of shalom today. Who are the citizens of this kingdom? It is the Church – it is Christians; and the responsibility falls upon us to carry this shalom of God as we share the Gospel. I think that is a critical way. If we don't tell our neighbors about Jesus – if we don't tell the world the Good News of Christ – we are really denying them access to the powerful story of the Gospel that creates shalom.

DAVE BAST

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, in the Sermon on the Mount. Are we active in the work of peacemaking? There is the whole question of the creation itself. Are we tending creation and contributing to its flourishing? I think an act of shalom for a Christian is to plant a garden, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

I was at a church a couple of weeks ago; they have 80 different garden plots there, about ten of them for the church, but most of these are for the community...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And they said: What a fantastic way of building bridges to the community that is also a way of saying: hey, as Christians we see God's shalom as being poured forth on this physical earth.

DAVE BAST

Even things as simple as recycling, as cutting our own consumption of energy; again, these are not left-wing causes. This is not politics...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

This is part of our faith, our respect for, our love for the physical world that God made. It is a good world. It is fallen, yes, but it is going to be redeemed; it is going to be made over; and I don't think that means it is going to be totally thrown out on the scrap heap and God is going to start over. I think that somehow our future is going to be tied into a world that is much the same as this one, but transformed – purged.

BOB HEERSPINK

God is renewing this world.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and that is again the picture that we see of things taken out that don't belong there, things added and growing that do belong there.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, the biblical concept of stewardship, that we are stewards in relationship to our relationships with neighbors, but to the creation, I think is a key concept by which we have to live. You know, you look at disasters like as what took place in the Gulf with the terrible oil spill, and you see a creation that is just groaning – it is screaming, according to the book of Romans, because of the brokenness in which we live today; and for us to become a blessing to our neighbor, but also to creation.

DAVE BAST

Or you see people yelling at each other, angry with each other, deepening the divides that separate, and sort of despising one another. One of the real ironies is that both Christians and Muslims use the same word for their greeting: Salaam/shalom – peace. Well, if we are followers of Jesus, we ought to be able to say that word as a greeting and mean it and embody it and be bridge builders rather than dividers and haters.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, maybe a takeaway from this program is just to ask us and those who have joined in this conversation to do three things in the course of the next week, in which they say: Okay, by doing this I am being a bearer of shalom to my neighbor or to the world.

DAVE BAST

A sign of the kingdom.

BOB HEERSPINK

Signs of the kingdom. We want to thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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