

# THE STORY OF GOD'S JUSTICE

AN 8-PART BIBLE STUDY





# THE STORY OF GOD'S JUSTICE

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AN EIGHT-PART BIBLE STUDY



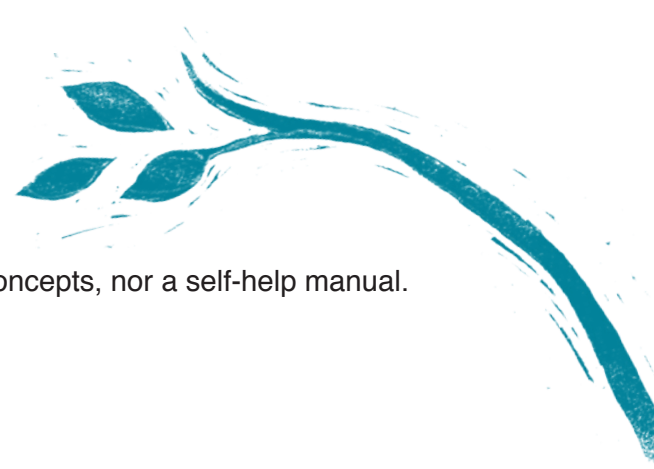
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# INTRODUCTION



The Bible is not a collection of verses, nor an index of doctrinal concepts, nor a self-help manual. Primarily it is a story:

- a story of God and his creation
- a story of God's people
- a story of salvation finding its completion in Jesus.

This story has a beginning, middle and end; it has heroes and villains; it embraces dramatic uncertainty over whether things will turn out right in the end. It expresses suffering, joy, love and hope.

But what is the story about? If somebody asked you to explain why you read the Bible and what you get out of it, what would you say? How would you summarize it in a few words?

This series of Bible studies will introduce you to a grand answer: the Bible is the story of God's Justice. Put another way, it tells how God goes about setting things right in his beautiful but sin-sick creation.

My understanding of God's justice grew through a project I helped to lead: the writing of a study Bible known as *God's Justice: The Holy Bible*. In that Bible each book has an introduction that indicates what place the book plays in the story of God's justice—for each biblical book makes its unique contribution to the story. Then, notes throughout each book explain or comment on particular parts of the text that are critical to understanding justice. These introductions and notes were written by 56 writers, from five continents. Many of them come from the developing world, so that our understanding of God's justice is not biased toward western points of view.

It was fascinating to see this Bible come together. Each contributor brought unique insights from their God-given culture. There was tremendous variety of style and emphasis. However, there was broad agreement on the central story: God's love for the world goes about setting it right—in justice.

Naturally, it's not possible in eight Bible studies to capture all the depth and nuance of that story. These studies serve as an introduction. They come from all parts of the Bible, and all literary forms, to demonstrate that justice is not a theme of just some parts of the Bible, but of all. (Some people think justice is the prophets' subject, and no one else's. Not so.)

It's important to note that the subject is justice, not injustice. In some circles the word "justice" brings to mind all the terrible wrongs of the world—economic inequality, legal injustice, governmental corruption, human trafficking, abuse, violence. These are indeed great concerns of justice. But they are negative; and justice is positive. It is a gleaming vision of how God intended his creation to be; and how it will be in the end, when he completes his work of justice.

That is why we start with a study in Genesis. God created not just a good world, he made a just world. Everything stood in right relationship to everything else. These relationships were spoiled by sin, but the raw material of God's justice was not destroyed. The story of justice tells how God goes about restoring his sin-sick creation, making it all that it was intended to be.

That is why we end with a study in Revelation. Again and again throughout the Bible we glimpse this “Day of the Lord” when everything is finally set right—when all creation flourishes as it was meant to do, and all evil is destroyed, once and for all. Revelation is the final flourish. It is the good ending we anticipate all through the story. To read it gives us hope, not that we ourselves can bring about justice, but that God can—and he certainly will, doing all he has promised. The good end is already assured; our God is a great God.

Between Genesis and Revelation the Bible tells an elaborate and complex story of God’s setting the world right. It involves God’s choice of individuals, of families, and of nations. It includes his use of kings to lead his chosen people, and his calling of prophets to tell his people the (often unpleasant) truth. It involves, throughout, the question of how God’s people can be forgiven for their failures, made right—and this the story introduces through priests and altars and sacrifices.

All the strands of this story converge in the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the true representative of God’s chosen people, he is the true king, the genuine prophet, and the final great priest, who offers the unthinkable sacrifice of his own life.

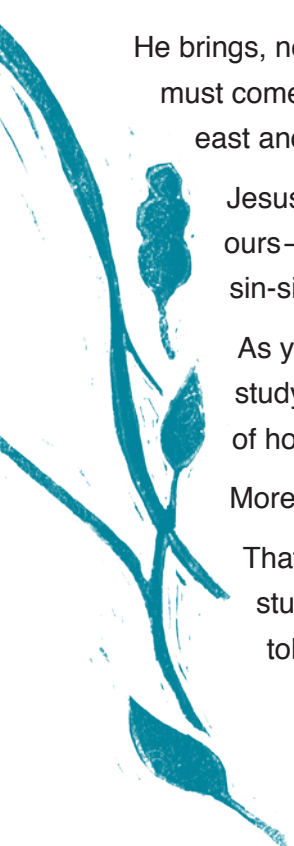
He brings, not simply justice for God’s special people, but for the entire world. All the nations of the world must come to peace—and God intends to see that they do. In the end God’s people will come from east and west and north and south, from all nations.

Jesus presides over the great finale of Revelation. In the final analysis this is his story—and ours—because he is the Lord of Justice. He sets the world right. He sets *everything* right—our sin-sick souls, and our sickeningly corrupt society, and our eroded planet.

As you do these studies, don’t hesitate to expand beyond the particular passage you are studying to think about the whole story. It’s possible you won’t be able to provide all the answers of how the grand story fits together, but that can simply whet your appetite for more.

More likely, you’ll begin to see how the whole story works as you do these studies.

That’s our purpose in these studies: not just that you find encouragement and inspiration from studying particular passages, but that you begin to grasp the whole story of God’s justice as it’s told in the Bible.



## SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

1. Pray before you begin to study, that God will help you to understand and will bring to your attention matters he particularly wants you to see. The Bible is a very personal book, and the point of studying it is not simply to gain a mastery of its content but to hear God's voice speaking to you. At the end of each study is a brief suggestion of how you can pray about what you have studied.
2. Read the introduction at the beginning of each study, and answer the reflection questions. This will help to expand your view beyond the passage of scripture itself and to understand the larger story.
3. Make sure you read and re-read the passage of Scripture that is examined in each study. The questions asked are not just for you to speculate about: they are intended to make you read more carefully, and to think more fully about what you read. The questions are written using the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, so you may want to use that translation.
4. These studies are meant to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying—which means that your answers may not always be the same as someone else's. There are three kinds of questions: *Observation questions* ask you to look closely and objectively at what the passage says. *Interpretation questions* ask you to think about the information you have observed in order to understand its point. *Application questions* focus on what difference the passage should make in your life. You may write your answers to these questions in a notebook or in the space provided between the study questions.
5. A Bible dictionary can be a helpful reference tool for understanding unfamiliar words. Or, you can usually get help through a google search.
6. If you have time, you may want to go on to the suggestions for study under "Now or Later," or you may want to come back to them at a later time.



# SUGGESTIONS FOR MEMBERS OF A GROUP STUDY

1. Come prepared. Your group will be enriched if its members have read the passage ahead of time and tried to answer the questions individually. Then you can share your answers and go deeper together.
2. Participate. You may feel intimidated, but everyone can contribute to a study, even if they are simply asking questions. Your ignorance may actually help others by stimulating them to think through matters they have taken for granted. The leader of your group will ask questions; he or she will not lecture. These study questions are meant to be used by a group that is learning as they read scripture together.
3. Stick to the topic. It's tempting to talk about other matters that concern you, or to share ideas from another authority (a commentary, sermon, or book). But these studies aim to focus your attention on a particular passage of Scripture, not on what other people have said about it or what other passages of Scripture may add. Your discussions will be far more fruitful if you let God's Holy Spirit speak to you through the actual text you have before you. As a group member, do your part to help the leader keep that focus.
4. Listen carefully to what others say. Some will not know as much as others, but they can offer great insights! Sometimes a fumbling, rambling comment may contain a seed of great value, if you are listening for it carefully. Most of the questions in this study don't have a single "right" answer; multiple responses are not only possible but quite useful in gaining a broader understanding of what God says.

Whenever you can, link your comments to what other members of the group have said. This is not a contest to see who can get the most right answers; it is a group process for discovering the truth together. So, begin your comment by saying, "I like what Susan said about verse 7, and it made me notice that verse 9 is saying the same thing but with a difference." Or, "I think Robert was asking how we can know the truth. I'm noticing that the last paragraph of this passage speaks to that."

5. Be careful not to dominate the study. Most people like to speak, but nobody enjoys being in a group where a few people do all the talking. Leave space for others to contribute.
6. Expect God to lead you, both individually and as a group. Pray that God will give you more than an enjoyable group experience, but that he will actually instruct you in how to live your life and how he is calling you.
7. Keep confidentiality! You want a group where people can say what they are thinking and share what they are experiencing. They will only do that freely if they know that nobody will go telling others what they said. If you want to share something that somebody said, ask them for permission. Otherwise, keep it confidential!
8. Some groups rotate leadership, and others prefer to have one or two regular leaders. If you are the group leader, you'll find possible answers for many of the questions at the end of this guide.





GENESIS 2:8-25

Anyone can see that the world we live in has much that is wrong. But what’s right? If we correct the wrongs, at what do we aim to arrive?

In learning about God’s Justice, it’s crucial to begin with the early chapters of Genesis. It is deep reading, and no wonder. We’re talking about the origins of all that is. Today, even in our bruised and battered world, God’s original intentions remain. It’s as though Genesis tells us, *This is what I had in mind*.

It is a good world. (God pronounced it *very good* in Genesis 1:31.) We might also call it a *just* world, because not only was every part good, but every part was in the correct relationship to all the other parts.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** Think back on some great project you once embarked on: a degree, a career, a relationship, a piece of art. How did that project change for you as time went on? Did your original ideals find complete fulfillment? In the end, could you pronounce it “very good?” Why or why not?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** What’s the opposite of injustice? If you think of a particular injustice that bothers you—child slavery, sex trafficking, bribery, murder, to name a few examples—can you describe its positive mirror image? What *should* a world without injustice look like?

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Genesis 1-3 has sparked a lot of arguments about interpretation of key questions, such as the age of the earth, or whether Adam and Eve were real individuals. As you read Genesis, it's important not to get trapped into the tunnel vision brought on by these controversial questions. There's a wealth of encouragement and inspiration built into these verses; open your mind to their riches. *Read Genesis 2:8-25.*

1. This section of Genesis begins by describing God making a garden. What does the word "garden" suggest? What makes a garden garden-like? What did God put in the garden? (vv. 8-14)
2. Verse 9 tells us that a great variety of trees grew in the garden, "pleasing to the eye and good for food." What does this suggest about the qualities God built in to his creation?
3. Why do you think the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were placed at the *center* of the garden? (verse 9)
4. What do you think is meant by the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Why are they important resources for the garden?
5. What is the role of "the man?" (vv. 15-20) What does this suggest about economic development?
6. Is there any limit to "the man's" power?
7. Some suggest that an "off-limits tree" teaches "the man" not to confuse himself with God; every day he passes a tree that God made and humanity is not allowed to enjoy. Have you ever lived with a limit that you did not understand or appreciate? What was it, and did you learn anything from it?
8. What relationship does "the man" have with the animals and birds? (vv. 19-20)
9. What is the relationship between "the man" and the woman God formed as his helper?

**PRAYER** *Ask God to help you see our world through the lens of Genesis. We see a garden well provided and protected, with humanity carrying the responsibility of working and caring for it. We see man and woman and animals in proper relationship. We see human beings who know their proper place: they are not God, they live with limits, while they work the garden to discover its potential. Is such a vision possible in the world as it exists now? Ask God for help in seeing clearly how you can be part of re-making the garden.*

### NOW OR LATER

This picture of God's garden surfaces throughout the Bible. One place is at the very end, in Revelation 22:1-5. Read that to see how the symbolism shifts, especially in light of generations of injustice that the garden must now overcome.





EXODUS 3:1-15

Between Genesis and Exodus we travel a great distance. Eden has been lost. Now God’s people find themselves, not in a garden, but in a country where they are mistreated as slaves. Is our world not similar? Exodus tells us what God thinks of this situation, and what he intends to do about it.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** From your knowledge of the world through the media, what group of people seems to you to be most oppressed? From your personal experience, what group of people whom you have actually seen and known seems to you most oppressed?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Through modern news media we are exposed to the woes of the world far more than our forebears were. Do you think this has increased compassion? Why or why not?

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Justice is not necessarily a concern that human beings stick to consistently. We tend to care for it when it’s convenient, or when the victims are lovable. The God of the Bible is consistent: he always cares for justice. That’s why we need his Spirit, which comes to us with his Word. This passage is a classic example of God’s Spirit invading the life of a person. *Read Exodus 3:1-15.*

1. Moses is in the wilderness, herding sheep, because his attempts at bringing justice to his people failed, and he ran for his life. (See Exodus 2:11-22.) In this passage, what gets Moses' attention? Why do you think God uses this method to encounter Moses?
2. What are God's first two commands to Moses? (verse 5) What do you think are the significance of these?
3. How does God introduce himself to Moses? (verse 6) Why does this matter?
4. List the verbs that God uses to describe his attention to Moses' people. (vv. 7-8)
5. Can we human beings imitate God in his way of showing attention to sufferers? What action steps would be necessary?
6. Verse 10 is the final "action step" for God. He wants to send Moses to liberate the Israelites. Why does God do this, rather than simply acting on his own?
7. Moses asks God a good question: "Who am I?" What do you imagine might be Moses' specific objections? How does God answer Moses' question? (verse 12) How does this help?
8. As a final assurance, God tells Moses his name. (vv. 14-15) What does it mean to know the name of God? How does this help Moses in the task before him?
9. If someone asks if you know God's name, what would you say? What is the name you call God by?

**PRAYER** *Ask God, using his name, whether he has an oppressed people he wants you to pay attention to.*

#### NOW OR LATER



Exodus 20, where the Ten Commandments are written, has a brief introduction (verse 2) where God introduces himself by name and by deed: I "brought you out of... the land of slavery." The ethical prescriptions of the law, which tell us to do justice to both God and our fellow creatures, follow from this. In other words, God takes the initiative and does justice first, in complete grace; we are invited to respond in kind.

Now or later, take time to read through the Ten Commandments asking yourself: how do these specific commandments follow from God's taking the initiative and liberating his people? For example, why does it follow that people liberated from slavery should not steal from each other? The answer has much to do with justice. God saves his people *from* injustice, *for* justice. The Law is a picture of how God's people should live under justice.



PSALM 72

After God liberated his people from Egypt and led them to a new home in Palestine, they lived for generations under a decentralized government led occasionally by inspirational leaders, “judges.” Only after this system failed to sustain justice did the people demand a king.

For hundreds of years thereafter Israel was a monarchy. Some kings—notably, David—were good. Most were bad, often very bad. Yet through it all, the longing for justice only grew stronger—and that longing became wrapped up in the hope for a great king.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** What do you think is more important for building a world of justice: the character of the leader, or the system of government? Give examples to support your argument.

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** For most of history, and still today in much of the world, people had no say in who would rule them. How much difference has democracy made in creating a just world?

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Psalm 72 is a prayer for a king. As a very ancient poem, it has some features that seem very dated. All the same, it captures the longing for justice in leadership, and a single great king to lead his people. As such it prepares the way for Jesus. *Read Psalm 72.*

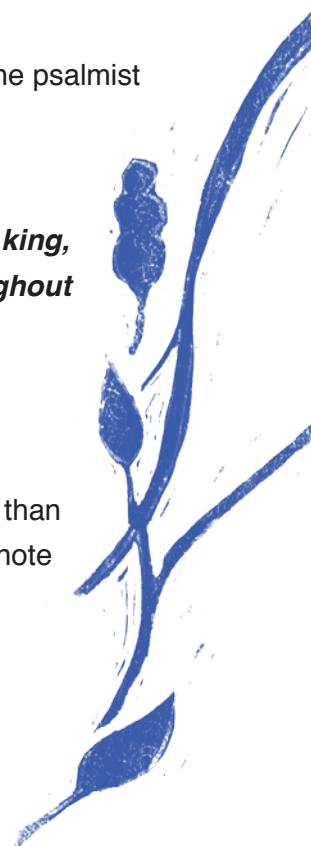


1. Justice and righteousness are a word pair that are often found side by side in the Old Testament. Reflect on what they mean to you. Are they attractive words? Why or why not?
2. Under the reign of this great king, the psalm hopes his people will prosper economically. (vv. 3, 7, 16) What does this have to do with justice?
3. What individuals does the psalm suggest will be particularly grateful for the rule of the great king?
4. Who will have reason to fear the great king?
5. The psalm does not assume that other kings will disappear from the earth, but that they will bring gifts to the great king and bow before him (vv. 11,12). If we think of the great king as the Messiah Jesus, what does this suggest about the ultimate relationship of God and government?
6. When God called Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) he promised to bless him and that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” How does this promise fit with the prayer that all nations should be blessed through the great king? (v. 17)
7. What will be the geographical boundaries of the great king’s reign?
8. How long will the great king’s rule last?
9. The great king treats his enemies harshly. (vv. 4, 9) Do you think this is a necessary part of doing justice? Why or why not?
10. When Israel first asked for a king, it wasn’t clear why this would be an improvement. (See 1 Samuel 8.) Why do you think God’s rule of justice became so clearly identified with a single, great ruler?
11. Verses 15-17 offer a picture of a flourishing planet. What are the key components that the psalmist draws to our attention?

**PRAYER** *Ask God to increase your personal longing for the final triumph of the great king, and the worldwide justice that he will bring. Ask God also to spread this vision throughout his church.*

### **NOW OR LATER**

There are many psalms that speak of a great king, a son of David who will be greater by far than David. Take time to read and reflect on Psalms 2, 16, 22, 45, 69, 89, 110 and 132. You will note not only his glory but also his suffering.



ISAIAH 58:1-12

Naturally we think of the biblical prophets prophesying the future. They did that, but much more they spoke to the present. What they spoke about, nearly always, was justice.

Prophets held no constitutional office. Their credibility rested on their truthfulness to speak for God—not telling people what they wanted to hear, but what God wanted them to hear.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** In Christian circles, what makes for a popular message? How often do well-liked speakers bring a word that criticizes their audience?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** How much of your relationship to God depends on your feelings of personal well-being? How much depends on your care for others?

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Isaiah prophesied in a time of great insecurity and national turmoil. People certainly wanted God’s help, but they wanted it on their terms. Isaiah reminds them—forcefully—of God’s terms. *Read Isaiah 58:1-12.*

- 1. Verses 2 and 3 describe the way Israelites relate to God. What behavior is mentioned?
- 2. Do you see a similar kind of behavior today? Where?

3. “Fasting” is mentioned repeatedly in this passage. What is fasting? What does it signify?
4. What is the Israelites’ motive for fasting, according to verse 3?
5. What is the problem with the kind of fasting they are doing?
6. According to verses 6 and 7, what kind of fasting does God want to see?
7. The Israelites are complaining that their fasting goes unnoticed by God. What results will they see if they fast in the way that God calls for? (vv. 8-12)
8. Isaiah speaks of breaking the yoke of oppression and loosing the chains of injustice. Can you name some ways in which yokes and chains operate today?
9. Many people go through times when they feel their devotion to God goes unrewarded. What does this passage say to them?
10. What do you think God wants you to do in the way of fasting?

**PRAYER** *Ask God to help you turn your attention away from yourself and toward the needs of other people. Ask him to show you what kind of fasting he wants you to do.*

#### **NOW OR LATER**

Jesus built his ministry answering the call of Isaiah 61. Read the account in Luke 4:14-30 and consider how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s words. You can compare that passage with Isaiah 58. What concepts are repeated? What is distinctive in each?



MATTHEW 25: 31-46

This Final Judgment was carved over the church door in many European cathedrals, for the edification of every person who went in to worship. Somehow that message, which seemed so central to earlier generations of Christians, has become largely disregarded.

However, Jesus’ message could hardly be clearer. All the world will stand before him to account for their lives.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** Are you given regular evaluations at your job? Are the criteria clear to you? How do you feel about being evaluated?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Who is harder on you: you, or your boss? Your parents? Your spouse? Your children?

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There’s no question that grace is the operating principle of our salvation. As you study this passage, be prepared to reflect on where grace operates. Has it operated on the lives of the “sheep” before they arrive at the judgment? In what way?



1. In your own words describe the scene set in verses 31-33. What is the significance of the angels? Of the throne? What is your overall emotional response to this scene?
2. The Son of Man's separation of people is "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Why the comparison of humans with these very distinctive animals?
3. What is the inheritance of the "sheep?" (verse 34)
4. When Jesus refers to them as "those who are blessed by my Father," what does he mean?
5. What did the sheep do to deserve this?
6. The "sheep" are surprised to learn that they cared for Jesus when they cared for their needy brothers and sisters. What does their surprise say about their mental focus when they serve the needy?
7. Specifically, what are the categories of people mentioned as being in need? What are the sheep called specifically to do for them?
8. What is Jesus' punishment for those who failed to care for his needs?
9. Does the punishment of eternal fire seem justified to you? Why or why not?
10. If you take this teaching seriously, how will it affect your life?
11. If your church were to take this teaching seriously, how would it affect its activities?

**PRAYER** *Ask God for a willing heart to care for those in need; and willing hands and feet to do what is needed.*

### **NOW OR LATER**

Revelation 20 records another description of the final judgment. You can read it alongside Matthew 25 and make comparisons. Is the message the same? What are the similarities? Are there any important differences?





## LUKE 18:1-8

Sometimes praying can seem to be an excuse for not doing anything. “Let’s just pray about it” can be translated, “Let’s just sit on it.” For Jesus, though, that’s not the right way to think of prayer. He was absolutely an activist, but he prayed regularly and long as part of his activism.

Justice is ultimately God’s work. He may use us for justice; he may do his work without us. By whatever means, he will make things right. When we pray, we join God in his work.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** Have you ever waited for something important for what seems like forever? What were you waiting for, and how did the waiting affect you?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Think of people you know who have experienced long-term frustration and unfairness. What’s the best kind of response you’ve seen? What’s the worst?




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In this parable, Jesus tells us that the work of justice can seem impossible. Read it and think about situations in your world where injustice seems like that. *Read Luke 18:1-8.*

1. The judge is an important character in this story. What is a judge supposed to stand for? What is his role?

2. What do we learn about the character of this judge and his refusal to grant justice to the widow?
3. Have you known someone who feels no concern for the opinions of other people and of God? Why would such a person be prone to ignore the demands of justice?
4. The widow is not asking for a favor, but for what she clearly believes is her right. Does this make a difference in a person's willingness to persevere? How so?
5. What do you pray for that is a matter of justice?
6. The judge changes his mind for reasons that reflect his character: he doesn't want the widow to keep bothering him. What is God's character, that he will bring justice for his chosen ones?
7. What kind of prayers does Jesus say will bring results?
8. What question does Jesus end this parable with, and how does that question pertain to us?
9. Looking at the church today, do you think Jesus would be satisfied with the way we pray for justice? How would you sum up the situation?
10. Looking at your own life today, do you think Jesus would be satisfied with the way you pray for justice? How would you sum up the situation?
11. Are there strategies you can think of to help you pray as persistently as the widow?

**PRAYER** *Ask God to move you to pray for justice today, and every day. Then ask him to help you set some guidelines—times and places, subjects of concern—that will strengthen your resolve.*

### **NOW OR LATER**

Study the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew 5-7—with justice on your mind. If this is basic teaching about the kingdom of God, and if we are to pray “Your kingdom come,” how does this prayer fit with the justice concerns of our modern world? For example, sex trafficking is a gigantic issue. What does the Sermon on the Mount tell you about how to oppose it? And what precisely are you asking for regarding sex trafficking when you pray, “Your kingdom come?”





PHILEMON

Perhaps the greatest charge against the early Christians is, “Why didn’t they oppose slavery?” In fact, it’s often thought that they supported it. Slaveholders in the 18th and 19th centuries quoted Paul telling slaves to obey their masters, with the assumption that for him slavery was a respectable institution. Is this justice?

But the situation requires subtler thinking than that. Slavery was a fundamental social institution in Paul’s day. The scholar N.T. Wright comments that people could no more imagine life without it than we can imagine life without electricity. Paul doesn’t urge slaves to revolt, nor does he instruct all slave owners to free their slaves. Quite possibly he knew that such a powerful institution was not going to vanish overnight, and that attempts at revolution would cause more suffering than relief.

What Paul does instead is to gut the life out of slavery, undermining its basic beliefs so that it becomes impossible to maintain. For him, the end of slavery begins in tiny house churches. Nowhere is this more cleverly and clearly done than in the little, personal letter to Philemon.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** Name an institution or practice in our day that you consider thoroughly unjust. What will it take to end it?

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Think about changes you have seen, whether for good or bad, in institutions of government, marriage or family. What brought the change? Was it violent or coercive power? If not, what was it?

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*Read the 25 verses of Philemon.*

1. From the evidence of the first seven verses of the letter to Philemon, what kind of man is he?
2. From verses 8-18, what can you tease out about what has happened with Onesimus?
3. What is Paul's relationship to Philemon?
4. What is Paul's relationship to Onesimus?
5. How important are these friendships and relationships to Paul? What do they have to do with the gospel the he preaches?
6. Paul says (verse 8) that he could order Philemon to do what he ought to do. What would give him that right?
7. Why does Paul choose not to order Philemon, but to appeal to him on the basis of love?
8. What does Paul say Philemon will gain by welcoming Onesimus as a brother rather than punishing him as a rebellious slave?
9. Can a brother be a slave?
10. What do you learn from Paul's approach that might be useful in confronting injustice in our own times?

**PRAYER** *Ask God for wisdom in understanding God's ways of destroying unjust practices and systems. Ask him for the drive to confront perpetrators but the grace to do it in a way that reflects the love of Christ.*

### **NOW OR LATER**

With Philemon in mind, go through the Bible and trace God's way of setting an unjust world right. Begin with his choice of Abraham and Sarah, his relationship with Jacob and Joseph, his use of Moses, his choice of David. Consider God's Law and how his people responded it. Look at the role of the prophets who spoke God's word and sometimes suffered for it. Especially consider the life and death of Jesus. How is God's methodology of change reflected in Paul's methodology of change?





REVELATION 21

The story of God’s justice began in a garden. We glimpsed in Genesis 2 the beauty of all good created things in right relationship to each other and to God. In subsequent studies we have seen God’s commitment to restoring that beautiful beginning, making all things right.

Here in Revelation we see where the story ends. It is a beautiful portrait of a cosmos tuned to justice. It’s a revelation of what God intends to do. It’s our hope.

**GROUP DISCUSSION:** Name one thing you hope and pray to see in your lifetime—whether in your personal life, your family, your community, your nation or anywhere in the world.

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION:** Are you more motivated by hope or by fear? What hope? What fear?

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As you consider Revelation 21, remember that it uses word pictures to stimulate your imagination. We can’t know exactly what a “new heaven and new earth” will be like, and we don’t need to know. What we need is a picture that gives us hope for the broken world we live in now. *Read Revelation 21.*

- 1. People talk about going up to heaven when we die. In verse 2, however, the new city comes *down*, from heaven to earth. What does this suggest about our future?



2. Verses 3 and 4 describe some of the key features of God's new world. What are they? Which ones matter most to you?
3. In verse 2 and again in verse 9, the city is compared to a bride, the wife of the Lamb. What does this mean? What does it do for you?
4. In verse 5 the Lord proclaims, "I am making everything new!" What do you most want to see renewed?
5. Even in this ecstatic vision of a new heavens and new earth, there is judgment on those who have turned their back on God. (verse 8) Is this necessary? Why or why not?
6. In verses 9-21, an angel gives a tour of the beautiful new city of God. Its building materials are precious stones. What do you think is intended by that?
7. There are twelve gates to the city (verse 12) named after Israel's twelve tribes, and twelve foundations, named for the twelve apostles (verse 14). What is the significance of this?
8. For Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Jerusalem temple was the most important place in the cosmos, a spot where heaven and earth come together. What happens to the temple in the new city?
9. What do you think it will be like to have God's presence as natural and ordinary as sunlight?
10. What happens to global nationalities and the kings that rule them? (See verses 24-26.)
11. What specific kinds of injustice do you expect and hope to see done away with in the end? What good things do you expect and hope to see brought into the service of God?

**PRAYER** *Pray with renewed energy the ancient prayer of Christians everywhere: "Come Lord Jesus!"*

## **NOW OR LATER**

Compare Revelation 21 with Old Testament versions of the same future hope: for example, Micah 4:1-5; Isaiah 4:2-6 and 11:1-9. Think about why God's people have been given such visions repeatedly over the ages. What do they do for us? For you?

These eight Bible studies are just a taste of the bigger story, the story of God's justice, told throughout the Bible. To go deeper, an excellent resource is *God's Justice: The Holy Bible*. This study Bible was written by 56 scholars and activists from both North and South, East and West.



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## STUDY 1

### GENESIS 2:8-25 THE WORLD GOD HAD IN MIND

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**Purpose:** To think about a just world as God originally intended it. This sets the framework for the rest of the story, as God works to restore the work he began.

**Question 1.** Some possible answers: gardens are places of beauty; gardens are places protected and cared for; gardens are peaceful; gardens cultivate the natural world so that humans can enjoy it.

**Question 2.** Beauty and utility are the basic responses: for God it is not enough that something be useful, it should also be beautiful, and vice versa.

**Question 3.** Perhaps because everything else should circle around these primary gifts: life, and the knowledge of (distinction between) good and evil. Also perhaps because at the center of the garden, they are protected from outside forces that might damage the garden.

**Question 4.** There are many interpretations of these trees. Some people think the tree of life touches on the fundamental biological qualities of living creatures, such as self-replicating DNA, which for all our biological knowledge remain mysterious. Some people also think the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has to do with our innate sense of right and wrong, which remains equally mysterious. It is impossible to have a just world without the maintenance of life and the proper understanding of good and evil.

**Question 5.** “The man” is to work the garden and take care of it. He also names all the creatures God has made. Working and caring for a garden is the fundamental basis of agriculture; it involves caring for our environment and seeing to its productivity. Some people say that naming the animals is at the root of science and scholarship.

**Question 6.** He cannot eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He is also limited by the nature of the garden: his instructions are to “work it and take care of it,” so he must take into account its created nature.

**Question 8.** Naming the animals surely involves noticing carefully their characteristics; otherwise, how could he keep the names straight? Such careful observation suggests the basis of science. Additionally, when you give a name to something, you then have a relationship with it. (We name our pets, and sometimes our favorite cars.)

**Question 9.** He is fundamentally like her—“bone of my bone.” They are to form a unit socially and physically, without shame.



## STUDY 2

### EXODUS 3:1-15 THE LIBERATOR GOD

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**Purpose:** To understand God's nature as a God who sees injustice, feels its impact, has compassion, and enters into intimate contact with it in order to bring justice.

**Question 1.** Moses doesn't seem to be looking for anything, but God catches his attention through a curious physical phenomenon. Apparently Moses isn't in regular contact with God through prayer and worship.

**Question 2.** God commands Moses to stay at a distance, and take off his shoes (out of respect). He wants to establish with Moses that he is encountering a God utterly unlike anything he knows: that he must treat "this holy place" in the wilderness with utmost respect. In other words, before he draws Moses' attention to injustice, he wants to draw Moses' attention to himself.

**Question 3.** God introduces himself as the God of his father and of the great Israelite ancestors. He wants Moses to know that he has had a long relationship with his people, to whom he has made great promises. His concern for them is not new or capricious.

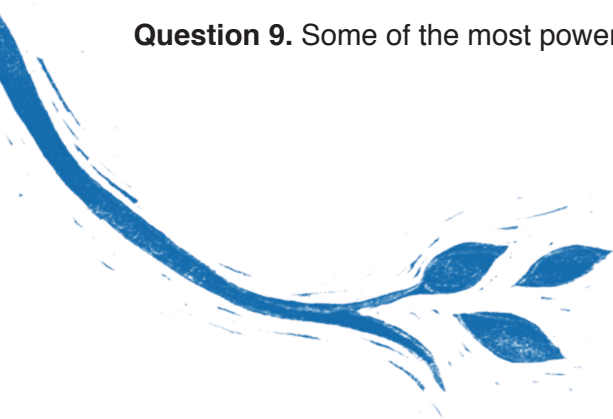
**Question 4.** I have seen (the misery); I have heard (them crying); I am concerned (about their suffering); I have come down (to rescue and to bring them out).

**Question 5.** We might have to gather information, going to see oppressed people first hand, listening carefully, feeling for the sufferers, and ultimately joining them where they are.

**Question 7.** He is one man without a following. He has no weapons or other ways to force Pharaoh's hand. He tried bringing justice once before and failed. He is a known outlaw and probably subject to arrest.

**Question 8.** We know someone's name when we have a personal relationship with them. To know God's name is to know that he is not an abstract force or a distant power: he is a personal God who knows your situation and cares about it personally. And, you can call on his help by name. Moses needs this assurance if he is to go through the trouble ahead, and so do the Israelites.

**Question 9.** Some of the most powerful names of God are: Father (as Jesus called him) and Jesus.



## STUDY 3

### PSALM 72 THE KING'S JUSTICE

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**Purpose:** To grasp how Israel's longing for justice became identified with the hope for a great king, a single leader who will make everything right.

**Question 2.** Justice as the Bible uses it has a much wider meaning than just fairness. It has to do with setting everything right in a bruised and battered world. We know from Genesis that God wanted his earth to offer plenty for all his creatures. It remains so today.

**Question 3.** The afflicted and the children of the needy (v.4); the righteous (v. 7); the needy who cry out, and the afflicted who have no one to help (v. 12); the weak and the needy (v. 13).

**Question 4.** The oppressor (v. 4); the king's enemies (v. 9).

**Question 5.** Under the reign of Jesus, other kings (or forms of government) may continue to exist, but they will honor the lordship of Jesus.

**Question 6.** Abraham is the father of Israel, and the Messiah is the king of Israel. The whole world stands to be blessed by the justice of the Messiah, who is Abraham's heir.

**Question 7.** He will rule the whole earth (v. 8).

**Question 8.** Forever; as long as the sun (v. 17).

**Question 9.** The Bible says many times over that evil must be destroyed.

**Question 11.** God is honored by all; God blesses all people without distinction; and there is abundant food.



## STUDY 4

### ISAIAH 58:1-12 JUSTICE IS TRUE WORSHIP

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**Purpose:** To understand that a strong relationship with God is impossible without a commitment to do justice. Without that, religious observances disgust God.

**Question 1.** They seek God persistently; they seem eager to understand his approach; they ask him for just decisions; they seem eager to be close to God; they ask God why he has failed to respond to their religious overtures.

**Question 3.** Fasting involves doing without something—often food—for an extended period as a spiritual discipline. It is meant to direct our attention to God.

**Question 4.** They appear to be fasting in order to get God's attention and reward.

**Question 5.** It is accompanied by exploiting workers and using violence.

**Question 6.** Taking an active role in freeing people from injustice and oppression, as well as sharing food with the hungry, providing shelter to the migrant, and clothing the naked. It involves turning toward other people, not away from them.

**Question 7.** Among other things, God's fasting of justice will bring healing, answered prayer, guidance, satisfied needs, and effectiveness in restoring their ruined city. Those who fast in God's way will flourish.





## STUDY 5

### MATTHEW 25: 31-46 THE MESSIAH HOLDS US ACCOUNTABLE

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**Purpose:** To understand Jesus' teaching that each of us will be held accountable for doing mercy toward the needy.

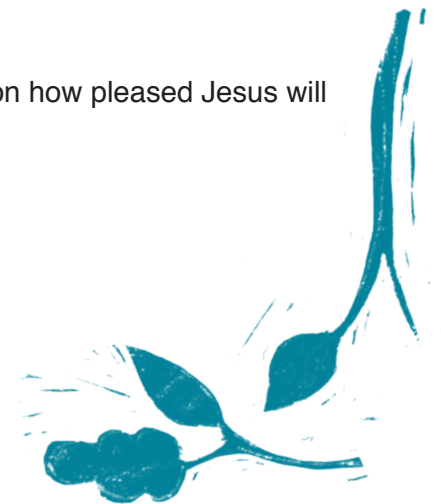
**Question 2.** The reference to sheep and goats suggests that Jesus is not separating on the basis of certain sins, but on the basis of a thoroughgoing difference in being. Failures to care for the poor and needy are rooted in character.

**Question 3.** They inherit the kingdom prepared for them for all time.

**Question 4.** It may be that in God's blessing Jesus refers to God's enabling of his creatures to do what is right as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. The kingdom has been prepared for them since the creation of the world. Presumably they also have been prepared for the kingdom.

**Question 5.** They cared for Jesus when he was in need.

**Question 6.** It would seem that they are focused on the people they serve, not on how pleased Jesus will be with them.



## STUDY 6

LUKE 18:1-8 PRAYING FOR JUSTICE.

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**Purpose:** To understand that prayer is part of the work of doing justice.

**Question 1.** A judge hears disputes to provide justice. He should be an incorruptible character so that he doesn't favor one person over another, but applies honest standards of right and wrong.

**Question 2.** The judge doesn't fear God or care what people think.

**Question 3.** Lacking concern for God or the community, they are bound to care only about what is advantageous to themselves.

**Question 5.** Everything in the Lord's Prayer is a matter of God setting the world right as he has promised, and thus is a matter of justice. For example: God's kingdom come; daily bread; forgiveness for those who forgive others.

**Question 6.** God's character is love, and it is his love for us that makes him answer our prayers for justice.

**Question 7.** Prayers that cry out to God day and night— fervent, persistent, emotion-filled prayers that demonstrate how much justice means to us.

**Question 8.** Jesus' question is not whether God will bring justice—he certainly will--but whether when the Messiah comes to bring it he will find anybody praying for it.



## STUDY 7

### PHILEMON THE END OF SLAVERY

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**Purpose:** To understand how Paul opposed slavery, and learn from his approach to evil institutions and practices.

**Question 1.** He is a committed believer, a friend and colleague to Paul, and the church meets in his home. Furthermore he is known as a loving person, and this love is enough to impress and encourage Paul.

**Question 2.** Onesimus is Philemon's slave, who has apparently run away, perhaps stealing something or doing some harm to Philemon in the process. Somehow Onesimus has found his way to Paul, in prison, where he has been a great help to Paul. Now Paul is sending him back to Philemon, his owner, carrying this letter. We should note that Philemon has the right under Roman law to execute Onesimus.

**Question 3.** Philemon is a dear friend and fellow worker, and he is in some kind of debt to Paul. Perhaps he owes his life in Christ to Paul.

**Question 4.** He is like a son to Paul, a very useful son, "very dear to me."

**Question 5.** Paul preaches that the gospel has made "new creation," which the church embodies in its community of generosity and love. Thus these friendships are the very essence of God's work through the gospel.

**Question 6.** Philemon is in debt to him, possibly for his very life in Christ. In the hierarchical Greco-Roman world, such debts must be repaid.

**Question 7.** Paul clearly believes that this is better for everyone. Most importantly, loving relationships will be strengthened all around. Paul sees these bonds of love as a reciprocal relationship growing stronger and stronger, rather than a debt to be discharged by submitting to the other's will.

**Question 8.** He will gain a brother.



## STUDY 8

### REVELATION 21 THE END OF THE STORY

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**Purpose:** To understand that this broken and bruised world will be transformed into a new city, where justice is done. We should be hopeful people.

**Question 1.** Revelation affirms that God's plans are not for a spiritualized heaven, but for the kingdom of heaven to be built on earth—with real, physical people living in a real, physical universe.

**Question 2.** In the new city, God lives with his people, and claims them as his own. Tears, death, mourning, crying, pain—the old order—will pass away.

**Question 3.** The emphasis is on commitment, intimacy and love.

**Question 5.** God cannot coexist with evil. For him to make the world his home, evil must be done away with.

**Question 7.** It is a new city, but it is built on the basis of what God has done through the centuries—especially through the people of Israel, and the church.

**Question 8.** God's personal presence replaces the material building.

**Question 10.** They will bring their glory and splendor and honor into the city. This suggests that good and beautiful things, both cultural and political, will not be destroyed but brought to serve God.







## Special thanks to Tim Stafford

for writing this incredible reading plan. Tim is the editor for *God's Justice: The Holy Bible* and author of more than 30 books. He lives with his wife Popie in Santa Rosa, California.

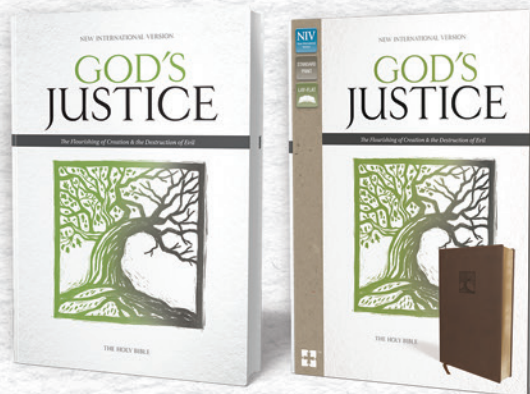
### LEARN TO DO RIGHT. SEEK JUSTICE.

God's justice—his plan for “setting things right”—is a foundational principle of the Bible. His plan for justice to triumph is traced from Genesis to Revelation, and as a theme, it forms the backbone of Scripture. God's plan is to restore the flourishing of creation and to see the end of evil, and every book of the Bible is infused with hints of this powerful and redemptive process.

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*“Traveling to 5 continents and seeking out writers to contribute to this special project was an honor,” says Stafford. “God's Justice represents a new kind of Bible experience, not only because of its emphasis on the story of God's justice – in making things right – but because of its truly international character.”*

This Bible addresses justice issues through the perspectives of fifty-six contributors who are scholars, activists and ministry leaders from around the globe. The world Christian voice of this Bible is groundbreaking and sheds light on God's work in his diverse cultures so that God's justice story can be told in dozens of different accents. Readers will be inspired to join God's mission for his world as they discover how the entire Bible reveals how God is setting things right so that evil is destroyed and God's creation flourishes.



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