

Whatever Happened to Fairness?

Exodus 22:1-14

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My parents have a neighbor that has a bull that gets out of its pasture. It jumps a fence, walks through the woods, past their fish pond and jumps another fence and then helps itself to their garden.

So far, the owner of the bull has not offered any restitution for the bull's appetite nor has he kept the bull from repeating his bad behavior.

As the Hebrew people came out of Egypt and formed a communal lifestyle, Moses had the task of creating laws to help them sort through their differences. A lot of these disputes involved animals.

What if someone borrowed an ox and returned it with a hurt leg? What if someone asked you to keep care of your donkeys while you went away and when you came back the donkeys were dead because they had not been watered? What was fair when someone had been wronged like that?

Sometimes it was difficult to know whose animal had misbehaved if all the grapes in your vineyard had been eaten. Once discovered, it was sometimes difficult for people to resolve their disputes and differences and know what was fair so everyone could get along.

As much as he tried, it was impossible for Moses to come up with laws to deal with every possible scenario.

What these laws show us is that we must live with some boundaries. Without boundaries, life would be chaotic and in constant disarray.

But we also see what was considered fair in Moses' day may not be fair today.

Our understanding of God has evolved from the days of Moses.

What Moses and the Hebrews understood as fair treatment and blessed of God might get us arrested and thrown in jail today.

For example, there are three verses that point out sins which Moses said are deserving of death: witchcraft, bestiality, and worshipping other gods.

None of these actions are worth defending as moral actions, but none of them are worthy of death.

When we read of someone being killed in the name of God for something they did, if we don't react with some shock, it's because we are too comfortable with the Bible.

But let someone read it for the first time, and you will discover their surprise that verses like these are in the Bible. If someone takes verses like these to heart and acts upon them, our law is going to act against them.

What might have been fair thousands of years ago, may not be considered fair by today's standards.

For example, there is a story in 1 Kings 18 about Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel to see whose god was the true God. Was it Yahweh, the creator of the heavens and the earth or was it, Baal, the god of the fertility cult?

The challenge was for the prophets of Baal to make an altar and present a sacrifice to their god and call on their god to consume the sacrifice with fire from heaven.

This was a fair challenge Elijah made to the prophets of Baal because they prayed to their god all the time to send rain. Without it, there was no food. Without food, there would be no births.

They needed a little fire from the sky directed at the altar, but all their praying, dancing, and cutting of themselves did no good.

When Elijah built his altar and sacrificed his animal, he added a bit of theatrics to his presentation. He asked that twelve jars of water be poured over his sacrifice and the wood.

35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"

It was a fair contest, all would agree.

It is what Elijah did next that seems unfair and so unnecessary.

He had the prophets of Baal seized and he slaughtered them in the Kishon Valley.

So what do we do when we find things in the Bible that we think are unfair?

When we are looking for a God of fairness, the best picture we have is Jesus.

Jesus is our standard for understanding God. Jesus is our most complete picture of God.

If you struggle with how people are treated in the Old Testament or with how people understood God, I encourage you to see Jesus.

If you continue to struggle with understanding what is fair and how we should be treating one another now, I encourage you to see Jesus.

There was a day when Christians used the Bible to defend slavery in this country. They saw slavery as a fair way to treat people, rationalizing that slavery was practiced in biblical times, even New Testament times.

But we can see how blind people were to their own way of life at the expense of the freedom of others, bending scripture to fit their own prejudices and lifestyles.

Now we would all agree that there is nothing fair in the enslaving of a person for one's own personal gain and we can all see that it cannot be squared with the love of Jesus and the life of Jesus.

It is easy to be blind to the perspectives of others. It's very difficult for us to see what is fair from the viewpoint of another. We must try to see what is fair through the eyes of Jesus.

It is not so easy for us to see what is fair on hot-button issues like immigration, gun control, gerrymandering, food stamps, profiling, and health care reform.

Why is that? I think I know the answer.

I've observed it while playing with small children. Small children are often very content in dividing and sharing as long as they get to do the dividing. A lot of times when a young child is doing the dividing, it's "one for you and two for me."

That child would be perfectly fine with that arrangement. Sometimes a child doesn't want to divide and share at all.

But if I were dividing something with the same child and I said, "two for me and one for you," then the child would recognize that there is an unfairness in that distribution and that child would likely say, "Hey, that's not fair."

Researchers have discovered that monkeys behave similarly. They enjoy cucumbers and will be happy getting one, but if they are handed one after having just seeing another monkey get a grape—which monkeys love—they freak out.

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/10/people-dont-actually-want-equality/411784/>)

Even a monkey can perceive when she has been treated unfairly. The monkey with the grape, on the other hand, is perfectly content with its advantage. (Ibid)

This seems to be the way of the world. We've all heard the saying, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Why is that?

The rich like to say it's because the poor are lazy. They are dumb. They don't know how to save. They don't work hard enough.

But might it also be that the rich have a lot of advantages, which we don't care to extend to the poor? As long as the rich are getting richer, which we feel we deserve, few are going to try to extend the same advantages to the poor.

Compared to the poor, most of us are seen as rich.

More so than most places in the world, we live in a place where people have a fair chance, but even here there is a lot of unfairness.

A lot of people can relate to the story of the Lion, the Fox, the Jackal, and the Wolf. They agreed to go hunting together and equally divide with each other whatever they found.

The wolf ran down a stag and called in the others to participate in the feast.

The Lion stepped in to carefully divided the Stag into four equal parts.

Then he said, "I am King Lion, so of course, I get the first part. This next part falls to me because I am the strongest, and this is mine because I am the bravest."

He now began to glare at the others very savagely.

"If any of you have any claim to the part that is left," he growled, stretching his claws meaningly, "now is the time to speak up." Aesop For Children (The Lion's Share) (<https://fablesaesop.com/the-wild-ass-and-the-lion.html>)

This I'm afraid, was the way so many African-Americans were treated during the days of the Jim Crow laws and that mentality was exported to Liberia long before then and fueled the unfair ways in which the indigenous people were treated by the Americo Liberians which eventually led to a civil war.

Reverend John Mark Carpenter told me a story about a man in the government that hired a team of indigenous men to work on his house. It was customary to pay some earnest money up front and the rest at the completion of the job, but he told them he was good for the money and they would all get paid upon completion of the work. When the job was finished, the government official refused to pay them and brazenly said to them, "I am a big man. What are you going to do to me?"

When the men came to Rev. Carpenter begging him to intercede on their behalf, their anger caused him to predict to his wife that one day the country was going to explode in violence, which it did.

Jesus' brother James knew his brother well. He knew that Jesus sought to treat people fairly: men, women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, Pharisees, Romans, lepers, those with mental illness, the blind, the lame, foreigners, those who opposed him, friends, and family.

James was in a good position to talk about fairness. He wrote these words:

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" James 2:1-5 ESV

Years ago, Pastor Randy Freeze interviewed Patrick Henry Hughs at his church in San Antonio Texas. Patrick was born without eyes. He was also born with a strange anomaly that prevented him from straightening his elbows and knees that made him wheelchair bound.

There is nothing fair about this. There are some things that life throws at us that cause us to cry out, "That's not fair, God."

However, as Patrick grew up, his musical abilities blossomed.

His dream was to play in a marching band, but how was that possible?

The band director at the University of Kentucky extended him an invitation to be in the marching band. His father took a job with UPS, working a night shift Monday through Thursday so he could be available for practice and game day in the University of Kentucky Marching Band.

His father pushed him in a special chair in formation with the band while his son played his instrument.

In the interview at his church, Pastor Randy asked Patrick how he dealt with his disabilities.

Patrick responded, "I see my disabilities as abilities. I see blindness more as an ability and sight more as a disability because there are people with sight who tend to judge others by hair color, skin color, the clothes they wear, or all those outward things, outward appearances, but I don't see those things. I just see that which is in a person."

This is a real Christ-like quality.

The Lord sees what is within us.

If we deal unfairly with others, the Lord sees that.

But God also sees if we struggle with unfairness that life might send our way. Every one of us will deal with unfairness in this life in one way or another. Some of us will have to endure unfairness in painful, almost unbearable ways at times, life-changing ways.

We are then left with a choice of whether we will allow the unfairness to bury us or eventually better us.

When I say “better us,” I don’t mean that we are better than we would have been if the unfairness had not occurred.

But once the unfairness does occur, can we be like Patrick Hughs? Can we better ourselves from that moment forward? Can we allow Jesus to use our pain to find avenues and paths to new places we would have never gone? Can we discover ideas, thoughts, or concepts that we would have never discovered? Can we use those things to make our world a better place?

The unfairness can better us to the extent that we are open to allowing God to take the empty spaces and fill them with something unexpected because just as much as life can be unfair, life can also be filled with surprises and gifts which are orchestrated by the Holy Spirit of God.

If we focus only on the unfairness, we will remain angry and bitter and that drains all our creativity and a lot of our enthusiasm for life.

We can still acknowledge the unfairness, without allowing it to define us.

Patrick Hughs was born blind. He couldn’t walk, but instead of focusing on the unfairness of all of that, he focused on what he could become and what he could give to others. He learned to play beautiful music which has blessed thousands.

What unfairness has this life sent your way?

If you are still stuck in the anger phase, acknowledge it. Talk it out with God. Allow God to continue to journey with you through that. God can lead you through it in time. I assure you, God will not abandon you.

Eventually, I pray that you will find ways for God to take the unfairness and show you how to take it and build something new upon it.

It will not be the same. It will never be the same.

Julie Crouch posted on Facebook that Sidney, age seven told her, “life will not be perfect without Papa (her father), but it can still be great.”

Julie writes, "My child is far more wise than I am but I find so very much hope in her statement. Let us all find hope in my sweet girl’s faith in the future for all of us without Drew."

It takes a lot of faith to affirm that God has not forsaken us when life is unfair and that He and is still working for the good of those who love him, for those who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Life is unfair. It has always been unfair and always will be.

But God is love and in the midst of the unfairness God will always love us and be working on our behalf.

He seeks to redeem us and lead us through the unfairness of life.

If God can use the blind to help others to see and if God can use children to give hope to the hopeless, then God can use you and me, even when we struggle with the unfairness that may have come into our lives.

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