

# The Justice Calling

WHERE PASSION MEETS PERSEVERANCE

Bethany Hanke Hoang and  
Kristen Deede Johnson

Foreword by Mark Labberton



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hoang, Bethany H., 1979–

The justice calling : where passion meets perseverance / Bethany Hanke Hoang and  
Kristen Deede Johnson.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-58743-363-4 (cloth)

1. Christianity and justice. 2. Social justice—Religious aspects—Christianity.  
3. Human trafficking—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Rescue work—Religious aspects—  
Christianity. 5. International Justice Mission. I. Title

BR115.J8H635 2016

261.8—dc23

2015030262

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The proprietor, International Justice Mission, is represented by Creative Trust, Inc., Literary Division, 5141 Virginia Way, Suite 320, Brentwood, TN 37027, www.creativetrust.com.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Anthony:  
who walked with me into this work and  
loved me into perseverance  
—Bethany

For Tryg:  
whose love draws me further  
into the grace of God in Christ  
—Kristen

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# Foreword

MARK LABBERTON

The God who is love calls the people of God to love. That same God who is just calls the same people to do justice. To extract or to separate love and justice from the character of God would be impossible, just as it should mean these qualities in action are inextricable from God's people. The body of Christ is meant to be the enactment of God's life in the world. Jesus says the evidence will be measured by whether we actually live our calling. It's not whether our lips say Amen, but whether our lives do.

This is the overarching argument of *The Justice Calling*. The central gift of this book is that its authors themselves say Amen to God's justice calling with their words and with their lives. Now, let it be said that Bethany Hoang and Kristen Johnson would be the first to admit they have a long way to go to live this calling as faithfully as they wish; yet, I want to witness to what I know about them. They obviously and deeply affirm the call to do justice even as they give themselves to live the calling they present to us here. They do so as fellow travelers who journey with God, and us all, in an unjust world of suffering and pain. Their privileged lives have been recast, reordered, and filled by God's love and by the world's need. The love and justice of God makes a claim on them, and they have responded with their hearts and minds, their abilities and time. What I have found in this book is that Bethany and Kristen's humble empathy, alongside their faithful biblical and practical teaching, strengthens my longing to live God's justice calling. I believe it will do so for you too.

Lives centered in the love and justice of God will make room for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the slave. That changes everything, which is just what Jesus said we should anticipate. Individual and social cries for justice go out for transformation of people and of systems; justice in the real world means both, not either/or. “Justice is what love looks like in public,” is the way Cornel West captures it. The body of Christ can and should move to enact the kind of incarnational justice that seeks, rescues, and restores individuals impaired by injustice. But likewise, God’s people need to engage the abusive assumptions, habits, laws, and societal systems that leave billions without justice and without hope every day—sometimes for generations.

These personal and systemic crises exist in the United States and in nations all around the world. This book illustrates its message primarily against the backdrop of global violence and oppression where the scale of injustice is the most overwhelmingly extensive. The particularity of injustice against the vulnerable, placed in the context of massive global injustice, is mind-boggling. How can a mature follower of Jesus be less than engaged and responsive, not paralyzed, by these enormous, life-destroying realities for those who also bear the image of God?

Alongside these international illustrations, readers could add compelling stories of urgent personal and systemic injustice in the United States as well. Our nation contains so many plain, persistent, multigenerational stories of lives undermined—and even now being damaged—through economic, racial, educational, and sexual injustice. The stories we might add include the names of priceless individuals, even whole communities, tribes, and regions in our nation. It is always about the decisions and actions of individuals, but it is also about laws, institutions, and social practices as well.

The justice calling is at hand wherever we are, right where we are. May this book give powerful voice to a distinctive call of those who follow Jesus Christ. May we too be among those who say Amen with our tongues and with our lives.

# Acknowledgments

We are so grateful to God for allowing our lives to intersect, making it possible for us to write this book together. It all began with a book proposal swap—realizing that we’d both been working on books that stemmed from a mutual concern about justice, we showed each other our respective proposals and realized they shared an uncanny, perhaps even Spirit-led synergy in what we were seeking to do. There was enough crossover between our ideas and yet enough distinction between our voices and contexts that we believed we could write a stronger book if we joined forces. We met for coffee in Michigan one afternoon in February 2011, hashed out our ideas, and then began. And began again . . . and again.

In the course of writing this book children were born and raised in our families, jobs and intense travel schedules were juggled, and—between the two of us—we moved more than half a dozen times. This book was a far longer journey than we anticipated, and its very existence is testimony to the Spirit of God working in our midst across the miles.

Throughout this project we’ve experienced God working personally in each of our lives, teaching us the very things about which we have been writing. As we wrote, God chiseled away at us, forming our understanding of who God is, who God is calling us to be as we follow Jesus, and what it takes to persevere. We are grateful—so utterly-beyond-words grateful—to God for his gracious love, presence, and power with us in this work.

We thank our editor at Baker, Bob Hosack, who was gracious to creatively reimagine with us what this book could be as we considered writing it together. We are grateful to Lisa Cockrel, Brian Bolger, and their editorial

team for going deep into the weeds with us as we shaped and reshaped the manuscript. To International Justice Mission (IJM), we are grateful to have been given the opportunity to write together. And words cannot convey our depth of gratitude to IJM's Nikki Toyama-Szeto, who invested countless hours helping this book come to life.

### **From Kristen**

In writing this book, I found myself reflecting with deep gratitude upon friends in Christ from my college days who first offered me a glimpse that God's heart for this world was bigger than I understood, even though talk of justice was not yet widely in the air in our Christian circles. I thank Christen Kay Schaefer Wiggins, whose faith has driven her to be passionate about urban housing, both then and now; Christy Borgman Yates, who has consistently cared about racial reconciliation and economic inequality; and that remarkable group of students who allowed first their friendships and then their callings to be deeply shaped by their commitment to live and actively love their neighbors together in urban Richmond for the long haul. All of these friends have persevered against the odds in their passionate love for God's justice; I am grateful for their witness and their deep roots.

Many of the ideas for this book were forged in the communities of Hope College and Third Reformed Church and came to life in the communities of Western Theological Seminary and Pillar Church. I thank God for prayerful and supportive colleagues, theologically inquisitive students, and grace-filled communities of faith that helped bring this book into being. I think especially of the faithful preaching of Rev. Jon Brown, which helped to shape the book's contents as it was being written; the fellowship of our dinner group through the years; the prayers and laughter of our Pillar women's Bible study; the "world's best prayer group"; the sweet summer fellowship of Fireside Sip; and the loving support of family and friends near and far such as Arlene and Dave Johnson, Jess and Erik Deede, Jill and Alex Pfeiffer, Susanna Leche, Deb Van Duinen, Beth Anderson, Amy Hagood, Jill Tanis, Kate Bolt, Abby Vanderbilt, Caron Gentry, Stephanie Mar Brettman, Gisela Kreglinger, J. C. Luckey Sadler, and Suzzette Rodriguez Hurley DeMers.

At pivotal points, a number of conversations helped to shape this book's contents. I think especially of conversations with Keith Starckenburg, Mark Husbands, Jeff Tyler, Charlotte Witvliet, John Witvliet, Jamie Smith, Todd Cioffi, Andy McCoy, Emily Gum, Chuck Mathewes, Bob Dodaro, Clay Cooke, Sean



Larsen, David Phillips, Chris Rice, Laura Goetsch, Tom Wright, Ellen Davis, Oliver O'Donovan, Kevin Slusher, John Brogan, Tom Boogart, Chris Dorsey, Chris Dorn, George Hunsberger, Ron Rienstra, David Stubbs, David Komline, Ben Conner, and Travis West. I am continuously grateful for the ways in which the thought of James Davison Hunter shapes and clarifies my own thinking.

I am grateful to my friends Todd Billings and Jason Byassee, who gave of their limited time to read the manuscript in an early stage, providing invaluable comments. Tee Gatewood generously read it at both early and middle stages and offered theological insights that sharpened the book tremendously. Han-luen Kantzer Komline, Dan Claus, Grace Claus, and Emilie Wierda offered exceptionally helpful feedback on the final draft.

My parents, Elka and Peter Deede, also invested innumerable hours behind the scenes. I cannot thank them enough for all they have done, especially for teaching me to give my best to the responsibilities entrusted to me. I will always remember the many books that Trygve Jr. “wrote” alongside me as well as Ella’s love for books that emerged early and strong. I continue to pray that they both become deeply rooted in Christ and that, by the grace of God, they bear much justice fruit in their lives. And to my dearest Tryg, who more than any other has helped me to receive the grace of God in my life: our life together in Christ gives me my most hopeful glimpses of shalom.

### **From Bethany**

To my dear family, colleagues, and friends who have walked with me through the years of bringing this book to life, I long for you to know a measure of my fierce love and overflowing gratitude for you, greater than any of my words could ever convey.

To my IJM colleagues who have poured conviction, beauty, courage, strength, and wisdom into my life and our work together: Gary Haugen, Larry Martin, Nikki Toyama-Szeto, Mark and Janet Labberton, Andy and Catherine Crouch, Amy Sherman, Tim Dearborn, Steve Hayner (who encouraged this work even into the last days of his life) and his wife Sharol, Laurel Henshaw, Sharon Cohn Wu, Shelley Thames, Constance Padmore, Sean Litton, Pranitha Timothy, Ruthie McGinn, Bill Clark, Kayrn Aguirre, Susan Conway, Greg Darley, and so many others from across the years.

To those who waded into the thick of this manuscript in its many stages, bringing clarity and vast improvement: Jim Martin, Chong-Ae Shah, John Richmond, Scott Kauffmann, Greg Tarrant, Saju Mathew, Philip Langford, Liz

West, Kristy Pyke, Abey George, Kelly Cotter Ingebritson, Lori Poer, Tierney Short, Amy Lucia, Stephanie Reinitz, Dan Raines, Matthew Robinson, Nhi Clement, and Caryn Dahlstrand Rivadeneira.

To those who have prayed and continue to pray so relentlessly and with such great love for my family, for me, and for this book: my parents Harriett and Jay Hanke and Trang Trinh, John and Linda Richmond, Christine Britton, my pastors John and Laura Crosby, Christine Caine, Amanda-Paige Whittington, Christiane Lang Hearlson, Becca Messman, the “listening prayer” group at IJM headquarters (Vera Leung, Bill Clark, Blair Burns, Amy Lucia, James Criss, Philip Langford), Barb Armacost, Holly Tilton, Joan Korenchuck, Alisha Bauer, Elizabeth Cullen, Jill Klaiber, Amanda Epting, Bonnie Yelverton, Andrea Fuderer and Lindsey Dennis.

To Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, a haven where my family has grown together in worship and walking with Jesus since our move from the East Coast to Minnesota, and to the staff who so graciously gave office space, tea, and camaraderie as I worked on this manuscript.

To the very best coffee and public writing atmospheres of Minneapolis: FiveWatt Coffee, Studio 2, SpyHouse Coffee, and George and the Dragon. Countless hours of creating and composing were richly inspired within these walls.

To my community of friends in Virginia and Minnesota, who have been companions in wisdom, love, and life through each stage of this book: Susan and Nate Den Herder, Riley and Skip Powell, Strina and Steven Busman Jost, Sara and Troy Groves, Kate Harris, Carolyn and Cameron Doolittle, Heather and David Hammond, Matt and Kari Norman, Jaime Rau, Pam Block, and every one of my extraordinary neighbors “South of George.” And to Sarah Gossman, now in Seattle, who gave herself in extravagant love and grace to Beckham, Zoe, Anthony, and me and paved the way for seasons of flourishing to come.

To Anthony’s and my family, with whom our lives are filled to overflowing with grace and love: the Trinhns, the Hoangs, the Hankes, the Youngs. I could not do the work God calls me to do without all that our family gives to Anthony, Beckham, Zoe, and me.

To Esther Dim, whose faithfulness catapulted me into the work of justice before I even knew your name, and who continually spurs me on to this day. I will never cease to be astounded by the way God has given us the gift of doing life together!

And to sweet Beckham, so many of your beautiful questions about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit have been wrestled with in these pages. I love that we are only at the beginning and have many years of learning together ahead. And to sweet Zoe, you summed up this book so well when you asserted, at the age of three, “Did you know that God is still making you?” Indeed. Indeed. Every moment of curiosity and joy and chaos with the two of you has spun beauty, and I cherish you more than you will ever know.

And to Anthony, on the eve of our tenth anniversary, with each new day I am caught by surprise at your never-capped capacity to dream and envision and build and make manifest what matters most for others. Thank you (so paltry these words!), thank you for connecting me to Kristen, for believing in both of us, for spurring this project along even in its hardest days, and for serving me and loving me over and over and over, and over and over again. I love you.

*Solo Christo. Sola Deo Gloria.*

# Introduction

## *Justice and God*

It seemed like any other day: wake up, grab breakfast, head to class, go to chapel, head to another class, then lunch. But it turned out to be a day that would change the course of my life.

It was the winter of 2002, and I (Bethany) was in my first of three years pursuing a master of divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary. I finished lunch in our cafeteria and headed toward the door, on my way to the next class. In the main foyer, I could see that someone had set up an information table. Typically I would have rushed past.

But something caught my eye.

A poster was featured prominently at the display table, and on the poster was the image of a young girl's face, a single tear streaming down her cheek. As I moved in for a closer look, I froze.

The poster had two sentences written next to the image of this young girl:

Slavery is alive.

Rape for profit must be stopped.

The poster—the girl, those sentences, that moment—is forever seared in my memory. I had no idea that slavery was still alive in our world. I knew nothing about it. I was a student and lover of history and knew a great deal about slavery from the past. But slavery, alive in our world *today*—this was a new reality for me.

The second sentence—“rape for profit”—pointed to a horror beyond anything I knew existed. For years I had carried a very personal burden for people who endure sexual abuse, but I had no idea that abuse was happening on a profit-driven, global scale or that an entire industry existed for the sake of exploitation. The existence of this reality, an industry that could be called “rape for profit,” knocked the wind out of me.

As I unlocked my eyes from this poster, I turned toward the table and met the eyes of Lisa, a woman who, unbeknownst to me in that moment, I would grow to know and deeply respect over the months to come. Lisa had driven up from Washington, DC, and set up this display table on behalf of the Salvation Army. I remember looking at Lisa and quietly asking her what I could

do, still stunned by the two sentences that forever reshaped my understanding of reality.

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*God is the one who  
reveals the justice  
calling upon our  
lives, because God is  
the source of justice.*

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Lisa pushed a piece of paper across the table toward me and handed me a pen. I wrote down my name and email address so that she could send me more information.

It seemed like a hopelessly small step. It was the kind of step that many of us almost disregard, simply because of how insignificant it feels. But looking back I realize that, regardless of its size, putting my name on Lisa’s mailing list was a step *forward*. And because it was a step forward, it was a step that mattered. It mattered then, and it continues to matter to this day.

I began to get articles from Lisa in my email in-box and was shocked to learn that there are more slaves in the world today than during the four hundred years of the transatlantic slave trade *combined*. Today an estimated 35.8 million people are owned by slave masters who use violence and lies to trap those who are vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> I also learned that this industry of selling human beings nets tens of billions of dollars annually. The estimates today exceed \$150 billion, with about \$99 billion coming from the sex trafficking industry alone.<sup>2</sup>

These statistics were completely new to me. The massive number of people in slavery, combined with news stories of actual children, women, and men all over the world being trapped in this scourge, was enough to leave me utterly overwhelmed. The more I learned, the more I felt like I was drowning in information I had no tools to navigate.

Seeing that poster and beginning to learn about human trafficking in all its forms ignited in me a passion that was immediate and strong. But in tandem with this new passion I was also fighting an even stronger instinct to recoil. I remember wishing there was a way that I could put what I was learning back on a shelf and forget about it for a while.

But I couldn't turn back. Unimaginable violence committed against the poorest and most vulnerable people in our world; suffering beyond anything I had ever imagined—I couldn't put it out of my mind. So what did I do? I hung my head. Quite literally. After opening yet another email full of nightmares I could not fathom, I buried my face in my hands and hung my head. I was sitting in the computer lab at the seminary library, and I was *done*. I couldn't move another step forward.

When I eventually lifted my head and stared at the computer screen again, I found myself composing an email to Lisa. "How do you do this?" I asked. "How do you wake up every day and face these terrible stories and somehow keep going, much less find a way to make a difference?"

Lisa wrote me a reply that I will never forget. She shared at length from her own story of engaging the needs of justice in our world and gave me a simple yet profound admonition: "Remember, this battle belongs to the Lord. It is not our battle. It is his. And he has invited us to join him. And he holds the victory. This battle belongs to the Lord."

## The Source of Justice

Knowing the reality of injustice in our world was never going to be enough to get me out of my computer lab chair. Far from spurring me to action, my newfound knowledge felt instead like a weight pulling me to the bottom of a fathomless sea of suffering. But Lisa's email reminded me that justice has a source, and that source is not dependent on what we have or don't have in our hands, or on our good but faulty intentions. The source of justice in the midst of even the most heinous injustice in our world is Jesus Christ. God's very character is one of justice, and he has given us Jesus as the manifestation of his justice both now and for eternity. God is the one who reveals the justice calling upon our lives, because God is the source of justice.

Ever since that moment in the computer lab I have been on a journey to discover justice rooted in Jesus, to know this call that comes first from God, and to navigate the brokenness of this world with biblical hope as my sure-footed

guide. Justice rooted in Jesus broke open for me the possibility and promise of persevering hope—the possibility that I could shed my paralysis and actually move forward one small step at a time because there is a God who is and will be victorious over injustice. And while God certainly could and does act on his own, God beckons us to join him, calling us into his family to be part of his work of redemption and healing through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

### The Whole Story

As God makes his call upon our lives, he connects us with companions for the journey. It turns out that we (Kristen and Bethany) were both wrestling with the reality of injustice in our world, and we were coming to similar realizations about the necessity of knowing Jesus as the source of all justice pursuit. Kristen comes to this book primarily from her context as a professor of theology and Christian formation interacting with questions and struggles that arise from her students, colleagues, studies, and life. Bethany's perspective comes primarily from her biblical and theological training in the context of Cru, Princeton Theological Seminary, and more than a decade of engaging pastors and local churches through leading a think tank for International Justice Mission (IJM)—an organization of attorneys, criminal investigators, and social workers providing direct service to victims of violent injustice.

Over the years we have both increasingly grown to understand that our passion for the needs of this world must be grounded in the reality of who *God* is and what God's vision for justice is and has always been. We've written this book as a Genesis-through-Revelation exploration of God's justice calling upon his people, God's invitation to us to participate in his work of healing what is broken and setting things right in this world. As we've wrestled with the enormity of the needs of the world, we've become convinced that Scripture is as essential guide that each of us needs; through Scripture God offers us an ever-unfolding invitation to know God's love for justice and strength to respond to his calling.

Our hope for ourselves and for all who follow Jesus is that we would not only grow to know the needs of the world and find ways to respond to these needs, but also that we would come to know more deeply the God who is able, above all we could ever ask or imagine, to bring beauty and glory out of the ashes of suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this conviction about who God is, we've written this book not as a guide to how you can muster more inspiration and find ways to "try harder" in response to the needs of the world. We are not going to tell you that the lives of the vulnerable and the advance of the kingdom of God rest on your actions. We are not going to tell you that you are the only hands and feet of Jesus and that Jesus can't act in this world unless you do. We are not going to try, whether overtly or subtly, to guilt you into caring about justice.

What we hope to do through this book is draw you more deeply into knowing who God is, what God loves, and who God calls us to be. We hope to offer a vision of what our lives and our communities can look like as, by the grace of God, we respond to his call for us to live the way of life revealed in Scripture. This way of life is the way of justice and righteousness.

We want this book to guide you and aid you in guiding others into pursuing justice rooted in Jesus—not because justice has become a buzzword in our era but because from the beginning of Scripture until the end we see a God who longs for justice and righteousness in this world and who calls his people to join him in seeking it. God is alive and active in this world; his light blazes in the darkness. And God calls us to join what he is doing through his strength, his presence, and his grace.

## Watchwords

We've broken the story of Scripture into six movements, each of which is connected to a major segment of the Bible: creation, the fall, Israel, Jesus, the church, and all things being made new.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the entire story we've found that five key words—watchwords, as we call them—emerge as essential and interconnected for understanding who God is and who God calls his people to be: holiness, *hesed* (faithful and active loving-kindness), justice, righteousness, and shalom (flourishing wholeness).

From the beginning of Scripture through to the end, the Bible reveals a God whose holiness and active loving-kindness (*hesed*) lead him to care deeply about justice, righteousness, and the flourishing of all that he has created. We see

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*What we hope to do through this book is draw you more deeply into knowing who God is, what God loves, and who God calls us to be.*

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these passions of God most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ as our holy and loving God enters this world in human flesh. God in Jesus Christ personally and powerfully takes the fullness of the world's injustice, unrighteousness, and brokenness upon himself in order to overcome the sin that prevents humanity and creation from flourishing. Jesus Christ will come again to complete this victory and fully usher in his kingdom of justice, righteousness, and shalom. In the meantime, God calls us to live as his holy people. Empowered by the grace of God in Christ, as we wait for the fullness of his kingdom, we live his justice and righteousness, actively loving and seeking the flourishing of all. And while we passionately respond to the justice calling as the people of God, we remember that the battle and the victory ultimately belong to the Lord.

### Mapping the Story

Each movement of the biblical story opens the door to a deeper understanding and invitation to respond to who God is; who God calls his people to be; and the justice, righteousness, and shalom that God longs to see in this world. At each turn in the story we find God beckoning us further into the justice calling he has placed upon our lives.

In chapter 1 we invite the reader to consider the whole of the Bible as one story and the implications of this interconnected story for understanding and living justice and righteousness. What *is* justice? What does righteousness *mean*? As we grow to know the whole story of God's love for justice and righteousness, in what ways will we respond as the body of Christ?

In chapter 2 we delve into *creation*, the first of six movements of the biblical story. Understanding justice in the context of God's original vision for creation leads to a counterintuitive invitation to rest. God is continually inviting us, even commanding us, to receive and extend Sabbath rest as a gift.

In chapter 3 we explore justice by juxtaposing it with *the fall*, and we seek to understand God's invitation to move *toward* the darkness of this world, in the light of Christ. We then consider what we can learn about God's commitment to justice from his covenant relationship with Israel (chap. 4). In this context, God invites us to lament rather than despair as we face suffering and injustice in our own lives and communities and throughout the world.

In chapter 5 we look deeply into who Jesus is as he enters and redeems this fallen, broken world of suffering and injustice. As we look to Jesus, we are invited to consider how we are being formed as we follow him. We need to be

honest with ourselves; as we pursue justice, are we enticed by the possibility of being heroic? Or are we seeking justice by the power of Jesus Christ, whose victory over sin and evil enables us to receive and seek God's justice and righteousness as God's beloved saints?

Turning to chapter 6, we explore what it means for the church today to respond to God's invitation to be sanctified and sent in kingdom mission. As we look to the end of the biblical story (which is only the *beginning* of all things being made new), we remember that Jesus Christ will fully usher in his kingdom of justice and righteousness in the age to come and how this invites us to be a people of persevering hope as we pursue our callings in the midst of injustice (chap. 7). In the conclusion to the book we consider what it means to live this story in our daily lives, embracing Scripture and the practices we have learned from Scripture as gifts that draw us deeper into communion with God, knowing that only as we abide in Jesus Christ will God bring lasting fruit from our lives.

A word of caution: many of the concepts in this book, such as *injustice* and *oppression* and *slavery*, are all too easily relegated to the (safer) realm of abstract ideas. Remember that this calling is about real people. People suffering from injustice are our neighbors, both nearby and throughout the world, right at this moment. Each person has a name, a face, a family, and dreams.

To help us remember this, we have woven specific cases of people suffering injustice throughout this book. In most stories pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. We also include stories of churches and other communities and organizations responding to injustice in this world. In sharing stories of suffering, rescue, healing, and following Jesus our hope is that ideas will spark as to how God is inviting you and others in your community to respond to the justice calling. Many of these stories focus on victims of violent injustice in countries *outside* the United States because this is where God has drawn Bethany to focus her response. But we believe that God calls us to engage people, places, and structures both near and far with a persevering passion for justice, and we encourage readers to consider how God is opening your eyes and hearts and lives to injustice and where specifically to focus your actions.

## A Word about Stories

Our intent is that this book will provide a Genesis to Revelation biblical theology of justice. Above all, we hope that this book will serve you, our

readers, by drawing you nearer to our God who loves justice and is himself the embodiment of justice. But it must be said, with complete candor, that even as we seek to offer a biblical theology that is timeless and thorough, we are by no means able to exhaustively cover the riches of the Scriptures. And even as we seek to draw you, our readers, into an experience of the reality of injustice in the lives of individuals and communities today, the stories of injustice that we tell are far from a thorough representation of the fullness of the wrong that justice seeks to right in our world.

As the authors of this book, created in partnership with International Justice Mission (IJM), our own expertise centers upon violent injustice being committed against those who live in the most poverty-stricken regions of the world, and the stories we tell lean heavily in this direction. However, it is incumbent upon every one of us who follow Jesus to be constantly mindful of and committed to engaging the myriad faces of justice and injustice beyond what any one book might present. In the United States alone today there is a groundswell of racially-charged violence and murder, there are waves of unaccompanied children and entire families seeking refuge from unstable nations, there is urgent need to reform our prisons and the systems that lead to mass incarceration, just to scratch the surface. None of the stories in this book, however, center on these or other deep injustices in the United States, nor do our stories touch upon Syria or Iraq or Israel/Palestine or so many other regions that could and should be named and engaged. But we want you to know that all throughout the writing of this book, we've sought to hold out in front of ourselves all that we could not address, and we've sought, even with the smallest of steps, to learn deeply and engage with injustice far beyond the areas we explore in the book itself.

As each of us moves ever more steadily toward the darkness of injustice by the light of Jesus Christ, we will discover there is far more that is broken than any of us could ever piece back together, and that there is far more beauty in the healing that God will bring than we could ever ask or imagine. We put forward this book as an offering, and we're counting on each reader to move deeply into the stories we've experienced while also allowing your hearts to be broken and your lives disrupted by the injustices in your own immediate context. As we enter into the stories of injustice in our world and as we enter into the biblical story with its persistent call for us to seek justice and righteousness in this world, God himself will lead us by the sun of righteousness that comes with healing in its wings (Mal. 4:2).

# 1

## Engage the Whole Story

### *Justice and Righteousness*

Boola was out of options.<sup>1</sup> He knew he was risking his life, but he secretly found a way to make a phone call to his brother. When his brother answered, Boola whispered into the receiver what was happening: he had incurred a small debt and in the midst of this transaction he was taken a thousand miles from home and locked into a brick-making facility. He was enduring vicious beatings, grueling eighteen-hour workdays under a blazing sun, and given very little food or rest. He was trapped and desperate to get out.

Boola had been trafficked into labor slavery. The terms *human trafficking* and *slavery* both refer to the use of coercion (whether through force or deception) to exploit a person for labor, sex, or other means of profit or gain.<sup>2</sup> The good news today is that, unlike in generations past, slavery is now illegal in nearly every country on the planet. Boola's own country has good laws against slavery. The problem is that, on the whole, these laws are rarely enforced.

When government authorities choose to turn a blind eye (and often even profit through bribery from their willingness to overlook the crimes) rather than protect those who are most vulnerable, slave owners and others who choose to abuse their power are able to wreak havoc on the lives of whomever

they can pull into their traps with no fear of consequences. In this culture of impunity the ones who pay the highest price are the victims like Boola.

Slave owners often lure the vulnerable into their control through lending money and holding over them the ruse of debt that needs to be worked off in order to be repaid. The loans in question are not large, typically borrowed to cover an urgent need such as a medical emergency. And yet, it turns out that the amount of the loan doesn't actually matter. The truth is that slave owners are not interested in being repaid for the money loaned. International Justice Mission (IJM) has documented scores of cases demonstrating that the financial debt owed is not the currency the slave master is most interested in; a physical human body, turned into chattel, is far more valuable to the slave owner than the original money lent.

Taken by force and fraud, Boola was trapped in this highly lucrative trade in human beings. The estimated annual profits for the human trafficking industry today exceed those of Microsoft (\$22.1B), BP (\$23.5B), Samsung (\$27.2B), Exxon (\$32.6B), and Apple (\$37.0B) *combined*.<sup>3</sup>

Vividly corroborating the evidence of what slave owners really want, one of the most harrowing forty seconds of video footage I (Bethany) have ever seen comes from an undercover surveillance camera brought inside the walls of a rice mill in South Asia. The video captures a slave master throwing his head back in laughter about the idea of a debt needing to be repaid. With an enormous smile and cackle he says, "The debt? We're not so much interested in the debt."

In his laughter, the slave owner reveals that he knows the incredible profitability of owning human beings. A living, breathing human being is exponentially profitable once secured as a commodity. A drug owner can sell a drug only one time because it is then consumed. A human being can be sold and worked over and over again. Slave masters—whether brothel keepers, or labor compound owners, or the traffickers who broker a transfer of sale—profit many times over from a single human being, working them for months and years until their bodies are simply discarded.<sup>4</sup>

## What Is Justice?

Whatever you might be thinking or feeling about what you've read above, you likely have a sense, at root, that *this is not right*. When we intentionally put these realities on our radar, when we choose to know the stories of slaveowners

who gleefully profit from the suffering of millions of slaves like Boola, when we encounter stories and situations of brutal injustice, we might have a deep, intuitive sense that *this is not the way things are supposed to be*.<sup>5</sup> But what is the basis for our sense that things can and ought to be different? And what can we do to be part of that difference?

In its most direct biblical formulation, justice can best be described as *setting things right*.<sup>6</sup> But how do we even know what “right” is? How do we make sure that we are pursuing God’s vision of “right” rather than our own distorted or culturally constricted vision as we seek justice? The short but crucial answer is that we learn what is right when we look to Jesus Christ and the whole story of Scripture.

When I (Bethany) was in high school, I learned how to reshingle a roof. After several years of mission trips around the United States, I grew to love being up on a roof with a crew of friends. I loved ripping through layers of tar-laden shingles with a sharp shovel, using a crow bar to pull up the old nails, and heaving it all to the ground in a massive heap, creating a clean slate. Once we rolled out rows of tar paper to cover the cleared-off plywood roof structure, we needed to complete a critical step. Before the first shingle could be laid, we needed to stretch a horizontal line across the length of the roof. Covered in chalk, this thin line of twine was held by one person on one side of the roof and then stretched taut by another person on the other side of the roof. “Snap!” One of us pulled the line high, let go, and watched it ricochet off the tar paper, leaving a perfectly straight, level marking of chalk. We repeated this process at intervals up to the ridge of the roof. Only then, when we knew the precise standard against which we would mark out all of our work, could we begin to lay the first row of shingles that would guide the following rows.

Like a chalk line’s offering of a horizontal reference point, plumb lines offer a vertical reference point. Both leveling tools have been used in construction since the civilization of ancient Egypt. As we grapple with the idea of *righteousness*, it is illuminating to note that the Scriptures describe righteousness using the imagery and metaphor of a plumb line (Isa. 28:17). God’s righteousness helps us to see the path of right living we are called to follow and to gauge whether we are living “rightly” and treating one another and the created world in accordance with how God created and redeemed us to live.

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*What is the basis for our sense that things can and ought to be different? And what can we do?*

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Every leveling tool needs a point of reference. In our pursuit of what it means to be “right,” Jesus Christ is that standard. Jesus embodies what is perfectly right, and his life serves as a measure against which we can determine

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*As God in the flesh,  
Jesus had all the power  
and the authority in  
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the flourishing of others.*

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what is right and what is not right. As God in the flesh, Jesus had all the power and the authority in the world, and he consistently used his power and authority not for his own gain but for the flourishing of others. He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Living in perfect communion with God, Jesus not only dedicated his life to love and service but he also gave his life to conquer sin, death, and injustice of every kind. Exemplifying how God intended humanity to live from the very beginning, he showed us right relationships, right living,

and the right use of power, undertaken out of love for God and love for others.

We need the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ—“the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1)—to know what is right, but Christ doesn’t just leave us with a measure of what is right. He is more than a plumb line or a chalk line against which we measure ourselves, leaving us to do the work of fixing what is not right in ourselves and in this world. Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension he *shares* his righteousness with us. He sets us right with God so that we can live in right relationship with God and offer every part of our lives as instruments of justice and righteousness in this world (Rom. 3:21–26; 6:13). Ultimately, “setting things right” is God’s work. We don’t fully see Christ’s justice reflected in this world, but we live in hope of Christ’s return, when he will finally and fully set all things right.

Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit invites followers of Jesus to join him in his work of setting all things right; God gives us the ministry of reconciliation in this world (2 Cor. 5:14–21). God calls us to join him in the pursuit of justice as we use our power to seek what is right and just in this world. When people use their power to enable others to flourish and live as they were created to live, justice is the result. Injustice occurs when power is used to exploit, abuse, and even destroy.

The biblical sense of justice as setting things right comes into play after the fall, when humans begin to use the power God has given them to seek their

own selfish ambitions rather than seeking God's vision. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word used to refer to the flourishing of all of God's creation, involves God, humans, and the rest of creation living together in harmony, wholeness, justice, and delight. The English translation of *shalom* is "peace," but that word fails to capture the rich and vibrant life that the Hebrew concept entails. In keeping with God's intentions, a world that truly embodies shalom is a world of justice and righteousness, with everyone and everything flourishing as a result of living "rightly"—that is, living in accordance with the ways God created them to live and to flourish.

When God created humans, he charged them with stewardship of the created world. He shared his very own power and authority with them so that they had the power and authority to faithfully care for God's world and for each other, using their God-given power to seek the wholeness of everyone and everything. But we know that the story takes a tragic turn. Instead of gratefully receiving the calling God had given them and faithfully using the power God had entrusted to them, the first humans chose their own way. Instead of trusting God's vision for them and for the flourishing of the world, they used their power to seek what they thought would be best for themselves. When they made that choice, they were essentially rejecting not only God but also the justice calling God had given them.

As a result, the door to injustice opened. Separated from right relationship with God, generation upon generation of people have used power not for love of God and others but rather to seek their own distorted notions of what is right, thereby seeking their own glory, security, or authority. Along the way, the people and the world that God created for flourishing have instead been exploited, abused, and even destroyed.

I (Kristen) was reflecting on this idea of "setting right" when my son broke his arm. The brokenness was immediately evident, as the bone jutted sideways

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*Jesus is more than  
a plumb line. . . .  
Through his life,  
death, resurrection,  
and ascension . . . he  
sets us right with God  
so that we can live in  
right relationship with  
God and offer every  
part of our lives as  
instruments of justice  
and righteousness  
in this world.*

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in a clear distortion of God’s intended design. The top priority of the orthopedic doctor was to set the bone right (*ortho* comes from the Greek for “right” or “straight”). With the bone painstakingly set straight by the doctor, the healing process could begin.

My son’s broken arm, this departure from the way arms are supposed to be, reminded me of the way God’s original picture of justice, wholeness, and delight gave way to an unjust and tragic world. In the midst of this fallen world, God called Israel to be his holy people and reaffirmed his justice calling. By

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*Separated from right  
relationship with  
God, people use their  
power to abuse and  
exploit rather than  
to love and serve.*

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drawing them into relationship with him and giving them his law as a guide, God called them to use the power and authority he’d given them to create a nation that reflected and pursued God’s vision of justice, righteousness, and shalom. Justice as “setting things right” is what God is referring to when he tells Israel to “follow justice and justice alone” (Deut. 16:19–20). He is calling them to be a people set apart by their consistent commitment to seek what is right in a world

full of wrongs, to return to the plumb line he has set, to seek justice in a world marked by injustice, to bring light to the darkness around them. Eventually, in his loving faithfulness, God sent Jesus Christ to set right all that was wrong, broken, and distorted. In and through Christ and the Spirit we are invited into God’s family and called to participate with God in seeking and living God’s vision of what is right.

God’s righteousness provides the backdrop against which we can understand God’s vision for justice and the justice calling that God has for us today. As we explore the biblical story, the five concepts of holiness, *hesed*, justice, righteousness, and shalom—which are all embodied in Jesus Christ and evident throughout the biblical witness—will be important guides.

## One Interconnected Story

Writing in the second century AD, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, is the earliest surviving example of a Christian who sought to combine the different parts of the biblical narrative into one story.<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus also believed that each of us is a character in the story of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> As you engage the story of Scripture

throughout this book, know that you are part of a long tradition dedicated to immersion in the whole of Scripture—a story in which you are also a character with a calling.

My (Bethany's) friend and mentor Ruth Padilla DeBorst has committed her life to creating space for others to live more fully into this full story of Scripture. She and her husband Jim founded Casa Adobe in Costa Rica ([www.casaadobe.org](http://www.casaadobe.org)), and it has become a place to both learn and embody what it means to live in mission not only among neighbors in your own community but also globally amid the needs of the world as a whole. People are invited to come to Casa Adobe as visitors for a brief retreat or as community members for a year of immersion and service.

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the whole of Scripture.*

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Ruth has been witness both to shattering suffering and unspeakable beauty, and every conversation with her imbues my life with wisdom. She's written and taught widely on the critical importance of engaging the whole of Scripture and living into the fullness of God's intentions for justice in our world. In particular, I find the following excerpt from an interview she did with Andy Crouch to be a helpful snapshot regarding what is at stake in our approach to reading Scripture:

I've been struck by how fragmented our reading of the Bible is. It's a kind of Sunday school version of the Bible: all these isolated little Bible stories, taught out of their context. What we need to reclaim is the big story, the big picture. "In the beginning God . . ."—that's where we need to begin. In the end, we find the new Jerusalem and all people bowing before the Lord of all nations. The story between that beginning and that end is not divorced from human history. Rather, it is a picture of God's involvement in history.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most pervasive themes throughout the Bible is freedom. Stories, illustrations, and allusions to freedom and slavery (both physical and spiritual, as well as the intersection of the two) abound, from Genesis through Revelation. Understanding Scripture as one connected story helps us to see how our pursuit of justice fits within God's long-standing desire for the freedom, the flourishing, and the wholeness of this world and everything in it. The larger story of Scripture gives us a picture of what God intended when God created

and redeemed the world and what full redemption will look like when Christ comes again. It provides a picture of how things are meant to be so that when we witness how deeply things have gone wrong, we can name them as wrong and join in with the work of God—who is *always* moving and inviting us to join him in making things right.

As Ruth explains, “I often think about the disciples on the way to Emmaus. When they were blind to Jesus, he explained ‘all the Scriptures.’ Too often we don’t look at all the Scripture, all of life, and God’s comprehensive intentions of not leaving any corner of the earth untouched by his love.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus is with us on this road, just as he was with the disciples, and by his Spirit he will provide everything we need to know to understand the interconnected story of Scripture more deeply, to love the world and those in it, and to join him in all he is doing in this world.

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*As we wade into  
the murky waters of  
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to know God’s Word  
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are buttressed by its  
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darkness and lies.*

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As we wade into the murky waters of injustice, corruption, and violence, we need to know God’s Word in such a way that we are buttressed by its truth in the face of darkness and lies. We need to be immersed in the story

of Scripture to see more and more of the God who is leading us and calling us as we follow him beyond the borders of what we know. If we ask God to help us better know the entire story of Scripture, God will show us not only his consistent concern for justice but also his consistent calling to his people to seek justice in this world.

When we move from the story of Scripture to stories of injustice in this world, we realize that real lives are at stake, every day. But the reality of what is at stake is not meant to be a burden of guilt; it is a gracious invitation from God to join him in seeking justice through the saving work of Jesus Christ, who has given us all we need to respond to this justice calling.

## Jesus at the Crux

Jesus Christ is the hinge on which the whole story turns. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ are collectively the climax of it

all. In the form of redemption, salvation, and reconciliation, Jesus Christ is the resolution within the whole that changes everything. It takes the rest of the story, which is ongoing, to work out this resolution. Clearly, then, Christ and the outworking of his saving love and sacrifice are central to the parts of the story that follow him.

We also need to keep in mind that Jesus Christ was present and active in the story from the very beginning, long before he was named. The Gospel of John tells us that all things came into being through Christ, who was with God in the beginning and who, in fact, *was* God from the beginning. Through the person of Jesus Christ, God made himself known to humans. Even though we didn't see him in the flesh until he was born as a baby in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ has always been God. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. These three persons of God make up one God, the Trinity, who has always cared about justice and called his people to seek it.

Jesus did not intend the justice calling to be a solo journey. Throughout the story of the Bible, God has called and equipped *a people* to live in relationship with him and to seek his justice in this world. As we immerse ourselves in the biblical story in order to learn more about God and his calling upon us, we need to do so as a part of God's family. We need to grapple with Scripture together and discern together; we need to draw on the wisdom, knowledge, and example of those in the body of Christ who have gone before us or who live in other parts of God's world. We need to spur one another on to rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit who guides us, forms us, strengthens us, and draws us further into life in Christ as we read God's Word together.

## The Justice *and* Righteousness Calling

The two greatest commandments identified by Jesus—to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself—are the flip side of the two most prevalent sins throughout Scripture: idolatry and injustice.<sup>11</sup> Failing to love God leads to idolatry, while failing to love others leads to injustice. Another way of putting this is to say that the call to love God and love our neighbors is a call to righteousness and justice.

*Righteousness* is a term used throughout the Bible, and it is critical for us to understand what it means as we seek to know the whole story of Scripture and God's love for justice. Unfortunately, *righteousness* is a word laden with

negative connotations in many cultures today, and it can be difficult to discern its original meaning. While it is easily relegated to the theoretical, the biblical call to righteousness is meant to have tangible implications for daily life and love. However, instead of bringing to mind love for others, the idea of righteousness and being “righteous” more likely brings to mind notions of *self-righteous* people who are full of pride and arrogance. Depending on your perspective, *justice* might also have some troubling connotations.

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*Seeking the Lord and pursuing justice and righteousness belong together and were never meant to be separated. Justice and righteousness flow from the same source: God’s steadfast love.*

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But when we look to Jesus in particular and the Bible as a whole, we see that justice and righteousness get to the heart of what it means to love God and love others. God’s justice and righteousness are manifestations of God’s character of love, and God, in turn, calls his people to be set apart by their justice and righteousness. And as God shares his own justice and righteousness with us through Christ, he enables us to love, justify, and be righteous. The entirety of Scripture

shows that seeking the Lord and pursuing justice and righteousness belong together and were never meant to be separated. Justice and righteousness flow from the same source: God’s steadfast love.

In Scripture, the justice calling cannot be separated from the righteousness calling. Although the connection is harder for us to see than it was for those familiar with Scripture in its original languages, when we look at the call to justice and righteousness throughout the whole story of Scripture, the significance of their interconnection and the implications for our lives today are staggering.

The New Testament words *justice* and *righteousness* are English translations of the same Greek word, *dikaïosyne*. These two words are part of a larger family of words that are prominent in Scripture and connect to the very heart of our life in Christ; the words *justice*, *righteousness*, *justification*, and *justify* all come from this same Greek root. Our English renderings fail to capture these significant family ties. As a result, our English understandings of justice, righteousness, and justification often don’t reflect the fullness of what these words meant to the first followers of Jesus.

Take the words that Paul writes in Romans 3. A common English translation of the chapter includes the following phrases: “righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:22); “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24); God’s offering of Christ is a sacrifice of atonement that demonstrates God’s “righteousness”; and God is both “just and the one who justifies” those who have faith in Jesus (3:26).

In its original language, this passage involves a fair amount of creative wordplay around the Greek root *dikaio*-. Through that wordplay, the readers (or more accurately, the listeners) of Paul’s letter would have seen obvious links between Christ’s work of justification and their own righteousness and call to justice. They would have seen that Christ’s atoning sacrifice justified them, making them right with God. They would have understood this act of reconciliation as a demonstration of God’s own righteousness and justice, a gift that enabled them to love God *and* others rightly and justly. As Tim Keller describes this connection, “Justice and justification are joined at the hip.”<sup>12</sup>

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament uses two different words for justice and righteousness, but the two concepts are closely connected to each other. They appear together repeatedly<sup>13</sup> and form a distinctive phrase called a *hendiadys*. An example of a common hendiadys in English is the phrase “sick and tired.” The words *sick* and *tired* provide a stronger and slightly different effect when placed together than each does on its own. Think of the phrase, “I’m sick and tired of waking up early.” (As parents with young children who don’t always sleep well, we are well acquainted with this particular hendiadys!) We would use such a phrase for added emphasis, to convey something more than just “I’m sick of waking up early” or “I’m tired of waking up early.”

Within the Bible itself, the most common word-pair used to convey our understanding of justice in relationship is “justice and righteousness.”<sup>14</sup> In Psalm 33:5 we read,

The LORD loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of his unfailing love.

This is but one example of an intentional pairing found throughout the Old Testament. The parallelism of this verse also tells us that God’s love for righteousness and justice is the way in which God fills all things; therefore we cannot understand God’s faithful love apart from righteousness and justice.

This inextricable connection between justice, righteousness, and love is at the core of God’s vision for the flourishing of all he has created.

The Hebrew word usually translated as “justice” in the Old Testament is *mishpat*. This word comes into play only when things have gone wrong with God’s original vision of shalom and restoration is needed. When a situation is not going according to the way of life God intends for his people or creation—when injustice of any kind is present—judicial intervention may be needed to help make things right (in this way, the word *mishpat* also has legal connotations and is sometimes translated “judgment”). Once the situation has been set right, then justice is in place. Without this restoration, injustice remains. *Mishpat* can also be defined as *the restoration of a situation or environment so that equity and harmony are promoted in the community*.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, *mishpat* means *setting things right*.

In contrast to many legal systems today, both justice and righteousness in ancient Israel were based on *relationships*. Justice was understood to be both inherently personal and communal. As scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier writes of the Old Testament sense of justice, “That which is right in a legal sense is that which fulfills the demands of the community relationship, and

the sole function of the judge is to maintain the community, to restore right to those from whom it has been taken.”<sup>16</sup> This was also one of the main responsibilities given to the king, to protect and restore right relationships in the community entrusted to him.

Even though righteousness can have negative connotations in our culture today—conjuring up images of people who care more about following rules and laws of the faith

than loving others—this could not be further from the biblical intention of righteousness. Biblically speaking, the word *righteousness* (rather than *mishpat* alone) probably better captures the big vision toward which we who are passionate about justice today are aiming. We want to see a world in which all people and all of creation are treated rightly and are given what they need to be able to flourish. This is a vision of abundant life, rather than the scarcity and disorder that come with injustice. *Righteousness (tsedaqah)* is the biblical word that connects us to this bigger picture of human flourishing, while *justice (mishpat)* focuses more specifically on the action that needs to

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*God’s love for  
righteousness and  
justice is the way  
in which God  
fills all things.*

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be taken in order to restore a situation to its intended righteousness.<sup>17</sup> As an integrated, holistic understanding of what it means to live rightly, loving others and following God’s rules are both essential to living in a deeply connected way with one another as God intended.

The root of the Hebrew word for righteousness, *tsedaqah*, refers to behavior that is called for based on the relationships between people or between people and God. Righteousness is not about an abstract moral standard to which we need to adhere perfectly but rather about living faithfully in each of our relationships. As one biblical scholar writes, “There is no norm of righteousness outside of that of personal involvement. When people fulfill the conditions imposed on them by relationships, they are righteous.”<sup>18</sup> Just like justice, righteousness is concerned for the community. At its core, righteousness is about loving others more than it is about ourselves.

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*Righteousness is not about an abstract moral standard to which we need to perfectly adhere but rather about living faithfully in each of our relationships.*

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Scholar and ministry practitioner Amy Sherman notes that biblical righteousness expresses itself in three directions—up, in, and out.<sup>19</sup> Righteousness expresses itself in an upward direction as we live our lives in ways that glorify God and demonstrate our love of God, in humble dependence on God’s grace and Spirit. It expresses itself inwardly as we live with internal holiness and purity, with transformed and purified hearts, and through the grace and transforming work of God in Christ and the Spirit. Righteousness also needs to manifest itself outwardly in righteousness toward others, as we love our neighbors near and far through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

The “righteous man” described by the prophet Ezekiel gives us a picture of what this upward, inward, and outward love can look like.

Suppose there is a righteous man  
 who does what is just and right.  
 He does not eat at the mountain shrines  
 or look to the idols of Israel.  
 He does not defile his neighbor’s wife  
 or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.  
 He does not oppress anyone,  
 but returns what he took in pledge for a loan.



He does not commit robbery  
     but gives his food to the hungry  
     and provides clothing for the naked.  
 He does not lend to them at interest  
     or take a profit from them.  
 He withholds his hand from doing wrong  
     and judges fairly between two parties.  
 He follows my decrees  
     and faithfully keeps my laws.  
 That man is righteous;  
     he will surely live,  
 declares the Sovereign LORD. (Ezek. 18:5–9)

Notice the different layers involved in being righteous and just within this passage. It begins with faithfulness to God, as the righteous person does not worship idols. It extends to loving treatment of others by addressing personal sexual ethics, the importance of just judgments, and the faithful use of finances. It marks the righteous person as one who follows God's laws and avoids wrongdoing not for personal gain but to become one who treats others well, shares with those in need, uses personal finances for the greater good of others, and judges fairly when called on to enter into situations of injustice. It assumes the righteous person is one who can and will do what is just and right.

### Justice as Judgment

Within Scripture the justice and righteousness of God are also linked to judgment. In today's world, we don't often think of God's judgment against unrighteousness as good news. When we need comfort in the face of our shortcomings or encouragement in the face of the injustices of the world, we don't tend to turn to the idea of God as our Great Judge. In the Old Testament, however, the people of God did just that. Look at the prayer contained in this psalm, calling God to judge on behalf of the afflicted:

O LORD, you God of vengeance,  
     you God of vengeance, shine forth!  
 Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
     give to the proud what they deserve!  
 O LORD, how long shall the wicked,

how long shall the wicked exult?  
 They pour out their arrogant words;  
 all the evildoers boast.  
 They crush your people, O LORD,  
 and afflict your heritage.  
 They kill the widow and the stranger,  
 they murder the orphan,  
 and they say, “The LORD does not see;  
 the God of Jacob does not perceive.” (Ps. 94:1–7 NRSV)

The people of God understood that appealing to God’s righteous intervention involves the condemnation of evil, which means the condemnation of all that goes against God’s good intentions for the shalom of the world. While the justice (*mishpat*) God and his people aimed for may have included punishment of the evildoer, this punishment was not mere payback. It was for the greater good—a restoration of that which had gone wrong. It was setting things to right. As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, “Only because Yahweh saves does he condemn. His righteousness is first and foremost saving. He is a ‘righteous God and a Savior’ (Isa. 45:21).”<sup>20</sup>

So God’s justice and righteousness are displayed through God’s saving action on behalf of his people. As we read in Isaiah:

My righteousness draws near speedily,  
 my salvation is on the way,  
 and my arm will bring justice to the nations. (Isa. 51:5)

God’s righteousness—that is, God’s relational faithfulness—involves righting the wrongs that impact the people whom God creates and loves. It involves saving his people from sin and evil. God’s righteous action leads to judgment (*mishpat*), which results in the restoration of harmony and flourishing in the community. In this way, God’s righteousness leads to *justice*.

Furthermore, God’s righteousness cannot be separated from “God’s mercy,” which is one way of translating the Hebrew word *hesed*. Like justice and righteousness, *hesed* is another foundational biblical concept. It appears throughout the Old Testament in reference to God’s faithful, active loving-kindness. “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6). This description of God emphasizing his *hesed* runs like a refrain through the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> God’s

*hesed* helps us to understand why God created humans in the first place and why God remained faithful to his people in the face of human sinfulness generation after generation. “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,” we read in Lamentations 3:22 (NRSV).

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No one English word captures all the connotations of covenant faithfulness and active devotion that the word *hesed* conveys, which is why it is alternately translated as “steadfast love,” “mercy,” and “loving-kindness.” Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis has beautifully translated *hesed* as “God’s love in action.”<sup>22</sup> Because of God’s *hesed*, God commits to faithfully and actively loving his people. According to Scripture God’s righteousness, justice, and active love all work together on behalf of God’s people and the world God created. We read an example of this in Jeremiah:

“I am the LORD, who exercises kindness [*hesed*],  
justice [*mishpat*] and righteousness [*tsedaqah*] on earth,  
for in these I delight,”  
declares the LORD. (Jer. 9:24)

*Hesed* is not only a mark of God’s character. Like the justice and righteousness calling, it is also a call God places upon his people. We see this perhaps most clearly in Micah 6:8:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.

The word translated here as “mercy” is *hesed*. We are called to love and act in ways that reflect God’s own mercy, steadfast love, faithful loving-kindness—love in action.

The same is true for holiness. Holiness is another biblical term that refers both to God’s own character and to the call God places upon his people. God is sometimes called the “Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 71:22), and God calls his people to be holy as he is holy (Lev. 19:2). The Hebrew word *qadosh*, which

is translated “holy,” means something set apart for a special purpose. The Sabbath day was the first thing in Scripture to be called holy, as it was set apart from the other six days of the week to be a special time during which God dwelled in rest and enjoyment with his creation. The place where God’s presence dwelled—first within the tabernacle and then within the temple—was called the most holy place or the holy of holies.

The people of God were called to be holy, set apart as the people with whom God dwelled. They were set apart for a special purpose—to be the people of God who lived with justice, righteousness, and *hesed* in this world. Because holiness carries with it the idea of being set apart, it can be easy to forget that the holy God of Israel makes himself known as a God who draws near. As theologian John Webster points out, God is the Holy One *in the midst* of his people (Hosea 11:9). He is the Holy One who in his majesty, freedom, and power *turns toward* his people in righteousness and mercy.<sup>23</sup> As we read in Isaiah,

The LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice,  
and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts.  
(Isa. 5:16)

Paradoxically, to be holy as God is holy, the holy people of God must be *set apart by drawing near* to others with justice, righteousness, and merciful love in action.

### Love Is Justice and Righteousness

God’s holiness and righteousness are made visible within the Bible as God draws near to his people with justice and merciful love. This becomes especially clear within the biblical story when God helps the poor and powerless. As Swiss theologian Karl Barth points out:

It is important to notice that the people to whom God in His righteousness turns as helper and Savior is everywhere in the Old Testament the harassed

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*To be holy as God is holy, the holy people of God must be set apart by drawing near to others with justice, righteousness, and merciful love in action.*

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and oppressed people of Israel, which, powerless in itself, has no rights, and is delivered over to the superior force of its enemies; and in Israel it is especially the poor, the widows and orphans, the weak and defenseless.<sup>24</sup>

The mighty and all-powerful God chooses to make a covenant with an unknown and powerless people (Israel). Within that powerless and frequently

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oppressed people, God gives special attention to those who are especially beleaguered: the poor, the widows, the orphans, the weak, and the defenseless. God's consistent choice to use his power to love and rescue those who do not have power and strength of their own is the expression of God's justice and righteousness.

This brings us to one more important understanding of the word *righteous* in the Old Testament. Those being mistreated within a relationship and those not receiving "right" treatment—the poor, needy, and oppressed—are all considered righteous in the Bible. In the words of the prophet Amos as he condemns the actions of the Israelites:

They sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth  
and push the afflicted out of the way. (Amos 2:6b–7a NRSV)

This does not mean that the righteous spoken of here are without sin themselves but that they are looking to God to make right what has gone wrong. God keeps a special eye out for these righteous ones because they are in need of restoration. As Psalm 146:7–8 puts it:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
The LORD sets prisoners free,  
the LORD gives sight to the blind,  
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the LORD loves the righteous.

God's commitment to the righteous poor, needy, and oppressed is a reflection of God's faithful love in action and his desire for justice and righteousness in this world, not a "reward" for the reliance or faithfulness of those who are suffering. Because God created the world and the people within the world to live in harmonious unity that all might flourish, it makes biblical sense that God would want to look after those who are living especially far from shalom.

God's justice and righteousness lean toward the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens, and in our calling to justice and righteousness we are to steward, as Barth has said, "against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it."<sup>25</sup>

Contemporary philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff refers to the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens as the "quartet of the vulnerable" because of how often they are named by God as needing particular attention when it comes to doing justice. Neither Barth nor Wolterstorff is suggesting that God loves those who are part of this quartet more than he loves others or that only people who fall within one of these groups can be victims of injustice. Rather, they are acknowledging how often the Old Testament links God's call to act with justice and

righteousness with these groups of people. As Wolterstorff puts it, those most likely to live in or be vulnerable to ongoing conditions of injustice are Scripture's priority.<sup>26</sup> God calls his holy people to seek justice on behalf of those living farthest from his vision of shalom so that all in the community might flourish.

The sinfulness of humanity prevents us from responding faithfully to God's justice calling. We are not able to love God and love others on our own. We do not even know what it means to love God and love others, at least not in the full and rich and whole ways that God intends us to love in keeping with his character of and vision for holiness, *hesed*, justice, righteousness, and shalom.

This is why we need Jesus Christ, as God in the flesh, to show us what love is. Jesus shows us what it means to love God and be loved by God. He shows us what it looks like to live as a beloved child of God, to love our neighbors as

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ourselves, even to the point of death. Not only did Jesus show us these things but he also did these things on our behalf so that we might be transformed into people who can rightly love God and others. As we love God and others in Christ through the Spirit, we are not merely imitating the example of Christ; through our love we are expressing an analogy of God's mercy toward those in great need, a mercy that we ourselves have received in Christ.<sup>27</sup>

In the light of Christ, we come to see that we are *all* poor, wretched, helpless, and utterly dependent on God's saving grace to rescue us. Outside the grace of God, we are incapable of getting right with God, others, ourselves, and the rest of the created world. As slaves to sin, we find it impossible to be holy, to act justly, and to love mercy, but thanks be to God that Jesus Christ came to this earth to find the lost and free the enslaved. Through Christ's righteousness we can become righteous and be restored to right relationships. Because of this grace, we can live the way of life God intended for his holy people, the way of justice and righteousness, the way of shalom.

As one of my (Kristen's) students wrote: "When we marvel at the saving power of God's extravagant love and mercy, whatever imperative we are called to is only in response to the grace, righteousness, and life already given to us by him. Our response is to move in the direction of justice that God is already moving in. Grace calls for justice."<sup>28</sup>

### Invitation for Today: Engage the Whole Story

Abraham Heschel is a Jewish rabbi whose study of the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament) offers incredible wisdom as we seek to understand the fullness and depth of justice represented in the Bible. Heschel eloquently points out that justice is a call that comes from the very character of God himself, and it is a call that God gives to *all* of his people. From his study of God's Word, Heschel became convinced that "to do justice is what God demands of every man: it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously." Scripture reveals further that to do justice is "not only to respect justice in the sense of abstaining from doing injustice, but also to *strive* for it, to *pursue* it. . . . The term 'pursue' carries strong connotations of effort, eagerness, persistence, inflexibility of purpose."<sup>29</sup> When we look to Scripture, we see that God's call to do justice not only comes to every single one of us as God's people, but it also requires each of us to actively pursue it.

I (Bethany) have been spurred toward more deeply immersing myself in the Scriptures and intently pursuing God’s call by dear friends who lead an organization called the A21 (Abolishing Injustice in the 21st Century) Campaign.<sup>30</sup> This organization is dedicated to rescuing victims of human trafficking, providing restoration through aftercare, and prosecuting traffickers in some of the most corrupt cities in our world. A21 was founded by Christine Caine, a woman who lives and breathes Scripture daily and deeply. Most mornings she rises before dawn and fills her mind, heart, and whole being with the Word of God—immersing herself in Scripture, writing in her journal as the Holy Spirit leads, and then teaching the Word of God to others throughout the day ahead. Even though she frequently preaches before thousands, she also sits in hidden corners with those who have suffered unspeakable abuse. Daily she lives to know and give the Word of Truth and the healing love of their Creator. She allows the Holy Spirit to pour the Word of God into her life and pours her life out to others, wherever God leads her to serve.

The A21 Campaign has been a beautiful example of partnership in the pursuit of justice, repeatedly sending their United States director, Amanda-Paige Whittington, and other staff members to join IJM for the Global Prayer Gathering in Washington, DC, each April. Amanda-Paige powerfully expresses this commitment to kingdom partnership in prayer, telling us, “We are armor-bearers with you.” Ever committed to partnership in the gospel, Amanda-Paige has become a constant companion in my own journey to continually renew my mind with the words of Scripture—the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17)—in the face of the intensity of the casework we are exposed to each day. She frequently sends me text messages from her own book-by-book study of the Bible, worship songs that fuel her for the day, or sermons that feed her with truth. Through her friendship I am reminded and also discover anew the many ways that followers of Jesus can bring life to one another simply through a daily, diligent commitment to sharing truth, wisdom, and strength from the Bible, no matter how many thousands of miles away we may live from one another. This too is righteousness; this too leads to justice.

### *The Bigger Story Always at Hand*

God is constantly beckoning each of us to draw near to him, and one of the best gifts he gives us is the opportunity to know and engage the bigger



story of his kingdom. Every one of us needs to be reminded, every day (and by each other), that our call to justice is part of a larger vision that God has had for this world and for his people since the very beginning. When we are faced with the reality of suffering and violence beyond what we can bear to hear, much less actually confront, the Bible reminds us that it is God who leads this work, and it is God who will empower us to respond to his justice calling. Most important, it is God who will enable us to keep responding day in and day out, year after year, over the long haul.

For every image, story, and statistic that overwhelms us, for every victim and perpetrator whose name we learn or even meet in person, for each and every glimpse of injustice that we see as we open our eyes wider, God sees infinitely more, and Scripture invites us into this seeing *with* God. God hears every cry of every single person who suffers, every victim who is abused, and every perpetrator who banks on the lie that God does not see or hear or act. God invites us to hear the cries and to respond *with* him—fueled by his words, empowered by his Spirit.

God saw Boola. God saw the darkness and hopelessness engulfing Boola. God saw him in his suffering. God saw as Boola called his brother, risking his life to reach out with this phone call from a thousand miles away.

Boola's brother reached out to local law enforcement authorities and told them what was happening to Boola, asking for help. It was likely, however, that his call for help would go nowhere. Or worse, calling the police could have resulted in the authorities sending a tip to Boola's slave owner, ensuring that Boola and his fellow slaves would be punished. My colleagues at IJM have seen this over and over again: government authorities in many countries will receive hard evidence of mass atrocities happening to people like Boola, and they will either turn a blind eye because there is no political will to intervene, or they'll turn a blind eye because they are actually profiting from that slave industry themselves by accepting bribes from the slave owners in exchange for protection.

But in this case there was a backstory at work, a *kingdom* backstory of the body of Christ, steeped in the whole story of Scripture, knowing deeply God's passion for justice. God saw Boola, and God was moving through people who didn't even know yet that Boola existed but who *did* know the God of justice revealed in Scripture. God was preparing his people to intervene.

Two weeks before Boola made his phone call, there were about a thousand people gathered to pray near Washington, DC. IJM holds this gathering for

prayer and worship every April (the Global Prayer Gathering) out of the conviction that throughout Scripture we see a God who loves justice and beckons his people to pray in the face of injustice. This Global Prayer Gathering is a time to engage the whole story of Scripture and the story of those who are suffering in our world and respond by talking with God, together. It's a time to ask God to move and act as his Word promises and to prepare our own hearts to be ready to move as God leads.

And so, two weeks before Boola made his phone call, two weeks before any of us even knew that a man named Boola existed, that's what we were doing—a thousand members of the body of Christ, responding to God's love for justice throughout Scripture, responding by showing up in prayer. None of us knew Boola as we prayed for his country that night. But when Boola called his brother, and then his brother called the government authorities, this time something completely unexpected happened. Instead of ignoring Boola's brother's pleas or tipping off the slave owner, this time the government authorities *asked IJM for help*.

The tide was beginning to turn. In all my years of work with IJM it would be impossible to count how many times we have prayed together and pleaded with God about cases that had come to a complete halt because government officials were refusing to move. My colleagues would bring evidence and plan the rescue operations and would be left waiting. IJM refuses to conduct rescue operations without government officials because each country's own government needs to lead the way to enforce their laws. The governments themselves need to do the linchpin work of arresting slave owners and freeing victims. And so year after year it has been a game of waiting, showing up over and over again, and digging in with dogged perseverance.

But in this case, after Boola called his brother and his brother called the government, the government actually *called IJM*. They *initiated* the rescue operation themselves. It was astounding. And that's why we need to remember the kingdom backstory and be prepared through prayer to move with the God who sees.

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*There was a  
kingdom backstory  
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body of Christ  
responding to  
Scripture, knowing  
God's passion for  
justice, and coming  
to God in prayer.*

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If my colleagues had just rescued Boola that day, that would have been in itself a great miracle because Boola, on his own, matters to our loving, faithful, just, and righteous God. Every single one of us matters to this God. And even if just one person is rescued, just one slave owner arrested, a strong message starts to make its way through an entire corrupt system.

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*God hears every cry of every single person who suffers, every victim who is abused, and every perpetrator who banks on the lie that God does not see or hear or act.*

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If they had been able to rescue even a *dozen* others along with Boola, that would have been a massive feat in itself, because rescue is not just about taking someone out of a slave facility. There are a host of steps that must be taken at the point of rescue: protection for each victim, release certificates issued and reparation money paid by the government to each victim, return of the former slaves to their homes, and the beginning of a multiyear aftercare program to ensure each former slave has the opportunity to flourish in his or her new life of freedom. Sometimes it can take weeks for these steps to unfold, if at

all. But in this case, the government authorities not only led the operation to rescue Boola and others but they also worked throughout the night and into the next morning to secure every need for each slavery victim *immediately*.

At the end of the rescue operation Boola was among not just a handful or even a dozen people released from slavery, but he was one of *514 people* rescued. Release certificates were issued for all 514: 514 victims paid reparation by the government, 514 people transported a thousand miles back to their homes. The government completed every single step and without a moment of delay. All these former slaves were taken into a robust aftercare program to help them learn how to live lives of freedom. Their slave owner was arrested.

By far the largest rescue operation in IJM's history to this day, it was unlike anything we had ever seen before. Prompted by the Spirit of God, this was what we had been asking God to do—to move through his people and begin breaking open a deeply ingrained system.

The massive sea change continues today. There have been rescues of unprecedented size, with local government authorities in Boola's country continuing to lead the way.

For the rest of my life, as I carry Boola's story in front of me, and as all of us continue to work together as the body of Christ to see freedom come and slavery end, I will remember the thousand followers of Jesus gathered together in prayer on one side of the world, and the followers of Jesus on the other side of the world who were ready to bring rescue as God flung wide the gates. I will remember that the Holy Spirit formed all of these followers of Jesus to respond to God's call throughout the whole story of Scripture to seek justice and righteousness. And I will remember that this beauty is yet only a glimpse of all God has, is, and will continue to do.

### *How Will You Engage the Story?*

How might the Holy Spirit be leading you and others in your community to consistently receive the gift of God's Word as you seek to be formed into God's holy people, set apart to receive and pursue God's faithful love, justice, righteousness, and shalom?

What steps might you take with your church, a friend, a colleague, a family member, or a neighbor to draw each other to open the Bible, enter into the whole story of Scripture, and receive truth that God will use to renew and equip you to respond to the justice calling in your lives?

How might you grapple together with the ways in which the sermons you are listening to and the passages from the Bible that you are reading connect to the richness of God's vision for this world and for his people?

How can you and your community begin to see justice through the whole story of Scripture?

As Ruth Padilla DeBorst reminded us earlier in this chapter, we are used to reading the Bible in fragments. It takes intentionality to receive the pieces of Scripture we encounter through sermons, Bible studies, or daily devotions and hold them up to the light of the larger story of Scripture. But when we do, beautiful connections and refractions emerge that we might otherwise miss.

I (Kristen) fell in love with studying Scripture when I was in high school. I can still remember the day I received an exhaustive concordance, which (back before the internet) was the best way to find all the places in the Bible where a particular word or topic was mentioned. I remember looking up the word *joy* and then looking up every single verse that mentioned *joy*; I then

compared those verses to the verses that included the words *happy* and *happiness*. I repeated that process word after word after word. The only problem was that I looked up each verse in isolation from the verses surrounding them, which provided the immediate context to make sense of them; I looked them up in isolation from the larger story of Scripture in which they found their fuller meaning.

I have no doubt that God used my study of his Word through that concordance to form me, but I was amazed at what I discovered when I learned to place these verses within the larger story of the Bible, moving from God's creation of the world to Christ's return. Connections that I had never seen

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before emerged, and confusing parts began to make sense, bringing to life the extent and scope of God's gracious commitment to our salvation. Now whenever I hear a passage in a sermon, read a passage during devotions, or study a passage with my church Bible study group, I try to ask: How does this passage fit into the verses around it and the larger narrative of the book in which it is placed? How does it fit into the larger story of the Bible?

As you study Scripture through sermons, Bible studies, and devotions, we encourage you to ask how your reading connects to the larger story of Scripture. When you ponder a favorite verse, take the time to consider how it relates to the grand, gracious sweep of God's commitment to the salvation of the world. Bethany and I have each experienced the ways in which verses and passages that we love and that call us to justice—such as Micah 6:8; Amos 5:24; and Isaiah 58—become more meaningful when we are immersed in the *entire* story of Scripture. As you encounter the movements of the story of God in each chapter of this book, and in the short rendering of the story that we offer for your reflection on the following two pages, we hope that you can see God's commitment to justice and God's calling upon his people to seek justice more fully. We hope that through deep engagement with the whole story of Scripture, the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see opportunities to seek God's justice and righteousness all around you.

### The Whole Story—A Rendering for Reflection

God created the world and everything in it with the intention that humans, animals, and the rest of the created world would flourish as they lived together in mutual harmony, justice, and delight. God's vision for the flourishing of all that he has made is a reflection of God's own character of justice, righteousness, and steadfast love.

The original biblical word for this flourishing is *shalom*. *Shalom* is often translated "peace," but it describes a reality much larger and deeper than the absence of conflict or a pleasant state of mind. The word *shalom* and its biblical counterparts express a holistic vision of the vitality of all of creation—from seed-bearing plants and trees on the land to the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, and human beings. God created humans to live in loving union and harmony with him and to care for one another and the rest of creation in keeping with this *shalom* vision. God called humans to undertake this stewardship in ways that reflected God's own way of justice, righteousness, and love.

Instead of trusting God and remaining in loving union with him, the first humans questioned whether God's commands were intended for their flourishing and made the choice to disobey him. This rupture in the trust and union between God and humans resulted in what we have come to call "the fall" of humanity, a reality with far-reaching ramifications. The fall resulted in disunity between God and the humans he had made, between humans themselves, within each human, and between humans and the rest of the created world. This was the case not only for those first humans but also for all their subsequent kin. God's creation was no longer a place that expressed the fullness of the justice, righteousness, and *shalom* for which it was intended.

Despite the significance of the fall, God in his loving faithfulness did not abandon his original desire for union with his people and for the flourishing of humans and creation within a harmonious order. God made a covenant relationship with the people of Israel, graciously calling them to live in union with him. In calling Israel to be his holy people, God set Israel apart by their relationship with him and by the way he called them to live, exhibiting justice and righteousness in this world. God provided guidelines and laws for the Israelites to create a society in which they could live in union with God, one another, and the (still fallen) created world in ways that continued to reflect God's own heart for and character of justice, righteousness, and love.

The law given by God made provisions for the ramifications of human sin so that the Israelites could worship God and care for all in their midst,

so that everyone could flourish, and so that their kingdom could be a place of refuge and shalom. As the people of Israel lived with justice and righteousness, as they looked after each person in their midst and tended the creation and institutions entrusted to them, God intended that they would be a witness to other nations of God's own love, righteousness, and justice. However, in their fallen state, the people of God continually failed to worship God with their whole hearts and love others in the kingdom of Israel. And yet, through the ups and downs of Israel's efforts to live with and reflect justice, righteousness, and shalom, God remained faithful to his people.

In God's steadfast love he eventually provided his own son, Jesus Christ, who embodied God's justice, righteousness, and shalom in ways that went beyond what anyone could have predicted or imagined. In Christ we can see the fullness of what God intended for his creation and his holy people. Because of what Christ did to set things right through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we—the people of God—can finally live the way God calls us to as we are invited into and receive God's own justice, righteousness, shalom, and love through the Holy Spirit.

As both God and man, Jesus was able to live in perfect relationship with God, others, and the created world throughout his life on earth. Through his death, resurrection, and ascension he overcame the consequences of sin on every level. This means that God's kingdom of justice, righteousness, and shalom can and will be made known through Christ. Jesus promised to return to this earth to fully usher in his kingdom, which has already begun but is not yet fully realized in this world.

With Christ as our savior and king, we are invited into a new covenant of restored union with God, one another, and creation. This new covenant ushers in both the kingdom of God and the church—the people of God united to God as his children through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The people of God are still called to live as God's holy people in this world in ways that reflect God's own character of justice, righteousness, and love; now that we are united to God through Christ and the Spirit, we receive God's very own justice, righteousness, and love. As we are both justified and sanctified by the saving grace of God in Christ, we are reconciled to God and given the ministry of reconciliation in this world. This is our place in the story now, as we live by the grace of God and in anticipation of Christ's return: through the Spirit, we join in Jesus's ongoing kingdom mission in this world, bearing witness to the justice, righteousness, and reconciling love of God in Christ and anticipating the fullness of God's kingdom when all will be made new.