

The Justice of God

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- [0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Alice. As we've mentioned this morning, we are going to carry on through the book of Job. We're actually entering the final section of this book.
- And this morning, as we do that, we're thinking particularly about the ideas of justice and fairness. I'm sure that that's something that everyone naturally feels is very important.
- We want to live in a just society, in a just world. No one likes the idea of people being treated unjustly or unfairly. The kind of current criticism of the World Cup in Qatar and the kind of unfair treatment of laborers there is a good kind of current example of that.
- As is the fact, I think, that it's not fair is one of the first phrases that every single child seems to learn. I'm sure if you've had kids, you heard that one.
- I actually heard it just this morning. So you definitely, you get that a lot. But it seems like we have this inbuilt desire for justice and for fairness.
- [1 : 0 4] And that has been an important part of society throughout history. It continues to be a huge issue today. And it is something that the Bible speaks about time and time again.
- Again, in fact, our kind of Western views of justice, although people might not always recognize this. The type of culture of justice that we live in is really built on the Bible's principles.
- Particularly that fact that all people are created in the image of God. That is still our foundation for justice. Of why people should be treated equally.
- Of why people should be treated fairly. And yet the Bible also tells us that to have a just world, that kind of world that we all want, that actually we need a just God overseeing all that.
- For there to be a kind of an ultimate objective standard of justice and fairness, that needs to have been built into the world by the God who created it and himself is just and fair.
- [2 : 0 7] And that then brings us to the book of Job and our passage this morning where we see that actually in this book, in Job, God's justice, God's fairness has been questioned or has even been sort of challenged, we might say.
- Is God really just? And perhaps when we look around the world, we might find ourselves asking that question. Well, this morning, the passage we're looking at gives a response to that question.
- And that response comes from a new character in the book. At the beginning of chapter 32, we kind of enter the final section of the book of Job. We're also introduced to this guy called Elihu.
- This is Elihu speaking. You might have noticed, you might not, but we've not heard anything from him before. He only arrives in chapter 32. He speaks for five chapters.
- He speaks a lot. We're looking at one of those chapters this morning, chapter 34. A bit of background. Elihu is quite a controversial character in a lot of ways. Most modern readers of the book of Job, most commentators don't really like Elihu.

[3 : 18] In different places, I've read him described as an angry young man and as a pompous windbag, among other things. So not an overly positive report on Elihu.

If you've heard anything or much on this section of Job, you've perhaps heard Elihu described that way. And if you were to read through those five chapters, you can see where you'd get that impression from.

Elihu, we might say, is a little bit spiky. He's not the kind of guy who does small talk particularly well. But I think actually Elihu is a really important character.

And actually he says some really important and true things. I think that's one of the reasons he's given a kind of special introduction back in chapter 32. That's one of the reasons he's given so much kind of uninterrupted airtime in the five chapters that follow that.

And really he prepares Job and he prepares us as readers for God's appearance and for God's words in the book of Job, which we'll be looking at next week.

[4 : 24] So I don't know, maybe you've never heard of Elihu. Maybe you don't have any opinion on him. Maybe you've heard various things. I'm keen not to be too harsh on Elihu and I hope that we'll see that what he says is really important as we look through chapter 34.

Because it's all to do with that incredibly important concept which we spoke about earlier of God's justice. Is God really fair? Is God really just?

So let's look at this chapter through that lens. And the first thing we see really setting the scene for the rest of what Elihu is going to say is the denial of God's justice.

The denial of God's justice. In some ways in this third and final section of Job, these last few chapters, things change a little bit as Job is on the back foot a little bit more than he has previously been.

So far Job has really kind of fought his corner against his accusers from earlier chapters. He's responded to all of their speeches. But actually we don't see that response in these last few chapters.

[5 : 27] Job is a lot quieter. We've been saying all the way through and it's absolutely true. It's so important to remember that Job is a righteous man. Job is a good guy. God himself has said that.

Job has suffered massively, almost unimaginably. But that isn't because he's done something wrong. He's not got some hidden secret. That's what his friends were accusing him of, remember.

The truth is that Job was upright. He feared God. He was a good guy. And yet actually that doesn't mean that Job was perfect. And here we see a real difference between what Elihu says and what Job's three kind of friends in inverted commas had previously been saying.

They'd said that Job is suffering because he'd sinned. Remember they had this very simple system, this kind of karma. And yet we've seen that that is not how things work.

That is not the way the world works. Elihu says something quite different. He points out that Job has sinned because he's suffering. And actually that change in order there is really significant.

[6 : 35] It's not some prior sin that has caused Job's suffering. We've been able to kind of reject that way of looking at the world. But his going through this suffering has brought about, in some ways, that sinful response.

And that sinful response is this, that Job has denied God's justice. And that's what Elihu accuses him of. Verse 5, Job has said, I am in the right and God has taken away my right.

In spite of my right, I am counted a liar. Verse 9, for he has said, it profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God. Elihu says that Job has denied God's justice.

And actually Elihu is right to say that. Now we've seen that a couple of times in our way through this book. A couple of weeks ago, chapter 19, we saw Job say, God has put me in the wrong.

Saying that God was unfairly dealing with him, attacking him, even though he'd done nothing wrong. Before that, we saw it in chapter 9, where Job says, God multiplies my wounds without cause.

[7 : 46] And there are other places as well. We've not looked through all of these chapters. There's other places Job says similar things as well. Job has denied God's justice. We've come across that. And in some ways, we've kind of let Job off the hook a little bit by pointing out, well, actually, when Job is saying that, Job doesn't have the whole picture.

Job hasn't seen what we saw in chapters 1 and 2. Job doesn't know how Satan is at work. What's been happening is that Job thinks God is doing what Satan is doing.

And so naturally, he finds that unjust. And yet, actually, this chapter points out that even with those mitigating factors, that actually still we need to be careful how we speak about God.

That as we've seen throughout Job, we can be incredibly honest to God. We can pour out our hearts to him. We can speak to him about how we feel, all we're going through.

We can bring all our suffering to him. If nothing else, I hope we've learned over the last number of weeks that God doesn't want our stiff upper lip. We can be incredibly honest, incredibly raw, speaking to God, as Job has been.

[9 : 02] But we do need to be careful in how we speak about God. And that is the line that Job has crossed, the denial of God's justice.

And I think for all of us, in hard times, in times of the greatest suffering, it can be so easy for us to become bitter or accusatory toward God.

Particularly in this way, to deny God's justice. It's not fair. We've already said it's one of the first complaints that rolls off our tongue. And often, actually, that's completely true.

Because our world isn't fair, is it? We've all experienced that. And yet, that complaint can very easily become, well, God's not fair.

And so this chapter is warning us. We need to be careful of that. We need to be careful how we speak about God. One of the ideas in looking through this book of Job, this book that faces up to suffering head on, we've said is not that we would have all the answers and make things simple.

[10 : 05] But that through knowing God in suffering, that we would be able to respond well when suffering comes. When we're suffering. When others are suffering.

And remember, really important, responding well in suffering doesn't just mean, you know, be brave. It doesn't mean, you know, just pretend it's all fine. Just keep it hidden away.

It means being realistic. It means facing up to the hardships of our world. But doing that while holding on to who God truly is. And not to let hard times push us away from God.

But rather, in those times, to hold on to him even more closely. And through that, to come to know him better. To come to know what he is truly like. And to find our hope in that.

That's what Elihu wants Job and us to see. And so in the face of Job's denial of God's justice, we see secondly, Elihu asserts the truth of God's justice.

[11 : 02] Let's have a look at that. The truth of God's justice. And really have a, this is kind of from verse 10 downwards. Have a look at what Elihu says from 10 down to 13.

Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God that he should do wickedness. And from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man, he will repay him.

And according to his ways, he will make it before him. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly. And the Almighty will not pervert justice. Who gave him charge over the earth?

And who laid on him the whole world? Elihu says, actually, one thing that can't be seen, said of God, is that he's unfair. Actually, part of God's nature is that he cannot do wickedness, those verses say.

He cannot do wrong. He is just. And really kind of, a big part of Elihu's argument here is simply that it's true because God is God.

[12 : 04] Who gave him charge over the earth and who laid on him the whole world? Elihu asks. Well, the answer, nobody. That no one gave God authority or gave the world to him.

He has that because he created it. And the point is this. Where do we get our idea of justice, of what is right and wrong from? Well, we get that from God.

Again, as we said with wisdom last week, same this week. God has built that into the universe. And so God can't do wickedness. God is just because he acts in line with who he is and how he's created the world to be.

And so we could get an unjust employer or an unjust head teacher or unjust politicians because they're not acting in line with that justice that God has built into the world.

We are able to complain it's not fair. But where do we get that idea of fairness from? Well, it can't simply be people who stick to the kind of human rules because actually we know that humans can make unfair, unjust rules.

[13 : 14] Our idea of fairness, the whole concept of justice, comes from God himself. That means that God can't be wicked, can't be, perhaps that all sounds slightly theoretical or slightly kind of philosophical for you this Sunday morning.

But I think still it's true. God is the standard of justice. The only reason we can really mean anything when we speak about justice, the only reason we can complain when we see injustice is because there is this external objective standard set by God.

Therefore, God himself is just. But actually, we also see the truth of God's justice in some ways in a much more down-to-earth but actually the most incredible way of all because we see God's justice proven in the gospel, in the very heart of Christianity, in the coming of Jesus Christ, that the life and death of Jesus are the ultimate proof of God's justice, of God's concern for justice, of God ensuring that justice will be done.

Jesus came because God is so committed to justice that he couldn't and cannot just leave wickedness, injustice, wrong, and all those things that the Bible calls sin. God couldn't just ignore that.

Couldn't just pretend that that didn't matter. As Elihu says in verse 11, for according to the work of a man, he, that's God, will repay him. And according to his ways, he will make it before him.

[14 : 45] People will get what is coming to them, what they deserve, because God is just. Now the problem is that all of us actually have these elements of wickedness within us.

That although we want justice, we don't always live out lives of perfect justice. We bend the rules when it suits us. None of us are our perfect people.

Actually, we deserve that punishment. And God is so just that he can't just ignore that. And so Jesus came to suffer in our place. Jesus came to take the penalty for the things that we do wrong, so that justice could be done, and yet we could still be forgiven.

The truth of God's justice is proven by the gospel. That's one of the reasons why it's so important, isn't it, that we speak rightly about God. Because God sent his own son, Jesus, to die, so that justice would be done.

How dare we then deny God's justice, when that is how concerned he is? How can we say, well, God doesn't care about right or wrong. God has given more than we could ever imagine to ensure that justice is done while still making a way for people like us, people who make mistakes, people who turn away from God, who love unjustly time and time again, to come to him and to know him through Jesus.

[16 : 12] And so we see the truth of God's justice. And it is good news, because it means we can have a hope, a certain hope of a fair world, that God will one day make things right, because he is just, because he does care.

But also in his justice and his love, he's made a way for us to be part of that. So Elihu answers Job, he shows the truth of God's justice.

And then in the next section here, he gets a little bit more specific, I suppose. Not just God is just, but actually what does God's justice look like? That's our next section, really verses 16 down to 30, the nature of God's justice.

And there's loads of stuff here. We're just going to pick out the headlines. What is the nature of God's justice? Well, we see first that it is impartial, verses 18 and 19. Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty, who says to a king, worthless one, and to nobles, wicked man, who shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands.

And we see that God judges everyone according to the same standard. Kings, nobles, princes, the rich, they don't get a free pass. They don't get special treatment. And God judges impartially.

[17 : 32] That's good news, isn't it? Don't we hate it when it seems like maybe wealthy people can just pull some strings, hire the right people, offer the right incentives, and get away with things that poorer people could never hope to?

A survey a few years ago reported that in the UK, a majority of people, 60%, believe the legal system is tilted in favor of the wealthy. I'm sure if we were to think of other countries where corruption is so much more overt, that number would be rightly far higher than 60%.

This is where the wealthy are just able to do as they please, but God's justice is impartial. God's justice will bring everyone to account. Isn't that the kind of justice that we really want?

And we see as well, secondly, that God's justice is always correct. Verse 21 and 22, For his eyes are on the way, where the elders may hide their steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves.

Basically saying that God knows all things. He knows what everyone does. He knows everyone's motives. He knows the things no one else does. And so his judgments are always correct.

[18 : 47] Perhaps think of kind of TV detective shows where people are always trying to crack the case. You're not quite sure who's done it or the police are trying to build their case, get the evidence together.

It's hopefully that a conviction might stick. Well, God doesn't need to do that. Verse 24, He shatters the mighty without investigation. That's not saying that God doesn't find out what's happened.

He's saying he doesn't need to go through this lengthy investigation because he knows the truth. That God's justice is always correct. Again, that's encouraging, isn't it?

Isn't that the kind of justice that we long for? That it's something that's impartial and fair, everyone judged equally. And judgment that is perfect, that the right result always reached.

And the Bible says that's the kind of justice God offers. That's the kind of judge that God is. That's the kind of God God is. Isn't that the kind of world that we want to live in? And yet there's also a third part of the nature of God's justice here, which is highlighted at the end of this section.

[19 : 51] And I think this is perhaps the most important aspect, certainly for Job and the context of the book of Job that we've been looking through. He has been suffering and questioning, denying even God's justice.

And that's this, that the third kind of characteristic of God's justice is that it doesn't always happen here and now. That God's justice doesn't always happen exactly when we would like it to.

And this is verse 29. When he, that's speaking about God, when he is quiet, who can condemn? When he hides his face, who can behold him, whether it be a nation or a man?

And the point is that we don't always see God's justice in action. And the point is that sometimes God is quiet. Sometimes God hides his face.

Sometimes we don't see God at work. And yet still God will carry out his justice at the right time. And so we don't live then in this world of kind of karma, where good things happen to good people, where bad things happen to bad people, where you can just basically look at someone and you can say, well, how are things going for that person?

[21 : 07] Well, that is what they deserve. That is how good they are. Or that is how bad they are. No, things don't always happen here and now. But still God will carry out his justice.

That's what Job's friends had misunderstood in thinking that this must all be Job's fault. That's what Job had misunderstood in denying God's justice. That's so important for us to remember as well too.

We've spoken about how we need to speak rightly about God. How actually suffering isn't an excuse to say what's not true about him, to deny God's justice. And yet so often, suffering can raise those questions.

Can't it? What is God doing? In the hardest of times for us, or those we know and love, people can so easily raise that point. Is God fair? I think the key to answering that is, yes, God is fair.

God is perfectly just, but we don't always see that here and now, that justice can be delayed. But one day that perfect justice will come. And again, this passage points us forward to the return of Jesus.

[22 : 15] We saw a couple of weeks ago how it's only really thinking in terms of eternity and broadening our horizons that we can truly make sense of suffering. Well, it's the same for justice.

One day Jesus will return. Suffering will end. And perfect justice will be done. It will be done impartially. It will be done correctly. It will be done eternally.

The good news, the gospel, is that one day justice will come. But for those who've trusted in Jesus, for those who've asked for his forgiveness, for those who've recognized that injustice isn't all just out there, but that it's in here as well, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus has satisfied perfect justice.

And Jesus has suffered in our place. Jesus has taken our punishment so that we can be forgiven. Now, that is the ultimate nature of God's justice that we can look forward to.

That's what we need to lift our eyes to. And often the slog of this world, the unfairness that we see personally on an individual level. I'm sure we could all give examples. But also nationally, internationally, on a far greater scale.

[23 : 28] Again, I'm sure we could all think of huge issues, historic issues, or things that we see on the news or elsewhere, which just aren't fair. The lesson of this passage is as we see these things, not to condemn God, but instead to trust in his perfect justice, to take confidence in that, and to look ahead to the time when that justice will be fully displayed, will be fully carried out.

And let's just finish then very briefly with the last few verses. We see fourth, finally, the response to God's justice. And really this is kind of Elihu saying to Job, look, you've made a mistake, and now it's time to see that, to admit that, and to repent.

He says it in his own sort of spiky Elihu style, but let me read a couple of verses, 31 and 32. For has anyone said to God, I have borne punishment, I will not offend anymore, teach me what I do not see, if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more.

Elihu says anyone, he's speaking to Job, saying is this what you've said, and this is how Job should respond, saying actually God I've done wrong, God I've spoken wrongly about you, help me to recognize that, help me to not do that anymore.

And again Elihu really pushes it home that Job hasn't spoken what is true about God. We mentioned he's not a gentle sort of guy. Verse 35, he says Job speaks without knowledge and his words are without insight.

[24 : 59] But actually that's what God himself is going to say about Job that we'll see next week. Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? It's what Job accepts to be true about himself in the final chapter of this book.

He says, I've uttered things too wonderful for me which I did not know. I think actually that's one of the reasons we should listen to Elihu even if he's a bit unpopular, even if he's a bit angular we might say, because actually Job and God himself echo his verdict, echo what he says.

Job has been in the wrong and yet Job has not been rejected by God. And we'll see this even more fully in the coming weeks. In his suffering he has spoken what is not true.

He has denied God's justice. But in response to the truth of God's justice, having seen the nature of God's justice, he's able to repent and come back to that just God.

This passage reminds us that often really good people, people like Job, people we might know well, people we love, in the face of suffering, people don't always respond as they should.

[26 : 13] We don't always respond as we should. We don't always speak about God as we should. This chapter reminds us actually that's really important that at all times we need to cling on to who God is.

That's where our hope comes from, from the goodness of God, from the justice of God. If we deny that then we're getting rid of the very grounds that we have to hope. This chapter reminds us that we should always be speaking rightly about God.

But it also reminds us that if there are times when we've fallen short in that, if you or people you know would say, you know what, actually I didn't respond very well to that suffering, I've turned my back on God in various ways.

This passage reminds us that actually God invites us back to him, to repent, to return to him, to live in relationship with him, to enjoy the security of his perfect justice seen in Jesus and the gospel.

That justice that we don't always experience here and now but which we can look forward to when Jesus returns and which we'll be able to share if our trust is in him.

[27 : 22] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Come on, let's pray together.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.