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God of Justice

Abraham George
& Nikki A. Toyama-Szeto



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Abraham George
& Nikki A. Toyama-Szeto



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Introduction

While pointing out the reason God was not responding to the prayer and fasting of the people, the prophet Isaiah also names the very essence of what God really requires:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

In this passage, the prophet highlights the religious practice of fasting and redefines it in rather non-religious term. It is not about the foods one can eat but rather the actions taken on behalf of and in connection with the marginalized. All of Isaiah 58 shows a connection between worship of God and acts of justice on behalf of the most vulnerable. The nation of Israel is challenged to see that their relationship with others, particularly those who have been cast aside in their community, affects their relationship with God.

This is indeed the mandate that we, as Christ-followers, have been given: to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to break every yoke, to share food, to provide shelter, to clothe the naked and not turn from our own flesh and blood! This is what God requires from his people. In the verses immediately preceding these, the prophet emphasizes that it is not even prayer and fasting or sackcloth and ashes God requires, but instead that we free those who are abused.

International Justice Mission (IJM), a human rights organization of Christian lawyers, social workers, investigators, advocates and educators, began its work

in 1997. IJM began by taking seriously these words in Isaiah. And so the organization started to actively work to “loose the chains of injustice” for people caught in human trafficking, forced labor and other forms of violent injustice.

Since its beginning, IJM recognized that the church is a key part of God’s work of justice. As IJM joined in a growing justice movement, we experienced some concern. Does this justice movement have the roots—the biblical grounding—to maintain a long-term, sustained engagement with these hard issues?

In 2010, IJM began helping churches in the Global South fight injustice in their communities. We quickly realized our mission was not going to be as easy as we had initially expected. In so many places, the church was far from embracing the prophet’s definition of true religion.

As we worked in the Global South and elsewhere, we noticed a pattern for why churches did not easily embrace the prophet’s description of true religion. First, there was either a significant lack of awareness of the injustices in their communities, or there was just a lack of awareness of adequate responses to these injustices. We thought this was best addressed through awareness-creating efforts. However, the second reason was a little more disconcerting to us. Just as in the passage from Isaiah, churches seemed to put more emphasis on certain religious observances, rituals and traditions instead of allowing “justice [to] roll on like a river” (Amos 5:24). Centuries of theological formulations and traditions had formed a thick cover on what was the essential kernel of God’s mandate—at least in terms of the church’s roles and responsibilities in this world—that needed to be peeled off. A spotlight needed to be shined on the core of God’s heart.

This Bible study is our attempt to peel back those layers of traditions and skewed theologies and put the spotlight back on a core essential. It is also our attempt to deepen the roots of justice into its strong biblical foundation. We felt the need to journey with churches around the world and grapple with the ultimate divine plan to set things right—*shalom*.

But what is this shalom God intends, really? The prophet Isaiah again offers us a rather vivid picture of this vision of shalom—peace at last:

And he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
 the leopard will lie down with the goat,
 the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
 and a little child will lead them.
 The cow will feed with the bear,
 their young will lie down together,
 and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
 and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
 They will neither harm nor destroy
 on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:3-9)

First articulated in the Old Testament poetic and prophetic literature and then expressed again in the New Testament, the idea of shalom places justice prominently at its core. Shalom is present when people live in harmony with God, and it is present when they live in harmony with nature. In addition, there is another key relationship that shalom encompasses. We also believe it is critically important to recognize that shalom is present when a person lives in perfect harmony with his/her fellow human beings. As people working with the victims of violent abuse around the world, this takes on special poignancy.

The prophet Isaiah introduces shalom in the previous passage with the following words, drawing a clear line of connection between God's plan for shalom and Jesus' mission in the world:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
 from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and of might,
 the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1-2)

The picture Isaiah paints of shalom is directly connected to the mission of this branch from David's family—Jesus. It is impossible to miss the conclusion that shalom is not only God's cause but that we, as followers of Christ, must engage in the work of shalom.

Indeed, the full and final fulfillment of God's shalom in this world will be God's doing, just as the occasional glimpses we have of it today are his doing. Nevertheless, we cannot sit by idly and wait for God to bring it about. We are God's co-laborers and it is our mission, just as it was of that branch from David's family, to work for freedom of the oppressed.

It is our hope in writing these Bible studies that the body of Christ around the

world will be awakened to God's heart for the poor and the oppressed. It is our hope that the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) will bring freedom, and justice will become our mission as well. It is our hope that in poring over and grappling with the thoughts in these study sessions you will recognize without a doubt that God's heart for the poor and the oppressed is not just a peripheral concept, but that it forms the very heart and core of the gospel. It is what God desires.

Of course, shalom is bigger than justice, but to be sure, there will never be shalom without justice!

Abraham George and Nikki A. Toyama-Szeto

Suggestions for Study

Suggestions for Group Study

If you are preparing to lead a small group through this study, be encouraged that God is pleased with your desire to lead others closer to his heart for justice. This curriculum is designed to move people through observation, interpretation and application as they study the Scriptures and encounter the questions included. At the back of this curriculum you will find a **Facilitator's Guide**, which includes tips for preparation, leading a discussion and getting the most out of this small group experience. The guide also includes an “at a glance” look at each session, including key points and featured Scriptures. This will help you to see how the sessions are connected, and will assist you as you draw your group's attention to the main ideas and themes.

Suggestions for Individual Study

Consider this guidance as you prepare for your study.

- Before you begin each session, start with a time of prayer. Ask God to guide you into his truth and new understanding.
- Read the Scripture passage more than one time. Consider reading the passage out loud so you can hear the words as you speak them. As you read the Scripture, don't hesitate to mark the text, circling or underlining words that stand out to you, surprise you or cause you to question.
- Give appropriate time to each of the exercises. These were designed to aid in your understanding of the Scripture and to apply that understanding to your life. Accept the gift of time that this curriculum offers, and allow some space for you to connect your learning to what's happening every day in your life and in the world around you.
- Be open to what God will show you through this session. Consider how he might be prioritizing your inner transformation, and how he is leading you to change what you believe to be true about justice, how you value justice in

your own life and how you can behave more justly on behalf of those who are in need of an advocate and a voice.

- Seek opportunities for you to live out what you've learned. Connect with friends, a small group, a church or a community service group. Move toward action.

We sincerely hope that this feels like a journey to you, one through which you can intentionally engage with the text and questions, finding at the end of your time a refreshing, enlivened and clearer perspective on the God of justice.

God the Creator

“That is not fair!” toddlers scream. Each time I hear it, it amazes me that kids so young seem to have been born with an innate sense of fairness or justice. Usually it’s defined as, “Am I getting what I want? Are you getting more than me?” And there is something about this passion that strikes me as something that must reflect God.

Yet our world dissolves absolutes and the definition of justice can become cloudy and confusing. One person’s striving for justice tramples on another’s freedom. We celebrate inclusivity of ideas, honor and respect different religions and cultures, and avoid judgment, hoping that makes everything good.

However, even as we become a society of many ideas and shy away from absolute truths, there are some things that we can and should agree on as a whole: it’s not okay for someone to own another human being; the exploitation of children for their labor or their bodies is not permissible; violence is not acceptable. But where does this sense of the inherent worth of people come from?

This session will take us to a deeper look at some of God’s original intentions and hopes for humanity.

As you begin this session, take a moment to think about what you hope to gain or understand through your learning about God and justice. Record some of your thoughts below.

What I know about justice:

What I would like to know or understand through this study:

What questions I'm hoping to have answered:

Read

Genesis 1:1-2, 11-12, 26-31; 2:1-3

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

¹¹Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation; seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. ¹²The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

²By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Psalm 139:13-16

- ¹³For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

**Reflect**

- **Question #1:** What characteristics of God do we see emerge from these two passages?

God's creation reveals his CHARACTER. These two passages introduce us to God the Creator. In Genesis, we see the power of God; he can create simply by speaking. In the psalm, we see the love and tenderness of God as he carefully crafts each individual. But more than anything, these passages teach us to view creation through God's eyes and to look for the goodness that he has poured into his creation. This session focuses on how the creation story reveals the dignity and value of each person. This will be explored through four key messages that come out of the scriptural story of creation.

- **Question #2:** In Genesis, God says that his creation is "good." In what ways is this true when you look at the world around you?

God's creation reflects his GOODNESS. These two passages of Scripture reveal the act of creation as God's outpouring of his character in material form. We see God's goodness inhabiting all creation. In these verses, we see the un-

imaginable beauty and goodness of God: it takes a whole universe to reflect the many ways in which he is good.

It is important to notice that in the biblical account the creation of humanity is not a reaction to sin, nor is it the byproduct of war and violence as there was no violence or evil in God. In the Bible, we see that the true creation is the establishment of what is good by a God who is only good. This is seen in the continual refrain of Genesis 1: “And God saw that it was good.” He did not create something that was both good and bad, but something that was altogether good. The creation story—as depicted in Genesis and the Psalms—teaches us about the character of God, that he is powerful and caring, mighty and tender.

■ **Question #3:** Look again at the Genesis passage. How does God respond to his creation in verse 31? What does this indicate about God’s value of humanity?

Creation reveals the DIGNITY and VALUE of humanity. Both the passage from Genesis and the Psalms teach us about the *dignity* of humanity. As Psalm 139 teaches us, each of us is intricately woven by God. He creates each one of us

God’s creation teaches us that humans have *inherent* value that is not dependent on what we can do, say or achieve. We do not have to *do* anything for God to consider us good. Instead we are *good* because we are created by God.

carefully *in his own image* (Genesis 1:27). These truths give incredible value to each individual. When we look around us, we should be able to see each other as a reflection of God’s goodness, as people individually and carefully crafted by our Maker. We are all deeply loved by God.

God’s creation teaches us that humans have *inherent* value that is not dependent on what we can do, say or achieve. In fact, in verse 31 God says that the creation of humans was “very good”—the very best of his creation. This means that as humans made in God’s image, our value comes not from what we achieve, what family we are from or what other people think about us, but our value is woven into the fabric of our being. We do not have to *do* anything for God to consider us good. Instead, we *are* good because we are created by God. Creation teaches us that no person, no circumstance and no harsh word can diminish the value and dignity that God has woven into us.

■ **Question #4:** What do these passages teach us about people? When you look

at the world around you, what are some ways that you see people treating each other that seem to contradict this truth?

God's mandate to humankind to procreate shows us that each new creation is a new source of goodness and is a good thing by itself. This should encourage us, when we look at ourselves and when we look at our neighbors, to see beings of the utmost beauty and value to God. These truths give us a remarkable foundation for treating others with immense dignity and respect. The knowledge that we are made in God's image and that God takes great care and delight over each detail of his creation will become vital later on when we look at why God hates injustice.

.....

A church in London called Holy Trinity Brompton was putting on a huge worship event in the city to be held in the Royal Albert Hall, a huge and very beautiful concert hall. However, many more people signed up for the event than they were expecting. The organizers were left wondering how to seat these extra guests. Eventually, they decided to ask Buckingham Palace for permission to use the royal boxes. These are special, private balconies reserved for use by royals, heads of state and highly honored guests like Nelson Mandela and President Obama, so they were not sure what the answer would be. Buckingham Palace responded that yes, they may use the boxes, on the condition that they seat their most esteemed guests there. The organizers wrote back after the event to thank the Queen for her generosity. They wrote that yes, they indeed seated their most honored guests in the box, a group of homeless people who had wanted to attend the event.¹

As Christians, we are called to look at people through the eyes of God, not of humanity. The creation story teaches us that we are all held in God's highest esteem, whether or not the world sees it that way. In God's eyes, the Queen of England and a homeless man are worthy of the same care and respect.

.....

Review

How might you explain what it means to be "made in God's image" to another person?



Respond

Exercise #1: How do others treat you? Your boss, your spouse, your friends, your neighbors? Are there things people do that affirm your role as one who is created in the image of God? Are there behaviors that discourage you from seeing yourself as a person created in the image of God? If so, what are some of the truths from God (from these passages or others) that you can reflect on? Use the chart below to answer these questions.

Person	Behaviors that affirm	Behaviors that discourage	God's truth

Exercise #2: Each and every person is made in the image of God. How has your role as an image-bearer affected your actions, decisions and choices in the past twenty-four hours? How might it affect your decisions in the next twenty-four hours?

Complete the next chart. Who are the people that you encounter on a regular basis? Write their names in the first column. What can you do to affirm their

role as people who reflect the Creator God? What actions do you want to reduce that might not be communicating their value as reflections of the Creator?

For example, it can be easy to take people for granted or ignore their personhood. We may begin to treat people as objects defined by their race, their gender, their job. After some reflection, I (Nikki) made a personal resolution that every time a waiter refilled my water, took my order or removed my dishes, I would say thank you and look him or her in the eye—in the same way that I would if I was visiting someone’s home. Who are the invisible people in your world, and how can you take actions to affirm that they are people created in God’s image?

Person	Actions you can take	Actions/behaviors you can reduce

For Further Reflection

Did not he who made me in the womb make them?

Did not the same one form us both within our mothers? (Job 31:15)

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful,

I know that full well. (Psalm 139:14)

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

before you were born I set you apart. (Jeremiah 1:5)

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

You are altogether beautiful, my darling;

there is no flaw in you. (Song of Songs 4:7)



IJM

International Justice Mission has been at work since 1997 protecting the poor from violence in the developing world. Their global team includes hundreds of lawyers, investigators, social workers, community activists and other professionals at work in nearly twenty communities. IJM partners with local agencies to rescue victims, bring criminals to justice, restoring survivors and strengthen justice systems. Their fight is against slavery, sex trafficking, sexual violence, police brutality, property grabbing and citizens' rights abuse.

The IJM Institute for Biblical Justice is a community of Christian leaders advancing solutions for overcoming injustice; sharing ideas, resources and tools for seeking justice; and moving the body of Christ into action. They are working to create exceptional resources that will serve the global church with an ever-deepening understanding of biblical justice and what justice means for all aspects of discipleship.

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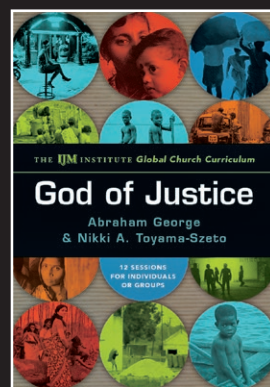
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