

Introduction

I want to start by telling you the story of Dom. Dom was a poor farmer in rural Cambodia, and every day he battled to provide for his family. He even struggled to put food on the table. One day a visitor came to Dom's village and made him an offer he couldn't refuse: Dom could travel to Thailand and work on a fishing boat, making more money than he ever would in Cambodia. Dom agreed, hoping it would open the door to a better life for him and his family.

When Dom reached Thailand, he was put on a boat with other Cambodian men, and suddenly everything changed. He came to the horrible realization that he had actually been sold into forced labour slavery. He wasn't paid. He couldn't leave. And he was forced to work 19-20 hours a day. The boat travelled thousands of kilometers out to sea, far beyond the reach of help or hope. Dom was trapped in horrendous conditions. He had to work, even when sick. Any mistake would draw a beating. Others were thrown overboard as punishment. Living in constant terror and fear, Dom didn't know if he would make it to the next day, let alone see his family again. This unspeakable torture continued for six long years.

And today, Dom is just one of 40 million people oppressed in modern slavery. Not just on fishing boats... but wood cutting, rock quarries, brick making, rice mills, silk production. And then there's the abhorrent reality of online sexual exploitation of children like Ruby in the Philippines... where children and teenagers are trafficked, imprisoned, and then sexually abused on camera while pedophiles anywhere in the world watch and participate live via the internet.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear stories like these, I find myself experiencing an overwhelming cocktail of emotions. I start to feel this sick knot in my stomach, shocked and appalled and numbed that such injustices could ever happen. And I start to feel a deep desire to do something about it, to act, to intervene. But right alongside that, I also feel a sense of powerlessness, of hopelessness, because the evil is so great, the legal and social structures are so broken, and the whole thing is happening so far away from where I live... and I feel paralyzed to know how I can make any real difference. And as part of this cocktail of emotions, I also find myself feeling guilty. Guilty that I don't care more, that I haven't done more, that I forget about these issues so quickly. Maybe you can relate to some of these feelings too.

This morning as we focus on the topic of modern slavery around the world, it's understandable that we might squirm in our seats and feel uncomfortable. But the goal of today isn't to make us feel guilty or full of despair. In fact, quite the opposite! The goal of Freedom Sunday, and the goal of IJM, is to stir *hope*. Hope for our world! Hope for justice! Hope for peace! Hope for the 40 million people who are enslaved right now, and hope for people like you and me who love them and want to know how we can help.

But where does this hope come from? Where are we going to find the resources to wage this war against injustice and oppression? You might think the answer I'm going to present today is: IJM (International Justice Mission). After all, they're the largest international anti-slavery organization in the world. They're rescuing thousands of oppressed people, strengthening local governments and justice systems, and seeing thousands of criminals brought to justice. But actually, I don't want you to place your hope in IJM.

This morning, we want to lift our eyes to an even greater hope. Rather than placing our hope in IJM, we want to find our hope in the same thing that IJM looks to for hope. Not an earthly hope, not a hope based on some earthly organization, or on the inherent goodness of humans. Not the hope that we really can have the world of our dreams if we just rally together and love each other a bit more, setting aside our prejudice and choosing kindness.

I think it's fair to say that that's where most of our society is looking for hope and justice and change. But after thousands of years of failed attempts, of evil reappearing in endless new forms, of oppression and abuse shape-shifting and returning again and again, of prejudice that continues in spite of more education, of tribal divisions amongst the very people who are meant to be fighting for the same cause... no wonder some of us tend towards despair. No wonder some of us feel skeptical.

Where *should* we place our hope? This morning we want to open the Bible and see what God has to say about justice. And as we do, I think we'll find that he provides us with a hope that is incomparably better than anything this world has to offer.

So if you haven't already, please open a Bible to Jeremiah 22. Jeremiah is a big book right in the middle of the OT, in the middle of your Bible. I actually struggled to choose a text to preach from this week, because there are *so many* passages in the Bible which speak about justice. But I hope this passage in Jeremiah will give us a good introduction to what the Bible says about justice.

As we skim through Jeremiah 22 and 23, we're going to see three things. First, the God of justice. Second, a definition of what justice is. And then third, where our hope for justice comes from.

The God of Justice

Here's what you need to know as we jump into the book of Jeremiah. It's a book about a prophet called Jeremiah. He was preaching to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, warning them that they would be defeated and taken into exile by the Babylonians unless they turned back to God. It's a heavy book! In fact, for the first 20 chapters, which spans about 40 years of Jeremiah's ministry, God has been repeatedly warning Israel: 'Come back to me or else!' And for 40 years, Israel has been refusing to listen.

Why is God angry with them? Read from v2 with me. The prophet Jeremiah goes to the king's palace and he says this: *"Hear the word of the Lord to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. ³ This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. ⁴ For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. ⁵ But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin."*

Do you see what God is concerned about? Verse 3, he wants the king to do what is 'just and right.' To rescue the oppressed, to care for the foreigner, the fatherless, the widow and the innocent.

But when we scroll down the chapter, we learn that king after king has been doing just the opposite. V13 – *'Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.'* V17 – *'Your*

eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.'

It actually reminds me of Dom's story that we started with, trapped on a fishing boat in Thailand. These wicked kings are making people work for nothing. They're taking advantage of the poor, the vulnerable, the helpless, because they're more powerful and they only care about getting rich.

Do you know what's so surprising and shocking about this passage? It's not the fact that evil people abuse the vulnerable for selfish gain. We've seen this millions of times through human history, and it still happens today. We've heard about Harvey Weinstein. We've heard the findings of the Royal Commission. We've heard about modern day slavery. The perversion of someone powerful preying on the weak doesn't surprise us... we know the kind of darkness that lurks in the human heart. God knows it too. A few chapters earlier in Jeremiah 17:9, God says, 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.'

That's not what surprises us in this passage. The remarkable, shocking thing here is that *God cares!* God cares. In a world where the powerful are corrupt and the weak are taken advantage of, we hear the voice of the most powerful being in existence, and he says, 'I care for the oppressed, the refugee, the forgotten slave, the abandoned orphan, the destitute single-mum.' He sees everything. He takes notes. And then he comes down to these despicable kings with burning justice and he says, 'Not on my watch! I'm going to hold you accountable, and you will pay!'

You say, 'Well of course God should care. I mean, people have dignity. Everyone deserves fair and equal treatment.' But where did you get those beliefs and convictions from? Where did you get your moral compass about equal rights? We might think it's just blatantly obvious, but Sri Lankan scholar Vinoth Ramachandra explains how absolutely revolutionary this idea would have been in Israel's time. In most ancient cultures, the gods were on the side of the powerful, the kings, the leaders. They were the important ones. Being powerful was a sign that the gods favored you... being poor was proof that you were forgotten and unimportant.

And then the God of the Bible comes along and turns this completely on its head. He introduces himself in Ps 68 with these staggering words: I am 'a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.' He isn't in bed with power. In fact, he's constantly calling the powerful to account, like we see here in Jeremiah 22. He aligns himself with the orphan, the widow, the oppressed, the outcast.

So actually, the concept of equal rights for all is a thoroughly *Christian* belief that our society has inherited from Christianity. History shows us that in the Roman empire, Christians were the ones rescuing unwanted babies who had been left to die outside. Christians have built more hospitals and orphanages than any other movement in history. Christians were the ones who pushed for equal rights, for education and literacy, for the invention of universities, and for the abolition of slavery.

So why do we care about social justice and about ending slavery? Why does IJM exist? Why are we hosting Freedom Sunday today? Why do we fight for justice? *Because God cares!* Because God made every person in his image with value and dignity. He made the young boy on the fishing boat in Thailand, and the young girl in front of the camera in a slimy Filipino brothel. Right now, God sees and God cares and God is acting. Justice is *his* mission, *his* priority, *his* passion.

That brings us to our second point. We've looked at the God of justice, but now we need to think about the definition of justice. What is justice? If it's not just a human invention, but something that comes from God, then we need to ask, *what is justice according to God?*

The Definition of Justice

Look again at verse 3. God says, 'Do what is just and right.' In Hebrew, the word here for 'just' is *mishpat*, and the word for 'right' is *tzedakah*. And throughout the Bible, these two words together capture what justice is all about.

The first word is *mishpat*, which refers to giving people the justice that they deserve. It means to rectify/fix an unjust situation. This includes a law court punishing someone for wrong, but it also includes standing up for those who are oppressed, defending the types of people God mentions in verse 3... the oppressed, the foreigner, the innocent, the orphan, the widow.

In fact, according to God, it is actually a sin if you *don't* actively defend and help and speak up for the needy. Job says in chapter 31 that it would be a sin if he had failed to care for the poor and the widows and the needy. We tend to think that charity is optional, right? We help if we want to, but it's our choice. But Tim Keller writes, 'Any neglect shown to the needs of these people is not merely a lack of mercy or charity, but a violation of justice, of *mishpat*.'

And then there's the other word for justice: *tzedakah*. This is really referring to righteousness, to living rightly. If everyone did *tzedakah*, there'd actually be no need for *mishpat*. We wouldn't need IJM if everyone did *tzedakah*. What does it mean to do *tzedakah*, to live rightly? Well, Jesus summed it up when he said, love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself.

That shows us how big and comprehensive justice really is, doesn't it? Justice isn't just about catching criminals and rescuing slaves (*mishpat*). In God's eyes, justice is far bigger than this. Justice is about the world we all long for, a world where all of us are loving all the time. A perfect world, without evil, without prejudice.

And so thinking about *mishpat* and *tzedakah* actually helps us to understand why there's so much injustice in the world. It helps us get to the heart of the problem. Look at what it says in Jeremiah 22:8. People walk past the ruins of Jerusalem after God poured out his judgment, and they say, 'Why has the Lord done such a thing to this great city?' And then the answer comes in verse 9: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and have worshiped and served other gods.'

What's the heart of the problem? What's the real reason these kings were mistreating the vulnerable? Because they didn't love God. They didn't really know God. They didn't put him first. The key to loving others is to first love God. That's the ultimate reason our world is full of so much hate and hurt and prejudice. It's because by nature, every one of us have tossed the God of justice and righteousness out of lives, we've put ourselves on the throne, and we've become selfish and proud.

So God says in verse 3, 'Do what is just and right.' In other words, our world desperately needs both *mishpat* and *tzedakah*. We fight for justice, we stand up for the oppressed, we partner with IJM, we care for the vulnerable in our communities - that's *mishpat* and God cares about it deeply! But we also remember that we can't stop there, because on its own, none of these things will deal with the selfishness and hatred and prejudice of our hearts. What our world most needs is *tzedakah*, righteousness, primary justice, the just life of loving others that flows out of a heart that loves God.

But what hope do we have of this? What hope is there that the fight might one day be over, that *mishpat* would no longer be needed because everyone is righteous? Will there ever be an end to the band-aids and patches which never seem to fix the problem? What can heal our world of the hatred and selfishness that pumps through its veins?

Jeremiah 22 ends on a bleak note. Our hope in the inherent goodness of humanity lies in tatters. Not even God's chosen people Israel were able to create a society of justice and righteousness. So many second chances, so many kings, and yet again and again they strayed from God and took advantage of the vulnerable.

And then, incredibly, as we turn the page to chapter 23, we discover that the God of justice is not finished. This is our third and final point.

Our Hope for Justice

Read what God says in 23:3. *'I myself.'* I myself! This is God, rolling up his sleeves and taking action to do what we could not. *'I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.'* What a beautiful picture, a vision of peace and hope! God himself, gathering his sheep, bringing them back to their pasture and caring for them.

How will he do this? Let's read on in verse 5. This is where it gets exciting! *The days are coming,* declares the Lord, *"when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."*⁶ *In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.*

After so many wicked kings, after being let down again and again by the people who were meant to be caring leaders... God announces the arrival of another king. The dream king! Look what it says about this king, v5: *'He will reign wisely and do what is just (mishpat) and right (tzedakah) in the land!'* Who is he? In verse 6 we're told his name: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour.

Jesus, God himself, come to earth as a man, a new king bringing with him a new kingdom! A king who uses his power to bring about justice and righteousness. The world watches on in awe as this glorious King uses all his power, not to take what he wants and abuse the weak, but to defeat evil, to protect the vulnerable, to serve sacrificially. On the cross, we see the perfect innocent Son of God receiving *injustice*, being mistreated, being cut off from God - so that sinners like you and me could be forgiven, and healed, and filled with the Holy Spirit, and welcomed into a kingdom of righteousness.

The story isn't over yet. We still see brokenness and injustice. There are still many who need rescuing so that they can hear the good news! But Jesus is already King, he has already conquered evil and risen from the grave, he is already reigning, and one day when he returns his kingdom of justice and righteousness will come in full!

This is what spurs us on. This is what gives us hope. Is Jesus your hope for the world? We don't place our confidence in ourselves, or our money, or IJM, or any other social justice movement. We place our hope in Jesus.

And as we turn to King Jesus and put our trust in him, his mission becomes our mission. His priorities become our priorities. That's why I want to encourage you to partner with IJM - because they're fighting for justice in the name of Jesus! That's why we dare to stand and fight, even when the task seems huge and the statistics seem incomprehensible. Jesus is the king who leads the battle charge. We simply follow him as faithful soldiers. And while the battle rages on, we have the privilege of seeing glimpses of the victory that is coming soon.

One day the fishing vessel Dom was on was seized by Indonesian authorities. Dom and the other men from Cambodia were allowed to return home. To his horror, when Dom finally arrived home, he found that his own son had been deceived and trafficked by the same people who had enslaved him. In time, Cambodian police introduced Dom to IJM, who had been working to stop labour trafficking in the region. As IJM interviewed Dom and others, we discovered a network of traffickers which had been operating for nearly a decade. Authorities eventually arrested 3 key players. With IJM's support, Dom testified in court, and the three traffickers were convicted. And thankfully, his son was also rescued and returned home.

Dom later confided how proud he was to stand up for his rights. He felt it was the first time in his life he had been able to do this. He can now enjoy seeing his children grow up in safety. IJM continues to build bridges between law enforcement entities in the region, and are dismantling trafficking networks across Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar.

This is just a little taste of what Jesus is doing through his people throughout the world, as our hearts transformed by the gospel to love God and love others. And the freedom and justice that Dom is enjoying is a little foretaste of the healing and restoration that Jesus promises to bring to the whole world one day.