

IS GOD UNFAIR?

Dear Friends in Christ,

Is our God unfair? Is the God whom we serve unjust? I'm sure that each one of you who is here today could tell me about some incident, some set of facts, some scenario that made you wonder about the unfair nature of this world or, for that matter, of God. A father and mother are both killed in a car accident, and leave behind three young children. A very young child is stricken with some aggressive form of cancer. An elderly couple loses their entire life savings to fraud. Knowing that God is ultimately in control of all things, there are probably times when you have looked up to God and felt, even if only for an instant, that you could have handled things better, better than God.

We aren't the only generation to question the fairness and the justice of God. The Israelites at the time of the Prophet Ezekiel thought that God was not fair to them. Ezekiel lived 600 years before Christ, and he was among the captives that were taken to Babylon by the conquering Nebuchadnezzar. Living in Babylon, far away from his homeland, Ezekiel was called by God to be God's spokesman to the Jews living in exile. He had the task of telling the Jewish exiles that Jerusalem and its beloved temple would be completely destroyed.

So they questioned 'why?' Why was this happening? It's the same question we ask any time disaster comes our way, "why?" "why me?" "why us?" "why now?" Is God being just? Many of the Jewish exiles rightly saw that the destruction of their homeland and temple was God's judgment for sin. But whose sin? Just who was to blame?

The people weren't willing to admit that it was their sin which had brought this judgment. Instead of repenting they quoted the following proverb: "*The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*" (Ezekiel 18:2 NIV). What the exiles were saying is that since it was their fathers who had eaten the sour grapes, why should they, the children be left with the bad aftertaste? In other words why should they be punished for the sins of which their fathers were guilty?

Now it was true that their fathers had been guilty of thoroughly turning away from the Lord. Forty years earlier, King Manasseh had led the people to commit atrocious sins. (2 Chronicles 33:9). He not only sacrificed children to idols but also filled the Lord's temple with foreign gods and killed God's prophets. (2 Chronicles 33). In contrast to their fathers, hadn't they, the people of Ezekiel's day, returned to the Lord under King Josiah? Hadn't they started celebrating the Passover again and faithfully offered their sacrifices? How could Ezekiel claim that it was their sin and not their fathers' that had brought about this calamity?

Yes, King Josiah had brought about a reformation destroying the idols of his grandfather Manasseh. But unfortunately this was a superficial reform. Not everyone appreciated what Josiah did. (2 Chronicles 36). While the people of Ezekiel's day may not have been sacrificing to idols, they were guilty of bringing their sacrifices to God out of a sense of duty, not out of love and thankfulness. Their weekday lives didn't match their weekend worship. They cheated on their spouse, they harbored grudges against their neighbors, and they lied to get things done. No, the people of Ezekiel's day were not without guilt and the worst part of it was they didn't recognize it. They blamed others for the hardship that they had brought upon themselves.

The sad thing is that our hearts are not any better. By nature we like to minimize our own guilt and blame others for our sins. But who is to blame for the messes of our lives? Here we like to blame others too. The boss is a jerk, my spouse doesn't understand me, the kids are driving me crazy, the devil made me do it. We point the finger of blame at just about everyone but ourselves.

That's what the Jews were doing in Ezekiel's day. They were blaming the generation before them for the woes of their day. We can relate to that. Nowadays parents are often blamed for much of what is wrong in a person's adult life. It is certainly true that what we do has an effect on other people, perhaps especially our children. It is also true that children sometime suffer from their parents' mistakes or misdeeds. But are we, and were the Jews back then, right to blame the generations before them for the way God was dealing with them?

In my ministry, I have seen that one of the reasons people reject our Christian faith is because they feel that our God is unloving or unfair or unjust. It seems to them that God has done nothing to fix the problems in this world, or in their own lives or in the lives of their loved ones. They conclude that it's all God's fault and that they could do a much better job in making things right. So why should they even consider worshipping a God who treats his people this way?

God has answered that question for the people of Ezekiel's day and his answer still applies to anyone who feels he could create a better brand of justice. God responded with a question. *"Is it not your ways that are unjust?"*

God's answer was to point the people back to their sins and transgressions. Even the punishment of exile was brought on them with a lot of warning. The prophets came to Israel and Judah and said, "God is bringing a great punishment on you for your wickedness. Repent now and he will halt. Turn to him and you will be saved." But they didn't listen. They didn't respond. They didn't repent. And so God's judgment came down on their nation.

⁴ *For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son--both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.*

God is truly fair and just. He created everyone. Each individual is a living soul that belongs to God. And each individual is individually responsible to God. The Lord punishes the sinner for his own sins. God does not punish a person for anyone else's sin.

In the intervening verses (vv. 5-24) which are excluded from our text, Ezekiel illustrates the application of God's justice to a righteous father, his wicked son, and the righteous grandson. He explains that a wicked son does not benefit from his father's righteousness, nor does that wicked son, in turn, jeopardize his righteous son's chance at eternal life. There's a reminder here for us. We may come from a long line of Christians. Certainly that's something for which we can be thankful, but it's no guarantee we'll be saved. Our salvation depends on our righteousness.

The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him. (Ezekiel 18:20 NIV).

Our salvation depends on our righteousness, and our righteousness depends on Jesus. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that the Messiah, Christ Jesus, is called, "*The LORD Our Righteousness*." (Jeremiah 23:6 NIV). Jesus is the source of our righteousness, the righteousness we need for eternal life. In Romans chapter 3, the Apostle Paul explains how this righteousness becomes ours.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:22 NIV).

Christ's righteousness, his perfection, his sinlessness is credited to each believer. We are clothed in Christ's righteousness through faith in Jesus. (Romans 4:5-6). Righteous living is a product of faith in Jesus. It is a product of the Lord's presence in a person's heart. Those who reject the Lord and live a life of sin will die while those who are righteous through faith in the Lord will be saved. Ezekiel explains that there is always a chance for those who are caught up in sin to repent and be saved, as long as they live. Conversely, those who are righteous by faith can reject that faith and face spiritual death.

²⁶ If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. ²⁷ But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. ²⁸ Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die.

Because all life belongs to God, even the lives of the wicked, the future remains open, not only for children of bad men, but also for the bad men themselves to repent and live. And that is what God desires. He is looking for any chance to be merciful.

³¹ Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!"

Repentance has to do with change. It is a change of mind, a change in attitude toward sinful activity, recognizing that it is wrong, an affront to the Almighty God and that no one else is to blame. Repentance includes a change from bold and selfish behavior to humble and penitent behavior.

Not only is God fair, but he is more than fair. He doesn't just urge us to repent, but he is willing to forgive our misdeeds and forget them. Not only is he willing to forgive our misdeeds and forget them, but he takes it a step further.

¹⁹ I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰ Then . . .they will be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19-20 NIV).

God promised to give his people their new hearts and new spirits himself. So believers are not expected to just conjure up a new heart or new Spirit. Instead it is the promised work of God in the lives of the righteous, those who believe in Jesus. And he didn't just stop by giving us a new heart or new spirit either. He didn't just call his people away from sin and to repentance. He also took the full weight of the problem of sin and placed it upon his own Son.

Although God is fair and just with us, he treated his own Son unfairly and unjustly to make us his righteous children. God placed the sins of the whole world on his sinless son. He made Christ the embodiment of our sin, and then he punished him with the death penalty our sins deserve. (Isaiah 53:5 NIV). Talk about something unfair and unjust! Jesus was punished for our sins. Yet God did this because he loves us.

You can see his great love for you displayed in his plan for your salvation. But can you see his love in time of adversity or affliction? Can you grasp the truth that, in love for you, his ways are just even when you don't understand 'why' or 'why me?'

You have been restored to the promises of our Loving Lord. You know that your trials are not the result of punishment and you know that your sins have been removed and replaced with the righteousness of Christ. A God who would do this for you is certainly not going to leave you or forsake you. A God who would do this for you will certainly work all things together for your good. Amen.