

When You Believe in God but Don't Think He's Fair

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[0 : 00] In our series this morning, we pick up on the question, when you believe in God, but you don't think he's fair. Every year, a group of us from churches together in Clevedon go into Clevedon School and lead a series of RS lessons, which are basically an introduction to the Christian faith for everybody in year seven.

One of those lessons is on the subject of suffering and what Christians believe about how we respond to suffering. We begin the lesson by getting the class into two teams.

It's usually boys versus the girls, and we do a quiz. And one team gets a pile of really, really, really easy questions.

The other team gets a pile of really, really obscure and difficult questions. And it's not normally very far into this activity before the young people begin to, shall we say, express their sense that it's not fair.

You see, when we think of suffering, that's the question that it raises.

[1 : 26] Why? Because life's not fair. All of us, every human being, whatever culture, whatever stage in history, we are wired with a sense of fairness and unfairness, with a sense of justice.

We hunger for it. We thirst for it. There is something in our DNA. We sense that pain when justice and fairness is not present.

And it's not just about self-preservation either. We see an injustice going on where somebody else is being treated unfairly. There is something deep within our being that makes us angry about that. As a Christian, I believe that that is just a reflection of our Creator, who is perfect justice. We'll come on to that in a moment.

But let's just think a bit more about what it is within us that gives us that sense of craving for fairness and for justice. It starts at a very, very, very young age. There was an experiment carried out by psychologists at Yale University among infants.

[2 : 44] And these children were only just old enough to be able to talk, but the experiment was carried out whereby a child was sat down and five bars of chocolate were placed on the table in front of them.

And the child was given the instruction that you need to share evenly the chocolate with an imaginary friend. So the child begins to say, one for me, one for you, one for me, one for you. It's not that long before they realise the conundrum. What do they do with the spare bar of chocolate? And in the vast, vast majority of cases, every child who was brought into that situation would actually express the preference to throw the remaining bar of chocolate in the bin rather than either them or their imaginary friend end up unfairly.

Now, why is that? Why is it that from the earliest of age, we have that sense, that inbuilt wiring, that there is such a thing as fairness and there's such a thing as unfairness?

And we know the difference between the two. And we won't rest as long as we see it in our world. See, life is not fair.

[4 : 17] The worst day of my life was when I was eight years old. It was about five o'clock in the evening. I was sat watching Blue Peter with my brother.

There was a knock on the door. We peeked through the curtain. It was a policeman. My parents went to the door. They were gone a very long time. Eventually, the police went. The parents came back in.

And the news was broken to my brother and I that our eldest brother, who was 18 years old, had been killed that day in a road accident. You carry that with you your whole life.

And there's not a day that passes by where I find myself struggling yet again with that question, how come I'm alive?

And he's not. And every single one of us has something in our lives in different ways and different shapes and different forms where we experience that question.

[5 : 28] Why? Life's not fair. It's not fair that one person is born into a situation where they have far more chance of success in life than somebody else.

It's not fair that one child is born healthy and another child is not. It's not fair that one child every few seconds dies of malnutrition.

and others don't. It's not fair that some people who treat others terribly or are just lazy go through life and actually life always seems to bless them.

And yet somebody else who is honest, who has integrity, who works hard, life turns out pretty rubbish for them. It's not fair. And in case we're tempted to think that that struggling that we have doesn't even go acknowledged within the Bible, we need to go back and revisit that because there is lots and lots and lots of acknowledgement, of recognition, and of wrestling with that unfairness in Scripture.

It's no accident that the book of Job that is reckoned by many to possibly be the oldest text within our Scriptures. The book of Job tells the story of a man called Job.

[7 : 00] He was a good man. He was a fair man. He was a righteous man. He lived a good life. He treated others well. He lived his life with integrity. And yet, bit by bit by bit, his life then falls to pieces.

He loses all his wealth and his possessions. His family all dying. And eventually his own health deteriorates. Now, it's not the end of Job's story, but it is the story that recognizes, that engages, that agonizes over the reality that life's not fair.

The book of Ecclesiastes, written by this philosopher who expresses a sense of unfairness and injustice.

In chapter 4 it says, Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter.

Life. Life. Is not fair. And the writer of Ecclesiastes reflects on how they sense that at times life seems meaningless as a result.

[8 : 17] And it's in the New Testament and Jesus, as he teaches, says in Matthew chapter 5 that God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

So if we think for one moment that the Bible is there and it doesn't even seem to recognise the unfairness of life, we need to think again because it's not the case.

So life is not fair and the Bible engages with that. But let's be really clear. Life is not fair does not mean God's not fair.

And if we go through our lives and all the fairness that it deals us with this idea that it is God who is the cause of that unfairness, then that will stop us living the lives that God wants us to live.

I want you to imagine that I just grabbed two volumes. Julian and John.

[9 : 33] Could you just stop? I'm not going to ask you to do anything embarrassing. Just stand here though. Okay, now I want you to imagine that a situation has taken place between Julian and John.

and let's say that Julian has done something really, really bad. He owes John quite a lot of money. You don't, do you?

I don't think so. No. That would be awkward. And he knows that he does but he's not going to own up.

And John finds out something about Julian that actually realises that he's a bit of a con artist and he's done this. He's done it deliberately.

He's really fleeced him. And not only that, he's kind of putting around all kind of untruths about John. He's spreading rumours everywhere he goes and John picks this up and he thinks Julian's really treating him unfair.

[10 : 33] And it's not only him but he's doing it to everybody else as well. Now next time they see each other out in public, let's suppose they meet right here, it's a Sunday morning just before the service. How is John going to feel about Julian?

Is he going to want to go up and talk to him? Is he going to really want to hang out with him? Is he going to, let's say that they're forced into having to talk to each other because they suddenly find themselves here by accident and then they get themselves into conversation.

Is John going to open up to Julian about anything? Is he going to share what's on his heart or mind? Is he going to entrust him with anything about himself? Is he going to confide in him?

Of course he's not. Thank you both. You see, the reality in our human relationships, if we've got it in our head that another human being has treated us unfairly, we're not going to want anything to do with that person.

Now, if you're carrying around that set of thoughts in your heart and in your mind, it will radically affect the way that you interact or not with that other person and the chances are it's going to rub off on the way in which you relate to other people as well, whether they have treated you unfairly or not.

[11 : 54] Now, if that is the extent of what happens when we carry that around about another human being, how much more so does it affect us when we carry that set of thoughts and feelings around in us about God?

If it is our conviction that God is unfair, that he is unkind, that he has treated us unfairly, that he treats others unfairly, you're not going to draw near to God. You're not going to want to confide in God.

You're not going to share with God your innermost feelings. You're not going to want to pray and you're not going to be able to interact with others in a way that somehow stands outside of those feelings that you have about God.

If you believe that God is unfair and is responsible for that unfairness, it's going to lock things down. Now, I'm not going to suggest for one moment that there is a simple answer to this, because there's not.

But when we look at the Bible and when we look at the way that God is presented to us, we see, firstly, that life is unfair. But secondly, we do not see a God who causes that unfairness.

[13 : 20] We see a God who enters into it, who takes it on himself, who engages with that life of suffering and that life of unfairness.

We do not have to be in that place where we understand something in order to believe in its truth. death. And if we're waiting for that moment, in this side of eternity at least, where we feel that we've got everything neatly sorted out and we understand how it is that there is so much unfairness in the world, if we're waiting for that time where we think we're going to get all of that sorted out and stitched up, we'll have a very long wait.

God is but from the other side of eternity comes the God of eternity and from that place enters our existence and all its pain and all its suffering.

You may have heard this reflection before. At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne.

Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them but some groups near the front talked heatedly, not cringing with cringing shame but with belligerence.

[15 : 02] How can God judge us? How can God know about suffering, snapped a young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp.

We endured terror, beatings, torture and death. In another group, an African boy lowered his collar. What about this? He demanded showing an ugly rope burn.

I was lynched for no crime but being black. In another crowd, there was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. Why should I suffer?

She murmured. It wasn't my fault. Far across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he had apparently permitted in his world.

How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear or hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that humans had been forced to endure in this world?

[16 : 11] For God leads a pretty sheltered life after all. So each of these groups set forth a leader, chosen because he had suffered the most.

A Holocaust victim, someone from Hiroshima, a sick child, a tortured man. In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other and at last they were ready to present their case.

It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge, God must endure what they had endured.

Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a human being. Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be questioned.

Give him a work so difficult that his family will think him out of his mind. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, betrayed by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge.

[17 : 27] Then let him be tortured. At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die.

And let there be no doubt that he died an ugly death. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it. As each of the leaders announced their portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word, no one moved, for suddenly everyone knew that God had already served his sentence.

We don't have to understand something in order to believe in it. But the idea that we have in our hearts, in our minds, of what God is like will determine the way in which we go about our lives in relation to God and in relation to each other.

[18 : 56] And my question to you is, do we have even any hint in that understanding of God that he just might be unfair?

Because as long as we do, things will be jammed up. We won't be able to move forward. I want to think about and pray about that in just a moment. As we do, I want to share with you one last image. Earlier this month, somebody called Denise, I'm going to pronounce this wrong, I know, Denise Muller-Koronek broke the world land speed record on a bike.

Can we have a picture? When I say a bike, I mean a pedal cycle, not a motorcycle. Denise, she's 45 years old, and she pedaled at 183.9 miles an hour.

To give you some idea, she did this over a course of 3.5 miles. That's roughly the same take-off speed of a Boeing 747.

[20 : 12] Now, in case you're thinking, it's not an ordinary bike, although it is in Utah across the Salt Plains. She was towed along by a dragster racer across the Salt Flats, and you can see the cable that's attached to her bike.

That towed her up to about 100 miles an hour, at which point she flicked a switch, the cable was released, and she pedaled to the rest almost additional 90 miles an hour on top of that.

Now, obviously, she's pretty good at cycling, but the bike's no ordinary bike. The bike has fixed gears.

It's a gear ratio that is so steep that it is impossible to pedal until those wheels are travelling at 100 miles an hour.

Hence, the need to be towed along up into that speed. But once it reaches that speed, the gears kick in. And I wouldn't say they do all the work, of course they don't, but they do an awful lot.

[21 : 29] Now, I just want to hold on to that image. Imagine you get on that bike and you try to pedal it. It will be as though the gears have been welded tight.

They won't budge. It would be impossible if you just try to move forward. As long as we have an idea in our minds that God is unfair, that's where our life is.

We can move through our lives with this sense that, yes, there is a God. We believe in God. But as long as we have it as part of that belief that God is unfair, we're not going to move.

Only when you're given that toe, when you're given that pull up to the 100 miles an hour, only when you experience that move that comes from the external source, when God's spirit engages in your life and shows you his reality in a way that we can't understand but nevertheless know is real, then we move.

And sometimes we can look at some of these heroes of faith that we read and hear amazing things about them. We think, how on earth did that person get through that and still believe in God?

[22 : 53] It's not a question of how they got through it and still believed in God. It's because they believed in God but believed that God was not unfair, that they were able to peddle. And because of the reality of God in their lives, by the dynamic presence of his Holy Spirit, that was beyond that sense of understanding, that not only did they begin to move, but they were able to do the most extraordinary things.

And so what I want us to do now is to pray. We're going to pray and, you know, every single one of us has experienced unfairness at some point.

And it might be now that as we come to pray, as you think about unfairness as a theme, you might be thinking of something that has happened a long time ago in your life or in the life of somebody

else you know.

It might be an experience of unfairness that is present, live, and active now. It might be a sense of insecurity or anxiety over a feeling that you're not sure of but you think that unfairness could be out there somewhere.

But what I want to suggest is as long as we have alongside that unfairness, and everyone, everyone without exception experiences something in life like this, but as long as we are carrying in our hearts and in our minds this sense that actually God is to be blamed for that unfairness, it's like trying to move forward on a bike that's welded fast.