

CHAPTER 6

WHY IS LIFE SO UNFAIR?

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question,
Why is life so unfair?

Life is unfair

There are many contrasts in the world we live in. You see rich and poor people, healthy and diseased, strong and weak, the powerful and the exploited, those with many friends and those alone, and many other contrasts besides these. Some seem disadvantaged while others have more than their fair share. This lack of fairness in the world distresses many people. We expect God to be fair, yet we see great contrasts in people's lives. Why is life so unfair?

Our distress deepens when we see innocent people suffering terrible diseases, while evil and selfish people can enjoy long and healthy lives. This second and related problem can be stated by asking the question, 'why is there a lack of justice?'

Why God allows unfairness

God could rectify any unfairness in an instant, but clearly He chooses not to do this. We therefore will start to answer the question, why is life so unfair, by looking at why God allows unfairness to happen and then apparently leaves it uncorrected.

Firstly, we need to note that God did not create everyone equal. He created Adam stronger than Eve (cf 1 Peter 3:7), so there is an inherent inequality in life even before sin entered the world. We can also point out that as individuals we possess natural abilities and talents, many of which we inherit from our parents. God made us different from each other. He also created the world with variety, so some lands contain precious metals or minerals, some have rivers flowing through them, some have trees growing on them, and some are good for growing crops.

We could argue these differences are unfair, but if everyone had the same abilities and every country the same climate and identical resources, the resulting uniformity would make the world a much poorer place. These differences in abilities and resources need not lead to an unfair world. If used equitably, they could benefit humanity as a whole.

Why God allows injustice

Secondly, God has given mankind the freedom to make moral decisions which can affect others and so could give rise to injustice. God allows us to exercise our choice and be responsible for the consequences of our actions (Deuteronomy 11:26–28). If He chose to intervene in every moral decision we make, He would take back the freedom and responsibility He has given us.

Because we have this freedom, things will not always work out the way God would wish. Sometimes we will cause injustice and other times we will be unfairly treated ourselves.

Selfishness

As we saw in chapter two, everyone inherits a sinful nature and cannot naturally make righteous decisions (Romans 3:10). We all need to learn the difference between right and wrong. If we recognised this, we would seek God for a better understanding of righteousness rather than trusting in our own judgment. This is unlikely, as we are basically proud and seek to do things the way we feel is right. We naturally want to pursue our own interests rather than the interests of others. The small selfish decisions we make on a personal level add up collectively to make the world an unfair place.

Good rulers encourage fairness

Particularly important to understanding why life is so unfair are the decisions people make when they have responsible roles in society. Leaders have more of a potential to influence society. King Solomon recognised his natural failings and asked God for a heart which could judge others righteously.

1 Kings 3:7–10 ‘Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great

people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. (NIV)

Because Solomon sought righteousness, he enjoyed peace and prosperity and his people were happy (1 Kings 10:8). If all our leaders sought God in the same way, life would not be so unfair. Unfortunately it is not that way. Most leaders do not seek after God, and as a consequence, their people are not blessed.

Proverbs 29:2 When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. (ESV)

Fairness is not always desired in rulers

The way those in authority are appointed makes it less likely they will be righteous. Promotion, very often, is based on ability—especially the ability to speak well. Nepotism or friendship can also be reasons. Sometimes people seek to promote themselves through corruption, or intimidation and force. Additionally, people will sometimes deliberately favour amoral leaders so their own sin need not be challenged.

Because of the way leaders are appointed, fairness and justice will not be their highest motives. Power, influence, money and pride will be more relevant.

1 John 2:16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. (NKJV)

These unrighteous aims will pervert a leader's judgment, increasing the likelihood of injustice and unfairness in their decision making.

Imperfect rulers

In spite of the unrighteous nature of many of our leaders, there is still a measure of fairness and justice in their decisions. God respects them, calling them His ministers (Romans 13:1–8), and He uses them to keep sin in control.

1 Peter 2:13–14 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. (NIV)

We need to accept the fact that the laws of a nation will be imperfect. Judges will not always make good decisions simply because their ability to judge is limited. Moses, in contrast, had a close relationship with God, and so he could make better judgments than the elders he appointed to help him (Exodus 18:13–27).

Although the rulers of a nation influence their people greatly, the people of a nation can, in turn, influence their leaders through prayer.

1 Timothy 2:1–2 I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (NIV)

(See also Proverbs 21:1.)

The rich and famous are not as advantaged as we may think

It is very easy for us to misjudge situations as we look on things from our own limited understanding, and we can be completely unaware of something really important. Money and wealth is such an area where we can have a wrong understanding. Many people think it is good to be secure financially and so spend much time and energy in acquiring possessions. But the Bible shows us clearly that this type of thinking is flawed.

Mark 10:24...But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! ...” (NKJV)

Riches are deceitful (Matthew 13:22)—they only have a temporary value and no eternal benefit. When a rich man and a poor man die all their wealth is left behind for someone else to have (Ecclesiastes 5:15; 1 Timothy 6:7). Riches promise security, yet in time of trouble are of no value whatsoever (Proverbs 11:4). They are a burden rather than a blessing (Ecclesiastes 5:12). They bring many friends (Proverbs 19:4–6), but we will not always know who is a true friend. Riches, like favouritism, bring enemies because others will be envious of us (Genesis 26:12–16; 37:3–4).

Wisdom more valuable than money

Our attitude to money is far more important than how much of it we have (Matthew 25:14–30; Mark 12:41–44). A wise man would say the following:

Proverbs 30:8–9...give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. (ESV)

Instead of seeking money, we should seek those things which are of value in God’s sight. Although a Bible is normally cheap to buy, its true value is enormous.

Psalms 119:72 The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (ESV)

It is good for us to read the Bible regularly and to benefit from its great value. As we do so, we will gain wisdom, which again, is far more value than money.

Proverbs 16:16 How much better to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. (NKJV)

(See also Proverbs 3:13–15.)

Other things more valuable than money

There are other things more valuable than money. Our trials of faith are much more precious than gold, (1 Peter 1:6–7), righteousness and a good reputation are better than great riches (Proverbs 11:4; 22:1), and a virtuous wife is worth more than rubies (Proverbs 31:10).

If we place too high a value on money, our view on life will be distorted, and we can end up losing out in the long run.

Matthew 6:19–21 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...” (NKJV)

The disadvantaged are more likely to respond to the gospel

Although the gospel is an invitation to all people to come into life (Matthew 28:19–20; John 3:16–17), it has a special appeal to those in need.

Luke 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (NIV)

(See also Matthew 5:3; 11:5.)

The poor and needy are more likely to respond to the gospel while those who are rich and have a full life are generally not interested in seeking after God.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are

mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (NKJV)

(See also Luke 14:16–24; 18:18–25).

The best gifts are spiritual

Even if a rich and talented person receives the gospel, it does not necessarily mean they will be more useful to God than a disadvantaged person. God does not need us to have great abilities as He empowers us with His Holy Spirit. Moses was concerned that his lack of eloquence would hinder his acceptability as a leader, but God assured him that his shortcoming would not fail him because He would be with him (Exodus 4:10–12). The key quality God looks for is to have a heart that wants to follow Him (1 Samuel 16:7).

God is doing something now about injustice

God has good reasons for allowing injustice to continue for a time. It can help with our character development, if nothing else. However, He is still interested in promoting righteousness, fairness and justice. Sometimes He will directly intervene in situations to correct extreme behaviour (Acts 12:21–23; Genesis 19), although sometimes though He will allow extreme behaviour to continue (consider the Holocaust in World War Two). Sometimes He will intervene in response to prayers of righteous people (Isaiah 37).

God blesses those who do good and curses those who do evil

Most of the time God will intervene but in a subtle way so as not to undermine our freedom. He does this by blessing those who do good while cursing those who do evil.

Proverbs 12:2 A good man obtains favour from the LORD, but a man of evil devices he condemns. (ESV)

Proverbs 10:27 The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short. (ESV)

(See also Jeremiah 17:10–11; Ecclesiastes 2:26.)

These blessings and curses might not at first be obvious to us, but in time we should see contrasts in the fortunes of good and evil people. Because this is a general principle, it will not apply in every situation at any given time.

Sometimes good people suffer and bad people do well

Sometimes we will see the opposite happening—righteous people suffering and wicked people prospering.

Ecclesiastes 8:14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. (NIV)

The reason for this is God has created the world in such a way that there is a degree of unexpectedness or chance, so therefore not everything is predictable.

Ecclesiastes 9:11 I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. (NIV)

The idea of a wicked person prospering and living a long life in relative ease bothered a number of the writers in the Bible. They felt that God should intervene. Jeremiah asked God, in a reverent manner, as to why the wicked were prospering and so happy (Jeremiah 12:1–2). Job also struggled with this problem (Job 21:7ff). Asaph was upset when he saw the wicked prospering and, like Jeremiah, he asked God for the reason (Psalm 73). A summary of Asaph's account is as follows:

Asaph was envious at the wicked because he saw their prosperity (verse 3); they are not in trouble like others (verse 5); they increase in riches (verse 12); yet Asaph who followed good has been continually chastened (verse 14); this was too painful for him to think about (verse 16); so he went and asked God and understood their end (verse 17); they are brought into desolation as in a moment and utterly consumed with terrors (verse 19); he concludes they that are far from God perish (verse 27); and it is good to draw near to God (verse 28).

God's answer to Asaph was to consider what happens to the wicked person after death. Our present life is so short compared with eternity.

Ecclesiastes 8:12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. (NKJV)

We can do something now about unfairness

We have an opportunity now to help remove some of the unfairness by thinking on others less fortunate than ourselves. We can, for instance, give to the poor, visit the sick and elderly, and in general place the care of others before our own interests. Paul suggests that not many people will do this.

Philippians 2:19–21 But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. (NKJV)

We can do our part in alleviating unfairness. We can also influence others to do likewise and we can pray for our leaders. However, we are not in control of this world, so we will only have a limited and unrecognisable impact on it. The problem of unfairness is far too big for us to resolve; therefore, we have to commit it to God and trust that He has a plan to work it all out.

Unfairness and injustice is only for a time

Unfairness and injustice seem worse than they are because they appear to last such a long time. However, in the light of eternity, a lifetime is really a short time indeed, and we should bear this in mind when we think about these problems. The disciples in the New Testament had a healthy view on life because they cared not for this earth as they knew what was coming. Both Paul, (Acts 20:22–25), and Peter, (2 Peter 1:13–15), knew they were going to die for Jesus' sake, and they were looking forward to being with Him.

Accepting death and thinking about what happens afterwards will place us in a better position to handle the problems of unfairness and injustice.

God will eventually correct all unfairness and injustice

It is grieving to see injustice on this earth—evil not being punished and good not being rewarded. Many people have cried out for justice through the ages.

Psalm 119:84 How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors? (NIV)

We can take comfort that God has a plan to end all unfairness and injustice.

2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. (NKJV)

The Day of Judgment

One day, God will judge all things and eliminate unfairness and correct every injustice. This day, called The Day of Judgment, is very important to God, and it is referred to many times in the Bible. He tells us His Son, Jesus Christ, will be the Judge (John 5:22) and everyone must appear before Him (2 Corinthians 5:10;

Romans 14:10; 1 Peter 4:17). There will be no favouritism or discrimination (Romans 2:11), God will judge us fairly and correctly (Psalm 96:10) and whatever decisions are made will have eternal consequences for us (Hebrews 6:2).

We might have forgotten what we did when we were young, yet God will still judge these things (Ecclesiastes 3:15). Nothing about us will be hidden from Him, and we will need to give account for all that we have said and all that we have done.

Matthew 12:36 But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.
(NKJV)

Look beyond this life

How we answer the question, why life is so unfair, depends on how we view life. If all we can see is life on this earth and death ending it all, then clearly it is unfair. If instead we align our view on life with what the Bible teaches, we will be able to accept injustice, knowing there will be a time when all things are put right.

The time we are now living in is when man rules and unfairness prevails, but there is coming a time when God shall rule in righteousness.

Psalm 67:3–4 Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You. Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For You shall judge the people righteously, And govern the nations on earth. (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. Would your relationship with God suffer if you experienced an injustice and He chose not to intervene on your behalf?
2. What wrongs would you seek immediate justice for, what wrongs could you leave until the Judgment Day, and what wrongs would you earnestly ask God to overlook?

3. Have we the right to see anything that happens to us as being unfair?

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