



## Sermon Title: But God

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**Scripture:** Job 24: 1- 4, 9,13-14, 22-25

<sup>1</sup>Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?

Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?

<sup>2</sup>There are those who move boundary stones;  
they pasture flocks they have stolen.

<sup>3</sup>They drive away the orphan's donkey  
and take the widow's ox in pledge.

<sup>4</sup>They thrust the needy from the path  
and force all the poor of the land into hiding.

<sup>9</sup>The fatherless child is snatched from the breast;  
the infant of the poor is seized for a debt.

<sup>13</sup>"There are those who rebel against the light,  
who do not know its ways  
or stay in its paths.

<sup>14</sup>When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up,  
kills the poor and needy,  
and in the night steals forth like a thief.

<sup>22</sup>But God drags away the mighty by his power;  
though they become established, they have no assurance of life.

<sup>23</sup>He may let them rest in a feeling of security,  
but his eyes are on their ways.

<sup>24</sup>For a little while they are exalted, and then they are gone;  
they are brought low and gathered up like all others;  
they are cut off like heads of grain.

<sup>25</sup>"If this is not so, who can prove me false  
and reduce my words to nothing?"

**Transcript:**

Well, hello. To those of you joining us online, thank you so much for joining us on this beautiful sunny day. So glad to have you. And those of you in the room, so great to have you here as well. So Jesus, we pray that you would use these next few minutes, as we look at your word, to understand you more and to live out of it better. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen. So the scripture reading comes from Job chapter 24, selections. "Why does the almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? There are those who move boundary stones. They pasture flocks they have stolen. They drive away the orphan's donkey and take the widow's ox and pledge. They thrust the needy from the path and force all the poor of the land into hiding.

"The fatherless child is snatched from the breast. The infant of the poor is seized for a debt. There are those who rebel against the light, who do not know its ways or stay in its paths. When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up, kills the poor and needy, and in the night, steals forth like a feat. But God drags away the mighty by his power, though they become established. They have no assurance of life. He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways. For a little while, they are exalted and then they are gone. They are brought low and gathered up like all others. They are cut off like heads of grain. If this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing?" So there's lots going on in that passage. As McKayla said, I'm just going to focus on one aspect of it, and that's the issue that he's looking at. All these things going wrong in the world and, where's God?

One of the great villains of the 20th century was Joseph Stalin, the communist dictator of the Soviet Union. He executed thousands of people just because they disagreed with him. And on top of that, more died of famines that were caused by the economic catastrophe that was communism. And during a conversation about war in Europe, someone mentioned the Pope's ability to sway opinion. And so Stalin very snarkily said, "The Pope, how many divisions does the Pope have?" In other words, the Soviet Union had this massive army. The Pope didn't have an army at all, army's not being a good look for Popes. And so Stalin was like, "Well, what do we have to fear? They don't have any armies." Well, a couple of decades after Stalin said that a Polish Cardinal became Pope John Paul the Second who gave not just moral assistance, but also tangible assistance to an unknown dock worker in Poland named Lech Walesa, who inaugurated a mostly non-violent bloodless revolution that within 10 years had swept the Soviet communist system into the as bin of history where it belongs.

Now, there's a lot of things that contributed to that, but the Pope played major factor. How many divisions does the Pope have? None. But he had legions of angels and that was more than enough to get rid of Joseph Stalin's unjust system. And it also shows what Dr. King said, which is, that the arc of the moral universe is long and it bends towards justice. And justice, the setting right of wrongs, is something that is intrinsically in us from the very beginning. It's in us when we're born. When my kids were little, my youngest Lucy would sometimes come to us crying and she'd say, "Jackson's not brushing his teeth. He says he is, but he isn't. He's not following the rules and I am," the cry for justice right there. And this reached a crisis for her. The next time they had their dentist appointment and they each got a little report card and Lucy's said she needs to brush more, she's missing spots. And Jackson said, "Looks great. Keep up the good work."

So all the way home, Lucy stewed in quiet rage at the injustice that she'd been following the rules but her brother was the one that got the praise. We have this sense of justice in us from the very beginning. I mean, just watch what happens when one toddler takes a toy from another toddler. Toddler war ensues. It's what I feel when the light turns green and the person in the front of the line doesn't go and they don't go and they don't go. And then the person right behind them does not do their job, which everyone knows is to honk at them. And then finally, the person in front wakes up and speeds through the light, but by the time I get there, the light turns red. So I'm stuck there while the vial offender is off having a great time. There should be a prison sentence for that one. We feel this sense of justice and injustice, even in the smallest of things. So how much more so in the really big things that we face in life and around the world.

And Bell Pres, one of the things that is so great about y'all is that you have had a heart for justice in this world for decades. I mean, long before I got here, y'all were doing justice in the world, which is just so awesome. And we need it, because in our own country, we look around, we see there's still racial injustice. There are scam artists who rip off vulnerable people, bosses who don't treat their workers fairly. And then globally, all around the world, so many things we could talk about, but the one that is most directly affecting us as a church, most directly affecting people in our church, is the renewed ethnic violence, genocidal violence in Congo against [inaudible 00:05:47] tribe. And this directly affects people in our Bell Pres New Hope Revival Community, some of whom are our worship leaders up here.

It directly affects them because they family and friends that are caught up in this violence, and they're being killed. They're having to flee into the jungle. They

don't have food, they don't have water. One person's brother was shot and killed while they were on the phone talking with each other. People like a woman in New Hope Revival, who when she was 15, came from a really close family. She called herself a daddy's girl, because she was really close to her father. And then one night, she woke up to gunfire and the militia came through and killed her entire family. And when the shooting started, the last thing she heard her father said was, "Pray. Stay with your sisters. Take care of each other." She eventually came here as a refugee and she's part of New Hope Revival, and still has lots of concern for friends and family that in Congo getting caught up in this ethnic violence.

But in spite of all that, she also has this steady faith and believes that Jesus can heal her land through a process of Christian reconciliation. So, in the passage I just read from Job, there's a lot of stuff going on there, but one of the things, the main thing is he's complaining about injustice. And he says, "There are those who move boundary stones. They pasture flocks that they have stolen." So boundary stones were how you marked property lines. So moving the stones was a way of stealing land from people. He says, "They drive away the orphan's donkey and take the widow's ox and pledge. They thrust the needy from the path and force all of the poor of the land into hiding. When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up and kills the poor and the needy." That's exactly what's happening in Congo right now. That's exactly. That describes it perfectly.

Job makes this long list of injustices in the world and he's like, "God, where are you in this?" But then he keeps talking and he keeps talking and finally he gets to this line where he says, "But God," the phrase that is the theme of our sermon series, "But God." But God drags away the mighty by his power. He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways. And this is really just the first of several passages, but God passages that talk about God as being a God of justice. So, for instance, Psalm Nine says, "But God will never forget the needy. The hope of the afflicted will never perish." Psalm 10, "But God, you see the trouble of the afflicted, defending the fatherless and the oppressed so that mortals who are of the earth will terrify no more." God is a God of justice.

But here's the thing, biblical justice looks a little different than what we sometimes called justice. Biblical justice looks different than what Liberals would call justice or what Conservatives might call justice, or anyone else. And one of the main things, one of the main goals in the Bible of God's kind of justice is it's always about restoration, not retribution and revenge. It's always about restoration, not retribution and revenge, restoration of what was lost or stolen or broken or hurt or wounded for individuals, but also for entire communities.

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Because a lot of what we call justice on earth is actually just retribution or revenge thinly disguised. There's this truth in human history that often when oppressed people gain a little bit of power, they very quickly become the oppressors.

You see that in the Russian Revolution, the oppress classes kicked out the Czar and actually eventually murdered the Czar, but very quickly you get Stalin murdering everyone who disagrees with him. Human revolutions have this tendency to change who the oppressors and the oppressed are, but they're still oppressors and they're still oppressed. God's justice aims to eliminate that dynamic completely. And one of the places you see this the clearest in some very challenging ways is in the scripture, the commands around what was known as the Year of Jubilee. And God commanded that in the Bible every 50 years would be a Year of Jubilee. And in that year, servants were set free, all debts were canceled, and all property reverted to its original owners. And this was all meant to be voluntary. It was not meant to be coerced or you couldn't confiscate the property.

So it's not socialism, but it's not capitalism. It's just something completely different. And it was this radical leveling of the playing field. So where people who've been falling behind for years had their debts canceled so they could have a second chance. People who had been accumulating wealth for 49 years were called to give some, not all, but some of it back so that once every generation everyone got a new start. Now, if that sounds radical, it's because it is. It's very challenging. I find it a little bit uncomfortable, especially when I think about the role that generational wealth plays in our culture and how, because of racism people of color haven't been able to accumulate as much generational wealth and the injustice of that. It's uncomfortable. But here's the thing, God's commands are never meant to make us miserable. There's always a promise attached, and in this case, several.

First of all, God always replenishes what we give away. That's just how it works. He replenishes. That's God's math. He replenishes what we give away. But second, this was meant to lead to a society where everyone thrives, which just makes everyone's life better. The Bible says this, "There need be no poor among you, no poor among you, if you only fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all of these commands. God will richly bless you and you will lend to many nations, but will borrow from none." This is not going to bankrupt you. God will make sure of it. And imagine a culture where there's no poverty and all the social unrest that comes from poverty. Imagine how that would be a

blessing for everybody. Jubilee was like this. The way I describe it sometimes is, the Jubilee Year was like this giant control alt delete of history.

You know how when your computer gets all jammed up and you have to do the control alt delete thing to reset everything? Or my go-to, which is just to unplug and then plug it back in. And if that does work, just give up in despair. It's hopeless. It can't be fixed. Just go get a new computer. In Jesus' first public sermon, he says this, "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favor." And that Year of the Lord's Favor, he means the Jubilee Year. And then he says, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, Jesus is saying, "I am the fulfillment of God's Jubilee vision and I have come to end generational poverty to get people out of prison who had been illegitimately imprisoned."

But he also says, "I've come to bring good news to the spiritually poor and to cancel your debt of sin and to reconcile you to God." Because see, here's another important thing to remember about biblical justice and how sometimes it differs, often, almost always differs, from our versions of justice and that is that the spiritual transformation must always accompany any social change transformation. For it to be true justice, you need both. And this is where it's different. Republican versions and Democrat versions of justice. They don't usually include this. But pastor Tony Evans points out that in the Bible, the Year of Jubilee was meant to be inaugurated, kicked off, by the Day of Atonement, which was a day of repenting for all of your sins and getting reconnected to God because the spiritual transformation and the social transformation, they're both important because, see, it's in the presence of Jesus that's the oppressor loses his arrogance and repents of his oppressive ways.

And it's in the presence of Jesus that the oppressed lose their bitterness and their resentment, and when those two things happen, you can have genuine justice that is about restoration, not retribution or revenge. Now, do not hear what I did not say. I did not say that all we need to do is worry about changing hearts and you don't have to change systems and structures. I did not say that. The Jubilee Year was a structural fix. It changed structures. So we need both. But if hearts aren't also transformed people will find a way to be unjust even in the most just of systems. We see this in U.S. history. We get rid of slavery, but very quickly in the South all these laws were passed called the Black Codes, which were designed to keep Black people in menial jobs, keep them uneducated, couldn't vote,

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and all of that. Got rid of the Black Codes and in came Jim Crow. Got rid of Jim Crow, but there was still mass incarceration, red lining, all the rest.

Injustice will find a way unless you have both a spiritual and a social transformation. Both, you need both. And we see this happening. It's not impossible. Like in Rwanda, we see that happening, and I'll talk a little bit more about that in a minute, but it is possible. It's also necessary, the spiritual part, to get your motivation right, because so often the motivation to do justice is some version of guilt. You ought. You should. You better. In fact, some of you right now might feel like this sermon is designed to make you feel guilty. And some of you might be thinking, "Well, that's okay. You're a pastor. That's your job, right?" That's why we come to church to feel guilty. No, no. Pastor Tim Keller says it great. He says, "The motivation to do justice isn't duty. It's beauty." It's beauty of a God who wants to set everything right because he loves us. Beauty of a God who loved us so much he died for us, the beauty of a vision of a world set right.

Because, see, duty is self absorbed. Duty is all about, how do I feel good about myself? Or how do I get the Twitter people off my back? Or how do I win approval from other people? And that duty leads to performative justice, which we see sometimes on social media where I blame and I shame others to show everyone how woke I am or how patriotic I am, to please my political tribe, whatever my particular tribe might be. Duty is focused on self, which, of course, is the exact opposite of justice, which is focused on others and focused on Jesus, who died to pay the price for my sins, and that duty of that can compel me. And then his beautiful vision of a world set right, that's what can compel us to want to be part of it in Jesus' way, using Jesus' methodology, not the methodology of our world.

So let me very quickly, just very quickly, sketch out four characteristics of biblical justice. What makes it biblical? First, this is of high importance to God. This is everywhere in scripture. This is not just one or two verses here or there. Hundreds of verses are about this. This is a major theme, major theme. God says, "My people seem eager to know my ways." That is, they're very religious. They go to church. They pray. Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and you exploit all your workers. It's not this the fasting I've chosen, to loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share your food with the hungry. And then God says, "If you do this, you will experience me in a deeper way." He says, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn." You will call and the Lord will answer. The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun scorched land.

In other words, you want a deeper experience of God? You want a deeper presence of God? Join him in the work of justice because that's where he's working. That's where he's moving. And God says, "If you want to know me better, join me there because that's where I'm going to be." And then the New Testament, the New Testament says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth." And that's just two of hundreds of verses in the Bible where God says, "If you have a genuine relationship with me, the natural outcome of that is going to be that you are going to care for victims of injustice." High priority.

Second, radical generosity is a hallmark of biblical justice. So, for instance, in the Bible, God told landowners not to maximize their profits by harvesting everything they could, but to leave some left over for the poor to harvest through their own labor, not through charity. Charity is often necessary in the short run, but in the long run it's disempowering. And this was to provide a way that the poor people could earn through their own labor of living. The Bible tells us not to see our money as our own. Everything we have comes from God. We're just the managers of what he's given us. And others have a claim on what I have so that everyone can flourish, because, ultimately, if everyone is flourishing, none of us are flourishing. Before the Russian Revolution, the Czar and the nobles were flourishing just fine until the Revolution and then they weren't flourishing anymore.

God calls us to radical generosity. However, as I said, it's meant to be freely given not confiscated. So it's not socialism. It's not capitalism. It's just different. Third, social justice is about radically equal treatment for everybody. Over and over and over again, you get verses like this that say, "You shall have the same law for the native born and the foreigner who resides among you. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord." And in a tribalistic culture where blood and tribe and family were everything, this is radical, radically equal treatment for them, and in some ways, for now. It's also why God prohibits bribery in the Bible, especially in legal matters because rich people can bribe a judge and poor people can't. In our own culture, we all agree, Liberal, Conservative, everyone knows if you're wealthy, you can get better legal representation than if you're poor and the scales aren't balanced.

And then fourth characteristic of biblical justice, special concern for the powerless and the marginalized. God says, "Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow," because they were the



most vulnerable. He doesn't say, "Speak up for the rich." Not because he doesn't love rich people. He does love rich people. It's just rich and powerful people have the means they need to make their voice heard and poor people don't. I love all my kids the same, but when one is sick, I have a special concern for that child. Highly important, radically generous, radically equal treatment of everyone with special concern for the poor and their oppressed. And God says, "When we do this, it brings wholeness and joy for everyone," and we experienced God at a deeper level because we're joining him in his work.

And what holds us back from having that experience of God, what holds us back from being part of this beautiful vision of a world set right, what holds us back is all of our excuses. And I have so many excuses. It's interesting, we're doing this sermon series on the phrase "But God" in the Bible, and if you think about it, that's also a phrase that we say back to God a lot usually as an excuse. "But God, I can't. I don't have enough time. But God, I'm not equipped. I'm not experienced enough. But God, it's uncomfortable, but God." What stands out in the way of that bigger life that God is trying to give us is us constantly saying, "But God." So here's the key question, how big is your but? Because it's in the way. And so is mine. So many beautiful things happen, so many beautiful things can happen when we become part of God's beautiful vision of a world set right.

Let me give you an amazing example that from Pastor Alexis and the Bel Pres New Hope Revival community that we, under their leadership, get to be a part of. Next week is Worship Through Music, and we're going to be receiving a special offering next week that will go to help deal with the ethnic violence in Congo. Half of that offering is going to provide food and supplies to refugees from this crisis, and then the other half is going to support a team of Congolese people who are bringing leaders from all four warring tribes together to tell them about the love of Jesus and how reconciliation is possible in the name of Jesus. And they've already been doing this and they've already had some success. People there in Congo are actually pretty excited, because it's the first time that any organization has ever treated all four tribes equally. Every other organization just goes to one or the other of the tribes.

One of the tribal leaders there says that this team of people, this offering that we'll take next week, is going to help assist as they do the work of justice, this team of people that the tribal leader says, "They don't discriminate against one community over another. So we are ready to tell our young boys who often end up becoming part of these militias, these are the people that are going to finally bring peace to our land, because they're treating all of us the same. And I trust them because I see that our tribe is part of this process." That is biblical justice.

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Radically equal treatment of everyone with the aim of restoration, not retribution. Because here's the thing, anti-anybody wrecks everybody, but pro everybody blesses all. Anti-anybody wrecks everybody, but pro everybody blesses all.

And yes, forgiveness and reconciliation is incredibly difficult, especially for people who have lost people they love. But as Pastor Alexis always says, "Nothing is impossible for God," which is part of what makes him a great leader and I am proud to follow him. And it's not impossible. We have seen it working in Rwanda over and over again reconciling Hutu and Tutsi, who after a horrible genocide 25 years ago through the power of the Gospel are being reconciled. It's not easy. It's not perfect. It doesn't take every time. It doesn't happen every time, but it still happens a lot. This is not an impossible vision. I've been in those reconciliation seminars. I've seen it happen. God is doing it in Rwanda. We believe he'll do it in Congo.

And then longer term down the road, Pastor Alexis and Bell Pres New Hope Revival has a vision to build a reconciliation center where people from all four tribes can come and get job training so that they can find jobs, all four tribes together in a Christian atmosphere of reconciliation. And if you want more details on all of this, there's more information on our website and you can look it up there. This is biblical justice. Radically generous, radically equal treatment of everyone with special attention to those most in need. And yes, it's hard, but when the world is at its worst, God calls his church to be at our best. And we can participate in a couple of ways, pray. You can pray for what's happening in there. You can pray for the people that are part of our church that this is directly affecting. Second, tell other people about it. Raise awareness, because the media is paying zero attention to this. So repost what we post on our social media about this.

And then third, we can give to that special offering next week. And then we're personally close to home. Where you live, work, play, learn, look around and see if there are people being treated unfairly, bullied, excluded in some way and how can you bring God's healing and restoration and justice there? How many legions does Jesus have? None. But he has a church in his world and he calls us to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God. God, who not only helps the poor and the oppressed, but who himself became poor and oppressed when he came himself as the person of Jesus, born to parents in a feed trough. Wanderer without a home his entire life. Rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. Ate his last supper in a borrowed room. Died on a cross

where they took the only thing that he owned from him, his robe, and he was buried in a borrowed tomb.

Unjustly condemned on false charges by false witnesses in a kangaroo court, and then put to death unjustly by one of the most wicked unjust empires in history, the Roman Empire. And most unjustly of all, died to pay the price for someone else's sins, talk about unfair, your sins and my sins, things we've done so that we could be forgiven from the unjust things that we all do. And we all do unjust things to our friends, our neighbors, our relatives, indifference to people in pain. But Jesus bore the justice of God so that we could enjoy the mercy of God. It is a radically different vision of justice than anything you're going to see on this planet. And he is at work in our world to set right what is wrong, to restore what has been broken, to heal what has been wounded until mortals who are of the earth terrify no more.

So Jesus, you are justice, and we ask that you would help us not out of guilt, not out of duty, but out of a vision of a world set right to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with you. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

### **Discussion Questions:**

#### Opening Question

- Icebreaker: When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions - Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

#### Sermon Reflection Questions

- How do verses 18-25 answer Job's complaints in verses 1-17 that God doesn't respond to injustice?
- What is God's response to injustice? (See also Psalm 10:14-18, Isaiah 58:6-9).

#### Closing Question and Application

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?

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- Who might you share this with?