

God's Law & Order

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. The longest-running American TV drama ever screened. Any idea what it is? What's that? Not *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Not *MASH*. Okay, well, *MASH* is right up there, but it's not *MASH*. It's another one. Any guesses? What's that?

No, no, not *Days of Our Lives*. Okay, I'll tell you. I'll tell you. I haven't heard it yet. The longest-running American TV drama ever screened was *Law & Order*. You've seen *Law & Order*? Put up your hands.

Lots of people have seen *Law & Order*. If you've spent... What's that? Someone said? I know. Everyone's seen it. Well, it actually premiered in 1990, as far back as that.

And the original show ran for 20 consecutive years, after which they had many spin-off shows, *Law & Order UK*, *Law & Order Special Victims Unit*, and all of these other shows that are still airing today.

[0 : 59] So it's a very successful show. And if you haven't seen it, basically each episode is the story of a crime, and the first half is the police investigating and solving that crime and catching the suspect, like a normal police procedural.

But then it doesn't end there. The second half of the show goes into a courtroom drama where they then prosecute the crime. The legal team prosecutes the crime. So you get to see the whole legal process in one episode.

And I think that is the key to the success of the show. I think that's why it's so popular. The reason is because I think there's something in us as humans that loves seeing justice done. And this show, even though it's fictional and it gives fictional stories, it shows us justice being done, justice being achieved.

And it connects with something deep inside us, doesn't it? We love justice. We love the idea of justice. We love to see justice done. Like the time I was sitting in traffic and I saw a taxi drive in the yellow service lane, on the yellow line, while there was a queue of cars.

You've seen this before? You know, you're sitting there and you go, oh, man, and he drives past. He doesn't consider that there's a queue. He doesn't respect anyone. And I was watching this and I go, there goes another taxi, until a trafficker pulled out in front of him that he didn't see and put his lights on and pulled him over.

[2 : 17] But it was the most satisfying feeling in the world, isn't it? I mean, when you see a trafficker pull over a taxi, it's just you can't beat that feeling of satisfaction. And that is because we have this sense of justice in us that must be satisfied.

It's one of the ways humans differ from animals. We have this intense inbuilt desire to see justice done. We have this desire for law and order. And that's why it's so reassuring when we turn to the Bible and we read about God and we discover that our Creator is a God who also is deeply concerned with law and order.

And we see this throughout the way that he's constructed this world and constructed societies. And this morning we see an example of God's law and order in this passage, Joshua chapter 20.

Now, for those of you who haven't been with us for our series, the book of Joshua teaches us about the establishment of the nation of Israel under God's rule, under God's guidance, and with God's help.

But one of the things about ancient Israel was its legal system, which was far advanced of any other country of its time. If you look at the laws that it had, no other country in the ancient world had laws quite like Israel's.

[3 : 30] And while many of its laws seem strange to modern ears, there are nonetheless deep truths about God's justice that we can learn from each one of them. And so that's what I'm going to try to do this morning with this chapter, chapter 20 of Joshua, which describes a particular law regarding what are known as cities of refuge.

Now, let me explain to you what cities of refuge actually are. A part of Israel's justice system was that each extended family, so each sort of larger family with its cousins and in-laws and everything, had a legal representative, someone who would be able to represent this family in court and in disputes and defend the rights of this particular family.

That was one of the bases of the justice system in Israel, these family lawyers, so to speak. But they weren't just family lawyers, because in the case of a murder of one of the family, this representative would also be tasked with tracking down and executing the murderer.

So he was kind of a family lawyer come bounty hunter. And these people were called Avengers of Blood. Pretty scary name. And you can imagine they were pretty scary people.

You don't want an Avenger of Blood tracking you down. But it was necessary in the society, because in a time without police, this would be the main deterrent against crimes such as murder.

[4 : 52] You know that if you kill someone, the Avenger of Blood will be out for you. And so that was, it was an important part of the kind of policing system of ancient Israel.

But as you can imagine, this would have created problems in the case of an accidental death, which sadly is part of what happens in a broken world. You know, say someone, there's a construction site, they're building a house, and someone accidentally drops a stone, and it lands on someone and kills them.

Now by this law, the Avenger of Blood of the victim's family was still entitled to kill the person whose fault it was, even though it was accidental, which isn't quite fair. And so, it's for these cases that God specially commanded Israel to establish what we call these cities of refuge, to which the responsible party could flee, and in which the Avenger of Blood wasn't allowed to touch them.

So once they were in the city of refuge, and they handed themselves over to the city authorities, the Avenger of Blood wasn't allowed to come in, wasn't allowed to hunt them down, once they were in the city. And that's what this chapter in Joshua is all about.

The entire chapter, chapter 20, is all about these, establishing these cities of refuge in the new Israel. So it's a strange little example of Israelite law, but it's one that God nonetheless insisted on, and it's in the Bible, because like everything, it teaches us something today.

[6 : 11] It teaches us some very important lessons about the nature of God's justice. justice. And we as human beings, justice-loving, justice-desiring human beings, should really be interested in God's justice, and what we can expect from God's justice, and how that affects our lives today.

Because the God of the Old Testament hasn't changed today. He's the same God today. His justice is the same. And so we learn a couple of important lessons. And the first lesson we learn about God's justice this morning, in this chapter, is it's fairness, just that God's justice is fair.

So if you look at, from verse 1 with me, in your Bibles, then the Lord said to Joshua, tell the Israelites to designate cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there, and find protection from the avenger of blood.

When they flee to one of these cities, they are to stand in the entrance of the city gate, and state their case before the elders of that city. So, you see here how God doesn't just consider the outcome that a person was killed.

God also considers the reasons behind the outcome, the motives of the heart that caused it. That's the thing about God. He's always concerned with the cause, with the motives.

[7 : 31] God considers all aspects of a crime, of an event, unlike often human beings do. In fact, I remember at school once, I was playing soccer at break time, and I got tackled, and my ankle got hurt.

And I was struggling to kind of move around. It was quite hurt. I was quite sore, but I hobbled back to the school after the bell went. And I had a history test the very next period.

There was a history test that the teacher had told us for weeks in advance. And I went to her, and I said, listen, I've, you know, I had an accident on the field. I'm very sore. I wonder if I can go to sick bay and skip the test.

She would have none of it. Because, and the reason is, because there were a lot of other people I had found out who were also asking to be excused from this history test for a number of different reasons.

And so the teacher just sort of had a blanket, well, she didn't allow anyone for any reason to skip the history test. So there I had to sit writhing in pain because of my sore ankle, writing this history test.

[8 : 42] And she thought I was just faking and putting on a show. Anyway, after school I went to the doctor, had an x-ray, and it turned out that I'd fractured my ankle. And I had to have a cast for a number of weeks after that, which was a great pleasure the next day when I went to the history teacher and told her that I had actually fractured my ankle and hobbled in with these crutches and this cast.

She felt very guilty for making me write the test. But the point is, the point of that story is that my history teacher, she painted everyone with the same brush. She thought I was just making an excuse, like the same as everyone else, that I didn't have a valid case.

She didn't take all the factors into consideration. She didn't, so to speak, look at the motives of my heart. And she couldn't. I mean, to be fair, it was difficult for her to see who was telling the truth and who wasn't, because she was limited in her knowledge.

But not God. You see, God's justice isn't like that. God's justice is never unfair. God's justice is always fair. God doesn't judge just from impressions.

He looks deeper. He is totally fair in His judgments, and He wants His people to reflect that in their dealings with each other. He wants fairness of judgment to be something that marks out a child of God, that marks out someone who is in His covenant people.

[10 : 00] And part of this is that He insists on due process, that the killer be allowed to state his case. You notice that He says, before the avenger of blood can catch the sky, he should at least have a chance to be able to prove his innocence, to state his case to the elders of the city.

And then we read later, He be given, even after that, a fair trial before sentence is passed. Verse 6, they are to stay in that city until they have stood a fair trial before the assembly.

And so the avenger of blood wasn't allowed to touch them before they had a fair trial, before everything was heard. And this was just, as I say, way ahead of any other legal system of its day. In Assyria and Babylon and Egypt, there was no such thing as due process and fair trial. But with God, you see, He insisted for His people that they be different to the rest of the world, that no punishment be meted out until all the factors have been considered.

And in fact, you could say that the legal system we enjoy today, where people have the right to fair representation and a fair trial, came into being because of these biblical principles that we read in the Bible.

[11 : 09] And so as Christians, if this is a mark of God's people, fairness in judgment, we should uphold and support the legal processes of our country because that is God's will.

It is a reflection of God's will. And not just in our country, but in our dealings with other people as well. Give people a fair hearing. Don't jump to conclusions when people are stating something. Look at all the evidence. Consider all the factors. It's important in our personal relationships to do that, but also in our roles as citizens of this country.

If no one else is going to uphold the justice system, Christians must because we represent the God of justice. So we should be against any form of mob justice or vigilantism or punishment without trial, which is hard in a country like South Africa often, isn't it?

Where we often don't trust the justice system. Where communities often take justice into their own hands. Where private security companies, after catching suspects, often take them into the bush and teach them a lesson before handing them over to police.

[12 : 20] And we feel satisfied when they do that. But satisfying as it may be, as Christians, we should stand against it. We shouldn't allow that. We should insist on due process and fair trial because that is what God insists on.

That's what he wants his people to reflect because God's justice is fair and so should ours be. That's the first thing we learn about his justice here. But secondly, we see that God's justice is accessible as well.

So, from verse 7, we're told what cities were selected as cities of refuge in response to God's command, which were Kedesh, Shechem, Kirith, Abba, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan.

Now that probably means nothing to you. But what's interesting is if you did some work and you actually looked at these cities on a map, and that's what I'm going to do behind me, I'm going to plot these cities out on a map, and what you can see, I want you to notice how they were distributed. These cities were distributed three on each side of the Jordan River, one in the north, one in kind of the middle region of each bank, and one on the south. And each of them was, in fact, near a major roadway, as you can see in the next slide.

[13 : 35] So that nowhere in Israel was more than a day's journey away from at least one of these cities of refuge, as the next slide will show. So this was the, you know, that was the distance that it took to travel in a day on foot.

And if you were going fairly quick, but I mean, when an avenger of blood was out to get you, you weren't going to dawdle. So you would be able to reach at least one of these cities because of the road structure and because of where they were placed.

Now what does that tell us about God? When we plot these cities out on a map, what does it actually teach us about God? Well, it tells us that he wants everyone to have a fair chance at appealing to his justice, that no one should be out of range of appealing to God's justice, that his justice is to be accessible to all.

And not even just Israelites, but look at verse 9 again. Any of the Israelites or any foreigner residing among them who killed someone accidentally should flee to these designated cities.

Now this is very important to understand because again, we live in a world where different people are given different chances at justice, aren't they?

[14 : 47] Depending on who they are, depending on where they live, depending on how much money they have. If you're rich, you can afford the best lawyer. If you're in an affluent area, you'll have the best police to investigate crimes.

But if you're poor, well then you don't have nearly as much chance of seeing justice done, do you? And you also stand more chance of being falsely accused for something someone else did or a misunderstanding of what you did because you won't have fair trial.

And lots of people in our country and around the world do not have the chance of fair trial, do not have the chance of justice because they can't afford it or because they're just not the right type of people.

But that is not so in God's justice system which we see again here in Joshua. God is concerned that anyone and everyone has access to fair justice.

No matter who they are, no matter where they live. And so, what does that mean for us? If we are His people today, that means that we need to uphold that priority in our lives.

[15 : 55] That everyone is given access access to justice. Whether it's in our personal relationships, whether it's in our family context, or whether it's in the country we live.

We need to ensure that no one is given preferential treatment because of their status or their bank account. We need to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard, especially the poor and those who can't defend themselves.

Isaiah 1.17, God says this to His people. He says, learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the case of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow.

See, that is a mark of God's people. That they are deeply concerned, not just with the fairness of justice, but the accessibility of justice. That everyone has a chance to be heard.

And so, you know, those who are down and out of Israel's time, those who couldn't provide or protect themselves, the fatherless, the widow, God's people were called to protect them and represent them.

[17 : 00] And so when you see injustice, if you are a person of God, if you are in God's covenant community, if you are a follower of Christ, when you see injustice in any form, small cases, big cases, as a Christian, you are called to stand up against injustice as a part of your witness.

You know, during apartheid, the church and white Christians, sadly, failed to do that most of the time.

Many turned a blind eye to the injustices of the apartheid government. And that was wrong, and it needs to be repented of. Because God wants justice to be accessible to all, irrespective of race, irrespective of status, irrespective of anything else.

everyone made in God's image should have a chance of justice. Because God's justice is to be accessible. But then, finally, we learn this about God's justice.

We learn that God's justice demands satisfaction. It's fair, it's accessible, but it always demands satisfaction. That's what we see in this passage, if we just consider it a little deeper.

[18 : 08] Because while God wanted a killing done unintentionally to have a fair trial, notice there was still a consequence to it. You see, this passage is not all about just letting those who kill unintentionally off.

It's also about putting them through a process where there is a consequence that even they have to pay. So the killer, even if they were found out to be innocent of the murder, had nonetheless spilt blood, and they had to pay a price.

Look again at verse 6. They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Okay, so the person had to leave their hometown and they had to stay in the city of refuge for years.

They weren't allowed to go home. They weren't allowed to see their family unless their family visited them. It was kind of like incarceration. It was kind of like a prison. They had to be separated from the rest of the community under the pain of death.

In fact, in Numbers we read, but if the accused, so even if they're innocent, if the accused ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which they have fled and the avenger of blood finds them outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused.

[19 : 24] The accused must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. And so you see, even though the killing was unintentional, God doesn't just let it go or sweep it under the carpet.

God's justice never lets things go or sweep them under the carpet. There's still a consequence to action. The question we should be asking though is what's this thing about the death of the high priest?

Why does the death of the high priest change the situation? Why then suddenly are they allowed to leave the city of refuge and go back home and they've got freedom and it's like nothing ever happened?

And this is where we need to delve a little bit deeper because you see the role of the high priest, it wasn't just anyone, it wasn't like some random person who had to die and then they went free. It was the high priest himself.

And the role of the high priest in the Old Testament was essentially to represent the guilt of the people of Israel to God and then to, through the process of sacrifice, to make atonement for it.

[20 : 25] That was the job of the high priest. He represented the people of God, to God. And the whole concept of sacrifice, the system that the high priest went through, reminded the people that a price needed to be paid for their sins.

But it also reminded people at the same time, when they saw the high priest going through this process of sacrifice, it reminded them not only that their sin has a price, but that God has made a way for that price to fall on a substitute, on the sacrifice.

But there was a slight difference when it came to killing another human being. You see, when it came to killing another human being, because of the sanctity of life itself, made in God's image, only human life could atone for human life in God's system.

Only another death could clear the guilt of the first death. And so, symbolically, God allowed the natural death of the high priest to be a satisfactory substitute for the death of the accused.

God declared, once the high priest died, that the accused didn't need to die because someone else had, essentially, in his place. Do you see what it means? Which, of course, still doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

[21 : 45] You know, why the high priest? How does that kind of cover the action that the accused did? It doesn't make a whole lot of sense until we stop and we think about it and we realize, wait a minute, this is God's way of pointing us to Jesus, isn't it?

Everything in the Old Testament, every part of the Old Testament, in some way, points us to Jesus. Jesus himself said that. The Old Testament foreshadows Jesus in so many different ways and it helps us to understand what his death really means for us today.

And so, you see, what the high priest was, symbolically here, in his death, clearing the guilt of the accused, Jesus was in reality when he died on the cross. Do you see the link? The high priest symbolically was the substitute for the accused.

Jesus, in reality, was the true substitute that the high priest foreshadowed. But, of course, Jesus' death went way far above the death of the high priest in the Old Testament because Jesus' death covered so much more than just unintentional sin.

You see, our sin, let's be honest, is far more than unintentional and accidental. Much as we like to say it is, we sin in numerous ways, knowing full well that we're sinning and not stopping very intentionally much of the time.

[23 : 13] And here's the thing, every sin against our Creator deserves the death penalty, nothing less. It sounds pretty harsh, but the Bible says the wages of sin is death.

Rebellion against the giver of life deserves the removal of life. That makes sense. If we rebel, turn our back on the God who gives us everything, the God who gives us life, when we ignore Him in the world that He's made, He has every right to remove that life from us.

The wages of sin is death and eternal judgment. The Bible is clear on that. And so, while we read the description of God's justice in this passage, you know, the idea that God's justice is fair, that it looks at the heart, that He is impartial, that shouldn't comfort us so much as make us scared.

You know what I mean? If God's justice is totally fair, if He doesn't sweep any sin under the carpet, then it should make us fear when we realize that our hearts are filled with wrong motives most of the time.

and that we have broken God's laws more times than we can count. The fair thing for us should be punishment by a God who never does anything that is unfair, by a God who never sweeps sin under the carpet.

[24 : 38] You know, God is not a God who says, ah, it's okay, I'll forgive you. He never does that. He's a scary God of justice. And while this world might sweep much sin under the carpet, and while we might be able to hide it from others, we're very good at hiding our sin from others, aren't we?

Especially the sins of the heart, the sins of the mind. Just remember that no sin will be ignored by a holy God who sees everything, who penetrates the deepest soul, who understands your deepest thought, and a God who ensures that justice is always done.

That should make us tremble. I think as Christians, we forget to tremble from time to time. I think we need to stop and tremble at this God.

When we look at us, we look at how far short we've fallen of God's glory, and we look at God and we see His perfection and His holiness and His justice, we should stop, we should gulp, and we should tremble.

But we shouldn't only do that. We should then look to Jesus and cling to Him all the more. Because in Jesus, God has made a way, the only way, for us, the accused, to be cleared of guilt through the shedding of blood.

[25 : 53] And for His justice still to be upheld. In Jesus, God has made a way that we can be cleared of guilt, that we can find refuge, and yet God's justice isn't compromised.

That God's justice is still done. And that happened when Jesus died on the cross as our substitute through the shedding of His blood, which is the core of what it means to be a Christian.

To not just believe that, but to cling to it and to realize how much you need that atoning death. How much you need Jesus daily in your life.

And so, while God is totally just, God is also incredibly merciful. And it's in the gospel, only in the gospel, that we ever see both sides of God, both aspects of God, held up perfectly.

God's justice without compromise and God's complete mercy in that He wants to provide a refuge from the consequences of our sin, and yet He also must punish it.

[26 : 54] And so, He creates, if you like, a city of refuge for you and me. A refuge that is available and accessible to anyone, even the worst sinner.

But you need to take that refuge if you're to be safe from punishment. You need to enter into that refuge. And God has given you this life, this, I don't know, 80, 85, 90 years on earth, not much.

God has given you this as a chance to enter the refuge before the avenger of blood catches you, which is your impending death and standing before God on judgment day.

Are you going to enter into that refuge before it's too late? Just like the accused in this passage had to enter into the city of refuge to be safe and give himself up to the city authorities.

You know, he didn't just enter the city and find an inn and hide away. He entered the city and he had to go and surrender himself to the city authorities to escape the avenger of blood. So we need to do the same.

[27 : 53] We need to actually enter into the refuge that God offers us and surrender ourselves to Jesus who is our rightful authority. Because we're all under the sentence of death, no matter how pleasant a person you seem to be, no matter how decent image you project onto society and the people around you, you are under the death penalty for your sin against God.

And so if you're still on the run, if you're still unsure of your eternity, under the pain of death, if the avenger of blood is still hot on your heels and you don't know where you're going to go when you die, and your sins are still weighing down against you and you feel the guilt of them, then run. Run as soon as you can to God's refuge. The gates are wide open. You just need to run to God's refuge in Jesus. You need to give yourself up to him because there and only there will you ever find full forgiveness.

Will you do that? And if you are there already, will you be completely and utterly thankful for the refuge that God has given and worship him and serve him because of what he's done in Jesus Christ?

Well, let's pray. Yes, Heavenly Father, we do want to just give you gratitude for making a refuge for us. We know that our sins are far more than unintentional.

[29 : 23] We know that our sins of thoughts, of word and deed have broken your laws. We know how many ways we go against your will in our lives.

And so we thank you for making a refuge in Jesus Christ. Lord, we thank you for this reminder this morning that you are completely just and we pray that you would help us to be just in our dealings with others but also help us to again realize who Jesus is and what he's done for us and that we can cling to him and find full forgiveness through the shedding of his blood.

Would you help us to cling to him, to worship him and to serve him all the days of our life. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.