

Study 2 – God’s Justice Revealed

Intro - A pause for thought

There were 89.3 million people forcibly displaced world-wide at the end of 2021. Among those were 27.1 million refugees, half under the age of 18 (21.3 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, and 5.8 million Palestine refugees under UNRWA’s mandate). There were also 53.2 million internally displaced people, 4.6 million asylum seekers, and 4.4 million Venezuelans displaced abroad. There are also millions of stateless people, who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement. (source, [United Nations](#))



Syrian and Iraq refugees arrive at Skala Sykamias, Lesvos, Greece, 2015. (pic Ggia)

*‘He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8)*

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a) In demands for social justice

(Read Isaiah 1:15-17, Luke 20:45-47, Micah 6:3-8)

Isaiah has highlighted the sad situation where those in control, here the priests, have just lost track of what’s required of them and gone overboard on their worship, with an abundance of sacrifices so huge that God hates the sight and smell they bring. They are behaving like their pagan neighbours whose gods constantly need feeding with sacrifices.

God rejects their offerings as the hypocrisy of the priests renders them meaningless. What God wants to see is his people learning to do what is right, and that begins with a desire for social justice.

Jesus finds himself in a similar position when he looks at the attitude of the teachers of the law. There is a dangerous pride shown in their fancy robes and greetings, not to mention an insistence on the best seats in the synagogues and feasts.

Pride can soon lead to a selfish nature that sees others (such as the widows) as inferior and capable of being used or abused. The widow represented the most vulnerable in society, who should have been receiving help, not robbed. God wants mercy and justice to be shown.

The writer of Micah visualises a courtroom setting where God brings a case against Israel, a nation that has received abundant gifts in terms of leadership, protection, and blessing. Then the emphasis changes to the people, with Micah speaking on their behalf. He wonders what God's preferred worship offering might be? Was it the choicest meats for sacrifice? A fine olive

oil? The quantity offered? Maybe even the sacrifice of a firstborn child?

No, is the reply. What is required are hearts aligned to God's will, shown through both religious and social lives, in kindness and mercy freely offered.

Discussion...

Q) The words of both Isaiah and Jesus highlight what we might call hypocrisy, namely 'do as I say, not as I do' (a phrase even used of preachers by John Selden in 1664). How applicable are those critical words in the wider world today?

Q) The examples of potential offerings mentioned might seem both extreme and horrific when we read Micah's words. When he says, 'With what shall I come before the Lord...' how do we answer that ourselves?

Q) Micah talks of 'walking humbly with your God.' How do you understand this phrase?

b) In defence of the oppressed

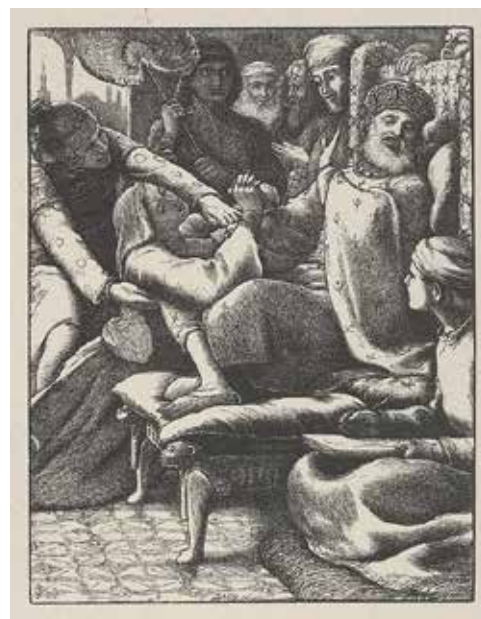
(Read Luke 18:1-8, Psalm 103:6-12, Psalm 82:1-4)

The Judge in Luke's narrative would probably have been a local Gentile judge, easily accessible and able to make quick decisions. He would inevitably find himself inundated with people wanting resolution to problems, and here, it is persistence that pays dividends with a judge who did not treat all who came to him with fairness and equality.

God is not being compared to this judge, because he listens patiently to all who come to him in their distress, and doesn't put them off, but acts on their behalf.

In Psalm 83, the writer is full of praise for all that God gives, and for his grace and mercy. He speaks of God's intolerance of injustice, and his emphasis on righting what

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The Unjust Judge and the Importunate Widow, engraved, Daniel Brothers, 1865

is wrong, particularly in the deliverance of his people from evil and oppression, and his punishment of oppressors.

Psalm 82 talks of a divine assembly with Yahweh, the God of Israel, as its head, a concept well known among Israel's neighbours. The 'gods' mentioned could be

human judges who are unjust, the powers controlling nations oppressing Israel, or pagan deities being judged by God. The cry is for them to be called to account, for failing to show concern for the oppressed, and instead defending the unjust.

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Discussion...

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Q) How does the example of the widow's persistence speak into your experience of getting issues and complaints resolved quickly?

Q) In Psalm 82, the writer talks about the oppressed. There is a lot of debate worldwide about increasing numbers of refugees, many from areas of conflict and seeking a new home. How difficult are fairness and justice to achieve in such situations?

Q) How do you view the Old Testament concept of a 'divine assembly', which was a common view in those times, and does it relate at all to your own understanding of the Bible narrative?

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b) In the Cross

(Read Romans 3:21-26, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Acts 17:29-31)

In Romans, Paul gets to the very heart of the good news, namely that God's righteousness is available to all people through faith in Jesus Christ, so all might experience the close relationship that was always at the heart of God's creative purpose.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile in sinning because, in their own strength, all fall short of where they should be. How to be seen as righteous or just in God's eyes has always been a problem for humanity, and the word used here means 'to acquit', as in a court situation.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks of the consequences of the death and resurrection of Christ, and one of these is that when by faith someone makes a positive response to the good news, there is a new 'creation' that takes place

in the relationship between human and divine. This transformation also assumes a responsibility of spreading the good news through both words and actions.

In his narrative in Acts, Luke has been describing how missionary work was progressing with Paul and others, mainly along the main Roman roads and by sea. In chapter 17, Paul is in Athens, a centre of pagan worship with many statues of deities in the city. He preaches to whoever will listen, in the marketplace, synagogue, or with the philosophers and local leaders.

The message focuses not on gold, silver, or stone images, but on the importance of the true God and the good news of Jesus Christ. To reject this is to open themselves to God's future judgement.

Discussion...

Q) How does the message that all are equal in God's sight compare with the way society looks at the breadth of humanity today?

Q) Paul's language reflects that of the court system of justice, with God's considered judgement on true believers to be acquittal. Is God as judge a picture you can easily relate to?

Q) Looking around Athens, Paul could not keep silent at what he saw, and felt a pressing desire to share the good news of Jesus with anyone who would listen. What is the spiritual message a visitor would get whilst wandering around your local towns?

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A Prayer

We pray justice
for the falsely accused,
freedom for the wrongly imprisoned,
healing for the tortured or abused,
care for the orphan and widow,
concern for the refugee and
dispossessed,
and above all forgiveness
for our emotional detachment.
May we weep as you weep,
love as you love,
and not be afraid to be angry
for the sake of your children,
wherever they might be.
In our helplessness we ask,
Lord, enfold them in your love.
Amen

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Quotes

'I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.'
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

'When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They say 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.'
(Desmond Tutu)