

Food for Thought Article: "Justice and Judgement."



Come with me to this scenario. It is 4.30 early in the morning on the 9th March 2026 in Manchester, England. A 50- year- old man is driving to work. It will be his last journey. Two young men are driving in another car whilst inhaling nitrous oxide (laughing gas) from a balloon. They are 'high' and the driver reaches a speed of 139mph in a 30mph zone. Eventually they crash into the car of the man going to work. He dies at the scene. They both escape uninjured.

At their trial, the 20- year-old driver of the speeding car is given a prison sentence of 11 years and 8 months for causing death by dangerous driving and other offences, and the 23- year-old passenger is given a sentence of 12 years and 9 months for aiding and abetting the offence.

Did the man who died receive justice? Did the two who caused his death receive justice?

Come with me to this scenario. Over a period from late 2024 to early 2025 in Hampshire, England, 3 teenage boys, aged 14 and 13 at the time, raped two teenage girls who were 15 and 14. Between them, the boys were guilty of 10 charges of rape. Videos of some attacks were shared on social media.

Rather than give them custodial sentences, the Judge at their trial gave them 'Youth Rehabilitation Orders' (YRO's) during which they would be subject to intensive supervision and surveillance. Because of their young age, the Judge said he didn't want to 'criminalise' them, he thought that 'peer pressure' had contributed to their actions and that they had 'done very well today' in Southampton Crown Court.

Did the girls who had been raped get justice? Many people thought not. There was a general outcry and the Attorney General referred the case to the Court of Appeal believing the sentence was too lenient. The Judge at the Court of Appeal agreed that the initial sentence had been too lenient and imposed a four-year custodial sentence on the offenders.

Come with me to this scenario. It is the 3rd December 2025. An 18-year-old student is walking home alone after a night out. He is attacked by a 23-year-old man with a knife and stabbed four times. The attacker (wrongfully) claims he has been racially abused by the man he has stabbed. When the police arrive, they believe the attackers story, and drag the 18-year-old victim across some gravel. He tells the police he has been stabbed and nine times says he can't breathe.

The police don't believe him, handcuff him, arrest him and read him his rights. He bleeds to death where he lies.

Did this 18-year-old receive justice? Did the murderer receive justice? He was given a life sentence and will spend a minimum of 21 years behind bars.

Inbuilt within us all, I believe, is the desire for justice. Even young children will protest and exclaim, 'That's not fair!', 'It's not fair'! Indeed all of us can be very quick to sniff out injustice and it's a natural instinct to focus on the need for wrongs to be righted, losses to be repaid, and offenders to be caught, convicted and punished.

What though is justice and is it possible in this life? And what about the future 'Day of Judgement' and the theme of rewards and punishments which goes all the way through the Bible and seems to be an integral part of God's justice? How do we understand laws and justice under the Old and the New Covenants and is there a difference? Moreover, what is our emotional response to injustice? At base, how are we as Christians justified (declared to be right) in God's sight and what are the benefits for those of us who believe? These are the issues and questions that we will seek to explore in this article.

An often-quoted verse with regard to justice occurs in Genesis chapter 18 where Abraham is pleading and interceding on behalf of Sin City i.e. the wicked city of Sodom. Underlying his dialogue with God, Abraham is trying to find out whether or not God is actually a just/fair God and whether he differentiates between the righteous and the wicked? It is a good question that we may struggle with.

'How many righteous people', Abraham asks, 'would have to live in Sodom for God not to destroy it ~ 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10?' It is in this context that Abraham asks, and seems to give an affirmative answer, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (verse 25) However, this is reassuring and instructive only if we remember that the right thing for God to do on this occasion was to destroy both cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19:25&29). Destruction, throughout the Bible, is often part of God's justice.

Justice and Judgement

Justice and judgement go together, for without judgement there can be no justice. So, when we become Christians, we are coming to the 'Judge who is God of all' (Heb. 12:23), and to Jesus who will 'judge the world with justice' (Acts 17:31). It is also a key part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to 'convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement.' (Jn. 16:8)

In Old Testament times, God set up an elaborate judicial system for his people. He said, 'Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.' (Deut. 16:18-20).

Unfortunately, the people were reluctant to accept the decisions of the Judges and the situation was reached where 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes.' Thus the book of Judges ends with anarchy and lawlessness. (Judges 21:25).

Throughout the world today, it seems that we are seeing increased lawlessness and this escalation, I believe, will continue until Christ returns.

By the time we get to Amos (800-750 BC), the judicial system was almost entirely corrupt. Justice and judgement had been turned into a cause for bitterness and recrimination (Amos 5:7), and those trying to operate the court system and tell the truth received the equivalent of today's online abuse/hate mail/ and murder threats (5:10). Some of the judges themselves were corrupt, taking bribes and denying justice for the poor in the courts. (5:12)

God's people were also part of the problem; so much so that God could no longer listen to the worship songs of his people 'he hated their singing' and neither was he willing to receive their offerings. What he wanted to see was 'Justice/judgement rolling on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.' (5:21-24)

Laws and Justice under the Old Covenant.

Under the Old Covenant, God's laws comprised the 10 commandments plus the 603 other laws mentioned in the first five books of the Bible, making 613 laws in total. But why were the laws given?

They were given to reveal something of God's character e.g. his Holiness, his Righteousness, his Jealousy, his Faithfulness, his Love and Mercy etc.

They were given to restrain sin. Laws can never make people good but they can and do act as a restraining influence on evil. They were given to kindle a fear of the Lord i.e. to help us develop a healthy sense of awe and respect for Him. See Ex. 20:20.

They were given to teach respect. Respect for God's uniqueness, respect for His name, respect for His day, respect for your parents, respect for other people's lives, their marriages, their property and their reputation.

They were given to bring order, health and wellbeing to society. If, as a nation, we followed God's laws, we wouldn't need to spend so much on our health service, our criminal justice system, our defence budget etc.

They were given to bring us to faith in Christ. The law is the custodian, the mentor, the 'paidagogos' (childminder/guardian), the supervisor, the jailor, to lead us to Christ.

"Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian." (Galatians 3:23-25)

What were the punishments under the Old Covenant for breaking the Law?

1. Restitution and redemption through the payment of a fine. (See examples in Ex. chapters 21&22)
2. Exact physical retribution – Eye for eye etc. Ex. 21:24&25
3. Excommunication to a safe place (haven) if you killed someone accidentally - Ex. 21:13
4. Capital punishment, i.e. the death penalty for kidnapping (to deprive another person of their God-given freedom to choose is a serious offence in God's book), the death penalty for adultery (marriage and family life are the building blocks of any society and adultery, which undermines this, is also a serious offence), cursing your parents, deliberate murder, false worship (Deut. 17:2-7) etc.

What was Jesus' attitude to the Law and to Lawbreakers?

He upheld the laws of God himself; his life was the perfect example of obedience to God's laws. He didn't just believe them, he lived them, all of them, all of the

time – the only person ever to do so. What he **didn't uphold** were human traditions masquerading as the laws of God!

He said to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, 'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions' and, 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!' (Mk. 7:8&9)

Jesus was not only a great Teacher but also a great Lawyer!

Indeed, he raised the bar when it came to observing the laws of God. He said breaking the 6th commandment was not just about actually killing someone physically, but also included being so angry with a person that you wished they were dead. It also included killing a person with words. Or take the 7th commandment: 'You shall not commit adultery.' This is not only about having actual sexual intercourse outside of your marriage but also includes looking, thinking, imagining having sex with a person who is not your wife/husband.

Nevertheless, Jesus was also gracious towards those who were lawbreakers. He came to seek and to save lawbreakers, not to condemn them. (See Jn. 8:3-11)

He also summarised the law as being about love for God, love for yourself and love for your neighbour.

How should Justice operate? What are the essential components of Justice?

It seems to me that there are 6 things that we can look for if justice is to be served: -

1. Justice should **deter** others from committing that particular sin/crime.
2. Justice should **protect** members of the public and also protect criminals in custody from harming each other and themselves.
3. Justice should **punish** the offender.
4. Justice should seek to **rehabilitate** the offender.
5. Justice should ensure that the person who is convicted is **actually guilty** of the crime; that there is no miscarriage of justice.
6. Justice should seek to **restore** relationships - restorative justice.

The punishments under the Old Covenant seem severe to us but they were designed to deter others. Indeed, the idea that offenders should be punished is difficult for many people to accept, even for Christians. The emphasis today is very much on rehabilitation.

Both corporal (Deut. 25:1-3) and capital punishment were an integral part of justice in the Old Testament and the concept of rewards and punishments continues under the New Covenant.

Indeed the New Testament is clear that Judges, Magistrates, the Crown Prosecution Service, Prison and Police Officers and Probation Services etc. are human authorities ordained and sent by God to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

‘Whoever rebels against these authorities is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves.’ (Rms. 13:2)

‘They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.’ (Rms. 13:4b&5)

Justice, Judgement and Separation/Division

People who do not like the thought of separation/division find the Biblical concept of judgement very difficult. In these days of inclusivity, most of us prefer to think in terms of total togetherness, the brotherhood of man, the sisterhood of women, the unity of humanity, the universality of salvation etc.

However, in the Bible, to judge (‘krino’) means to separate, to select, to discriminate between. So, God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked, those who fear the Lord and those who do not, those who serve God and those who do not, those who believe in Jesus and those who do not.

“And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.” (Malachi 3:18)

And this is a theme which Jesus repeatedly mentions in his teaching. In his parables he distinguishes between those who had oil in their lamps and those who did not; between those who used their talents and those who did not; between those who fed, clothed, visited and cared for ‘these brothers of mine’ and those who did not.

And at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, he distinguishes between those who travelled on the broad road and those on the narrow road; between those who bore good fruit and those who did not; between those who built on the rock and those who built on the sand.

Justice, Judgement and Choice

The Bible is also clear that we are responsible for the choices we make and that those choices have consequences. The choices are between life and death, blessing or cursing, serving and worshipping the living God, or idol worship.

I was reminded of the subtle way in which idolatry can creep into our everyday lives recently when I was watching, on T.V., one of our top football teams. Emblazoned around the stadium were these words, “And on the sixth day, God created Manchester City.”

Deuteronomy chapter 28 lists the blessings of obedience and the curses for disobedience and in Deut. 30:19-20a Moses says to the people, “This day I call the heavens and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. **Now choose life**, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him.”

The Day of the Lord/ The Day of Judgement

The Day of the Lord/Judgement is mentioned throughout the Bible. There needs to be a Day of Judgment because of all the imperfections and corruption in our human judicial systems down through the ages, and because this life, taken by itself, is not always fair - the righteous often suffer whilst the wicked prosper.

We have already noticed Abraham’s assurance and affirmation in Genesis 18:25, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” and in Revelation 19:1&2 we read, “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgements”.

Also, in Revelation 19:11, John says, “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he [Jesus] judges and makes war.”

And if we consider the death of Jesus on the Cross, we must conclude that his sentence and death were, from a human perspective, the biggest and most grotesque miscarriage of justice in human history. One day everyone will see the reversal of that judgement and God and Jesus will finally be vindicated.

Before then, God gives us warning signs. On 4th December 2021, Thomas Massie, a Republican Congressman in Kentucky, USA, tweeted a picture of himself and six other family members standing in front of a Christmas tree all brandishing

powerful rifles. Underneath were the words, “Merry Christmas - Santa, please bring Ammo.”

About a week later, Kentucky was struck by the most powerful tornado in its history; dozens were killed, many houses destroyed and debris was sucked 30,000 feet into the air.

The ‘Day of the Lord’ is the central theme of the prophet Zephaniah. It is described as ‘The great day of the Lord’; ‘the day of the Lord’s wrath’; a ‘day of distress and anguish’; a ‘day of trouble and ruin’; a ‘day of darkness and gloom’; a ‘day of clouds and blackness’; a ‘day of trumpet and battle cry’. This is judgement on a national and international scale as well as personal.

Individually, each of us must also appear before the judgement seat of Christ. The **bema** was common in many Greco-Roman cities and was a raised platform from which governors issued decrees or pronounced judgements. There was one in Corinth which Paul used as an illustration: -

“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:10)

Justice, Judgement, Rewards and Punishment

Justice is defined as ‘The just requital of deserts’, a definition which the Bible upholds and gives rise to the proclamation and presentation of rewards and punishments.

Rewards.

“See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.” (Is. 40:10)

“The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, ‘See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’” (Is. 62:11)

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.” (Rev. 22:12)

Although we may be rewarded in this life, most rewards will be distributed in the next life. One thing that can discount us from receiving rewards in the next life is religious ostentation which results in human affirmation in this life.

“Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 6:1)

The Christians who will receive the greatest reward are those who have been persecuted, insulted and had all sorts of false allegations made against them. Their reward will be ‘great’ in heaven. (See Mt. 5:11&12)

Belief in rewards is one of the fundamental Christian doctrines. ‘Anyone who comes to him [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’ (Heb. 11:6b)

Sometimes our reward is spoken of as an ‘inheritance’. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (Mt. 25:34)

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.” (Col. 3:23&24)

Punishments.

At the beginning of this article we saw how the right thing for God to do was to destroy both cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. chapters 18&19). It would be easy to dismiss that ‘Old Testament event’ and not learn anything from it. However, the New Testament doesn’t allow us to do that!

Jesus said it would be worse for the residents of Capernaum, who had seen the miracles he had performed but hadn’t repented, than it would be for the inhabitants of Sodom on the day of judgement. (See Mt. 11:23&24)

Peter wrote that what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah made them ‘**an example**’ of what is going to happen to the ungodly’. (See 2 Peter 2:6) And Jude, Jesus’ brother, likewise wrote, “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. **They serve as an example** of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” (Jude 7)

For Paul, false apostles, false teachers, deceitful workers were servants of Satan and ‘their end will be what their actions deserve’. (See 2 Cor. 11:13-15) Convinced that God is just and his judgements are right, Paul is also sure that ‘He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified...’ (2 Thess. 1:8-10)

And Peter, like Paul, saw human authorities as ‘sent by [God] to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.’ (1 Peter 2:14). He was also sure that the Lord ‘knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgement.’ (2 Peter 2:9)

As for Jesus, he also believed in a distinct separation between those deserving eternal punishment and those deserving eternal life. “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Mt. 25:46)

Justice, Judgement and Justification

To be justified in God’s sight means that we are made and declared to be right by him. How does this happen?

1. By God’s grace through our faith (although our faith is also a gift from God - Eph. 2:8)
2. Through Christ’s atoning sacrifice – the shedding of his blood – which we also receive by faith (Rms. 3:22-26). In Isaiah chapter 53 we read (concerning Jesus), ‘Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed’ (verses 4&5). And in verse 11, still referring to Jesus, we read, ‘After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will **justify** many, and he will bear their iniquities.’

‘He [Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our **justification**.’ (Rms. 4:25)

And what are the benefits for us who believe?

1. Peace with God – ‘Since we have been **justified** through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ (Rms. 5:1)
2. No fear of condemnation, either from God or others. ‘Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’....‘It is God who **justifies**. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. (Rms. 8:1, 33&34)
3. The assurance of Jesus’ ongoing intercession for us at the right hand of God (Rms. 8:34)

4. No separation from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rms. 8:38&39)
5. The gift of the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness (Rms. 8:26&27)
6. Life for our mortal bodies (Rms. 8:10&11).

Our Emotional Response to Injustice

As I close this article, I would like to ask you, “How did you respond to those three scenarios I shared at the beginning of this article? (Maybe read them again to refresh your memory). I hope they generated some anger, for anger is often the natural and morally appropriate response to injustice and wrongdoing. If we feel no anger in the face of unjust suffering, it may be because we are becoming indifferent to it. There are times when anger is not only understandable but necessary.

Jesus’ anger was directed towards hypocrisy, the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, and anything that was an obstacle to people experiencing God’s love, forgiveness and healing.

Paul gives us permission to be angry. Indeed, he commands it! In Ephesians 4:26a he writes, ‘Be angry (‘orgizesthe’ = a present imperative) and do not sin.’ Anger which challenges injustice and contributes towards justice, is acceptable. Anger which spills over into vengeance, is not. Righteous anger is our responsibility; vengeance belongs to God. ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord’ (Deut. 32:35; Rms. 12:19; Heb. 10:30).

One final scenario for you to consider.

One summer’s evening in 2011, in Nottingham, England, James Hodgkinson had been out with his father, brother and three friends. James was 28 years old and a Trainee Paramedic. He and a stranger, Jacob Dunne, who was 19, got into a fight and Jacob threw a single punch that led to James’ death nine days later from a bleed on the brain.

Jacob got a 30-month custodial sentence for manslaughter and was released after 14 months. Sentencing for manslaughter is complex. Under our laws there are 5 different types of manslaughter and once aggravating and mitigating factors are taken into account, plus age, plea, and the degree of culpability, custodial sentences of anything between 2 years and life imprisonment are possible.

Whilst Jacob was in prison, James' parents said they would like to meet him and eventually Jacob agreed. Gradually they got to know Jacob and even to like him. He wasn't the 'monster' they had imagined him to be.

These meetings were arranged by, and under the supervision of, an organisation called 'Restorative Justice' (www.restorativejustice.org.uk)

Restorative justice brings those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm into communication enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.

James' mother, Joan Scourfield, eventually gave Jacob a reference which helped him to go to university where he got a first-class degree in criminology. He is now married with a family and was recently appointed to advise the government on youth justice across England and Wales.

His story is told in his book 'Right from Wrong' and has even been turned into a powerful play called 'Punch' which has received rave reviews.

Although Jacob's story, so far, is not an overtly Christian one, how important it is to remember that justice as restoration is the beating heart of the Christian gospel. It brings into play **confession** (acknowledging the harm/wrong that has been done), **repentance** (acknowledging that a change of thinking and behaviour is required), **forgiveness** (finding the freedom to let go of bitterness, revenge and resentment), and **reconciliation** (acknowledging that practical steps are necessary, and must be willingly accepted on both/all sides, in order to bring offenders, victims, and God, together).

While no earthly justice system is perfect, we can at least be encouraged wherever we see these four Biblical principles of justice and restoration underpinning systems of law and order in our societies.

George Irving – Sept. 2026

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