Message: God’s Not Fair

I learned it early in life. I was in a classroom full of students like myself all of whom were looking forward to one thing: recess. We would enjoy it soon, released to the vast expanse of the playground, getting the desperately a desperately needed break from the monotony and labor of studies. We lived for recess, and so we were all greatly troubled when the teacher announced during our lesson that if anyone talked while she was teaching, then we would all have to stay in from recess. I do not remember the bright kid who could not keep his mouth shut, but I do remember that we did not go to recess, and I was ticked. One kid does the wrong thing and every single kid in the room gets punished. I learned it early on.

Life is not fair. If only it showed up in trivial instances.

On January 12 of this year, the ground beneath Port-a-Prince in Haiti shifted violently, collapsing thousands of buildings, killing thousands of people instantly and trapping hundreds more. I first heard about the earthquake sitting comfortably in my home here in East Hampton. Sylvio Previlon, a plant foreman who lived at the edge of Port-au-Prince, lost his home. His 25-year old daughter, Sherline was killed in the rubble of the local university building. Here in East Hampton, my $250,000 home was unscathed; my 22-year old daughter and her family are alive and well.

Life is not fair.

Every single person in this room has had something happen to you that is not fair. Someone you care about won’t talk to you. Your job was eliminated. Someone you loved died. Someone you love abandoned you. You walk in pain every single day of your life. Something valuable was stolen from you. You lost that home you loved. You were assaulted. You were lied about or judged. And you have thought to yourself...

That’s not fair. Life is not fair.

God is not fair. It’s nearly impossible to avoid that conclusion. So many of you in this room believe that God is in control of the world and your life, and then things happen in your life that are not fair. It’s hard not to conclude: God is not fair. You feel terrible about even thinking it, but it seems obvious. God is not fair. And you know what? You are right. God is not fair. You see it in the Bible on a regular basis. God does things that are not fair. He allows things that are not fair. The Bible is full of such stories.

One of the most prominent is the story of a guy named Job. His story is found in the Bible in a book/section that goes by his name: “Job.” He lived in some of the earliest days of human history, and he had what most of us would consider a wonderful life. He was married and had ten children, seven boys and three girls. Wealth in his agricultural society was measured by cattle and he had thousands on his ranch: sheep and camels and donkeys and oxen. He had gardeners and ranch
hands and maids. Job loved God and trusted Him deeply. He was honest and faithful and generous to the poor.

In fact, his character was so stellar that God bragged on Him. The book of Job records a very unusual—even strange—conversation God had with Satan. The Bible affirms that Satan is an accuser, and we might reasonably conclude that he regularly mocks God at how poorly we are following Him. It appears that he was doing this very thing when God points out the character of Job. In fact, God says that there is no one on earth whose character and devotion to God matches that of Job. Satan scoffs and counters that Job follows God because God has given him such a prosperous life. “You take all that away from him,” Satan assures, “and he will curse you to your face.”

God then does something that is clearly unfair. He allows Satan to wreak unthinkable destruction on Job’s life. In one day, all of his cattle are killed or stolen, and in the process most of his ranch hands were killed. On that same day, his children are all having dinner together at the oldest boy’s house. A devastating windstorm swept into that home, which collapsed, crushing Job’s children. There were no dramatic rescue stories. Every single one of them died. Not long after the funerals of those children, Job contracts a terrible disease that affected every inch of his body, an illness so disfiguring that his own friends could not recognize him. So angry and hurting was Job’s wife that she told him he ought to just go ahead and curse God and die.

Life’s not fair. What is more troubling is that God is not fair.

This becomes a huge topic of conversation between Job and three friends who come to visit him. In fact, most of the book of Job is a record of this debate about whether God is fair. There is a gut-wrenching section of Job where he talks about his pleading with God. “Though I cry, ‘I’ve been wronged!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice.” (Job 19:7 NIV) He goes on to talk about how his family has abandoned him and friends don’t come around anymore. He talks about how his offensive look and offensive odors have repulsed even his wife. He anguishes over little children who mock his appearance when he goes into town. In his words, you hear the anguished cry:

Life’s not fair. God’s not fair.

His friends disagree. God is fair, they contend. He sends blessings and good things to those who do good. He sends calamity on those who do evil. God will not let a righteous man suffer the kinds of things you are suffering. It is obvious that there is evil in you that you have managed to hide from everyone but God. That is why tragedy has come to you, because God is fair, and He makes sure that good people prosper and evil people suffer. Job’s friends understand “fair,” and so they confidently affirm that God is fair.
I’m curious where you would land in this debate of whether God is fair or not, though I don’t want you to answer out loud. There is a very good chance you’ve thought about the question before: “Is God fair?”

Looking at the pages of the Bible, it would be hard to say that God is fair. Pastor and author, Mark Buchanan sees this “unfairness” in the earliest pages of the Bible. Two brothers, Cain and Abel, offer a sacrifice to God. God accepts Abel’s sacrifice but does not accept Cain’s. It certainly doesn’t look fair. Angry at God and envious of his brother, Cain kills his brother. God rebukes Can and exiles him, but God protects him so that no one can harm him. Mark Buchanan asks:

“Why let him off so lightly? He’s a killer--a cold-blooded, premeditated, first-degree murderer. Yet there’s no real justice rendered here, no capital punishment, no eye for an eye, no life for a life. No jail term. Not even bail. Just a perpetual exile. And God steps in to ensure that no vigilante action or frontier justice is ever exacted against Cain. The killer gets to go free, on the loose. He might be your neighbor. Your kid might go to school with his kid. And you can’t do a thing about it, and those who loved Abel can’t do a thing about it.”

Life is not fair. God is not fair.

At the end of the book of Job, God weighs in on this question in His own unique way. He speaks to Job: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?...I will question you and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? God asks Job question after question like these:

"Were you there when I laid the earth’s foundation? Who marked off its dimensions?” (The Bible, Job 38:4-5)
"Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place?” (Job 38:12)
Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, ‘Here we are’?” (Job 38:35)
"Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?” (Job 39:19)
"Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?” (Job 39:27)
Can you pull in the leviathan (crocodile, dinosaur?) with a fishhook? Can you make a pet of him like a bird...? (Job 41:1,5)

These questions are God’s answer. The “answer” is implied in the questions, and God’s answer goes something like this: I am God and you are not. I made everything you have ever seen, and it is under my control. I know more about the world and life than you know. The only reason you even care about “fair” is because I made you that way. You can trust me to do the right thing. That is precisely what you must do.

At the end of God’s questions, Jobs words come slowly and humbly: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know....My ears had heard of
you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2,3,5,6)

Here is what Job discovered. God is just, but He’s not always fair. God is good, and He will always do the right thing. He upholds what is right. He defines what is right. God is a God of justice. The Bible affirms this repeatedly.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you. (Psalm 89:14 NIV)

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! (Isaiah 30:18 NIV)

What God does is right. He will do the right thing. What He does is just, but it will not always look fair. Justice is God doing the right thing whether it looks right or not. What falls to us is to trust that the God Who created our awe-inspiring universe and every creature within it knows what He is doing and will do the right thing.

The book of Job has a surprise ending. After talking to Job, God then turns and speaks to Job’s three friends and says, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” In other words, “Job was right and you were wrong.” What were Job’s friends wrong about? They had a wrong understanding of “fair.”

We sometimes use the words “fair” and “just” interchangeably, but we must exert great care in doing so. I would be careful about using the word “fair” of God simply because we attach our own standard to the word “fair.” Job’s friends had attached a meaning to “fair” that most of us do. When we do what is good and right, good things come our way. That’s fair. When we do bad things, God makes bad things happen to us. That’s fair. Or we turn it around.

Some of you in this room today are going through something very difficult and you’re thinking “God is mad at me. I must be doing the wrong thing because look at all the trouble coming my way. God doesn’t like me.” Because you’re facing trouble, you think God is ticked at you. Others of you are ticked at God. You’ve been praying. You’ve been going to church. You’ve been doing the right thing. You’ve even started giving generously, and still that person won’t talk to you. You still can’t get a job. You’re still not married. You still aren’t liked at school.

It’s not fair, and you are right. It’s not fair. God isn’t always “fair” and He doesn’t promise “fair.” In fact, the Bible warns that those who follow God may very well encounter even more losses in life, even more suffering. That’s what happened to Job, right? He encountered trouble because he was doing right. That’s not fair. But Job learned to trust God’s justice and goodness even when life was unfair. That is what God calls us to do. “Trust me in your losses. Trust my goodness. Trust my timing. Trust me to do the right thing.”
The story of Job is the second-most unfair story in the Bible. The most unfair story is what happened to Jesus. Jesus, God’s Son, comes to our earth to bring the message of God’s hope and forgiveness. He ends up being falsely accused and dragged into a rigged trial, and He ends up being brutalized. It is the single most unfair moment in all of history. And in that moment, Jesus taught us how to trust the justice of God. He is our example of how to trust God when life is unfair. Here is how the Bible puts it:

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrust himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:19-24 NIV)

Facing the most unfair treatment in history, what did Jesus do? He “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.” He knew His Father would do the right thing, even though what was happening to Him was not fair. We should “follow in his steps.” Will you do that?

God is just, but He is not always fair. Are you willing to trust this God? Are you willing to trust that God is right and good even when He appears unfair? Before you answer, let me up the ante. An “unfair” God is your only hope in life. If God was “fair,” you and I would be doomed. The Bible passage I just read records two remarkably “unfair” things. The first is this: The best person who ever walked the planet, the One Who never ever did or said the wrong thing was brutally killed. The second most unfair thing is found in these words: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

As He died, Jesus took the judgment of God for my sins and for yours. That’s not remotely fair. In elementary school, it was not fair that I got punished for another kid’s breaking the rules, and it’s infinitely unfair that Jesus would be allowed to take the penalty for my sins. That’s simply not fair, but God says that it is just and right. God is not fair, and it is our only hope. I urge you to trust the goodness and justice and grace of God, even when life is tragically unfair.

What does it look like to trust this God? The first and best step is to acknowledge that He is God, that you aren’t, and that you desperately need Him. Embrace and receive the forgiveness and pardon that Jesus secured on your behalf as He died. Make the example of Jesus and the instructions of God the blueprint for you will live. Trusting God, however, is not a one-time thing. It is to be a lifestyle. Trusting Him when life is hard and unfair will be especially difficult. We learn something about how to do that from our friend, Job.
There is a song we sometimes sing here at Hope Church, “Blessed Be Your Name,” by Matt Redman. It is a song of praise to God and trust in Him when things are good and when they aren’t. He sings: Blessed be Your name When the sun's shining down on me, When the world's 'all as it should be' (in other words, fair!) Blessed be Your name. Blessed be Your name On the road marked with suffering Though there's pain in the offering, blessed be Your name. Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise, When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say: Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your name, Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your glorious name.

He then transitions to a phrase that can be hard to sing sometimes: “You give and take away, You give and take away, My heart will choose to say Lord, blessed be Your name.” Sometimes, songs we sing at Hope Church have words or phrases right out of the Bible. This is one of those. Do you know who said it? It was Job who said, “God gives and God takes away, but I am still going to praise Him; I am still going to trust Him.” May his affirmation become our own expression of trust in God as we sing the song together this morning.

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