

Justice in an Unjust World

By Gary Haugen
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WHERE IS GOD?

Here's a simple proposition: If you really want to know someone, you need to know where they've been. The idea is simple enough, but it has radically altered my understanding of what it means to know God—because, frankly, it's hard to hear about where He's been.

I myself have been to some pretty horrible places. And those places form part of who I am. In the fall of 1994, for instance, I served as the director of the UN's genocide investigation in Rwanda. As you may recall, during a period of about two months in the spring of 1994, about five hundred thousand Rwandans were hacked to death by their neighbors. When I arrived in October, my job was to view about one hundred mass grave and massacre sites, deploying teams of investigators to gather evidence.

I spent my days sorting through the human carnage that remained, piled knee-high, in the churches where Tutsi women and children had fled for safety. With a bulldozer we turned over mass graves outside churches and stadiums where thousands of dismembered fathers, sisters, and grandmothers had been cast into vast pits of death. I spent hour after hour taking the testimony of those who survived these orgies of murder—many of them children who had seen their entire families butchered before their eyes.

Murder investigators begin with corpses and work their way through physical evidence and eyewitness testimony to reconstruct the story of what happened. In these cases, the stories were unspeakably horrific. Hundreds, even thousands, of defenseless Tutsi women and children had huddled in church sanctuaries, schools, and stadiums to seek safety from the Hutu militias and mobs. Often it would take several days of drunken butchery before all of the screams fell silent. I was there for the horrific aftermath, but I wasn't there for the horror.

Nevertheless, I know someone who was there—my God.

As I have come to understand God's real presence amidst the horrendous injustice of our earth, I see why zeal for justice is at the very core of His being. Justice, for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is not a good idea, a noble aspiration, a theoretical satisfaction, or an impersonal principle; it is His very beating heart.

Every day, all day, wherever vulnerable men, women and children are victimized by the abuse of power, our God is there suffering with them. This is what it means to say that God is a God of compassion, a word that in its Latin roots means “to suffer with.” At the heart of God’s compassion is the fact that He directly observes the suffering of the abused. When it comes to the brutality of injustice in our fallen world, there is no place for an all-knowing God to hide—a God who “has compassion on all he has made” (Ps. 145:9).

Over and over in the Scriptures, God tells us that He sees and hears the suffering of the oppressed: “The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed... He does not ignore the cry of the afflicted” (Ps. 9:9-12). “To deprive a man of justice—would not the Lord see such things?” (Lam. 3:36).

Moreover, it is this very compassion—“suffering with” the oppressed—that animates God’s passionate, all-consuming response to injustice. Simply put, God hates injustice and wants it to stop. “The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence His soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice...” (Ps. 11:5-7).

I’m sure I had read this before in my Bible, but I don’t think I really got it until I began to reflect upon what it must have been like for God to be present, really present, through every hacking, screaming moment of the Rwandan genocide, and every other brutal injustice perpetrated upon those who are weak and vulnerable on our earth.

God’s hatred of injustice is fundamental to His nature, and the Bible makes clear that those who do not understand this aspect of God’s holiness simply do not know him. “For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing” (Isa. 61:8). The God of the Bible is not mildly bothered by the abuse of power, or tepidly resigned to injustice in a fallen world. The use of power by the strong to abuse the weak strikes at the very core of His holy heart. While we may grow numb or oblivious to much of the brutal abuse of our world, God maintains a fresh, holy hatred of injustice—“God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day” (Ps. 7:11).

And yet, somehow, we want to know this God without having to know where He’s been. Over and over again, however, as I approach God in prayer I can hear His gentle voice prodding me, “Son, do you have any idea where your Father has been lately?”

The God Who Suffers With Victims of Injustice

I remember coming home from the killing fields of Rwanda and feeling a bit wounded by friends who did not express even ten minutes of curiosity about what I had seen. Given how unpleasant it all was, I really didn’t blame them; in fact, most of the time I didn’t like talking about it very much. But my closest family and friends, who really wanted to know me, wouldn’t let me get away with silence. They knew that they could never understand the deepest part of me if they didn’t have some understanding of the hard things I had seen.

Likewise, if we really want to know God, we really should know something about where He has been—and what it has been like for Him to suffer with all those who are hurting and abused. God knows that we can never comprehend the tiniest fraction of the oppression and abuse that He has had to witness; but we can know Him better if we understand something about His experience as the God of compassion—who suffers with the victims of injustice. Two such victims come to mind for me—two girls from India.

I met Kanmani this year in a small village in southern India. She's ten years old. Six days a week she sits in the same place on the floor and manufactures cigarettes. She is required to complete two thousand cigarettes a day. If she doesn't work fast enough, her overseer strikes her on the head. Her voracious ten-hour workday is broken only by a single thirty-minute lunch break. At the end of a long week, she gets her wages—five cents. Worst of all, she has been working like this for more than five years.

Kanmani was sold into bonded labor by her parents who turned to a moneylender in a moment of economic crisis. Without intervention, she will spend her entire childhood this way. As the Old Testament writer lamented, "...the child of the poor is seized for a debt" (Job 24:9).

Such bonded servitude is completely illegal under Indian law. Nevertheless, it is conservatively estimated that there are fifteen million children laboring in virtual slavery working off family debts in India. And sitting with each one, every day, is my compassionate God—"a God who has indignation every day."

Sumita lives in Bombay. She was twelve when she ran away from threatening circumstances at home. Abandoned and terrified, Sumita boarded a train to Bombay alone. She arrived in Bombay, spotted the closest bus stand and stood, an isolated child, next to the dirty street.

Soon, a kindly man approached her, befriended her, bought her some food, and led her across town to a street which everyone in Bombay, except Sumita, knows is the place where men go to buy sex. Led up the stairs of a dark building, Sumita realized where she was and tried to run. But she was trapped and held in a windowless room. For three days she cried. She was slapped and beaten into submitting to the brothel's patrons.

She stopped trying to escape. "I was like a bird with broken wings," Sumita said. In time, the brothel keeper's coercion became as invisible and constant as gravity, conveying an iron law: "No one can help you. You have nowhere to go." The United Nations estimates that there are a million children forced into prostitution every year around our globe.

As Jesus weeps with Sumita by night, and cries quietly with Kanmani by day, can there be any doubt about His passionate hatred for the abuse they endure? Can we ever know our God deeply without some sense of where He spends His time?

On the other hand, we very well may ask: What kind of a compassionate God would sit there and do nothing? Is He truly there? Like the psalmist, we might look upon the oppression of the poor and cry out: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1).

Personally, I don't have any doubt where God is. Nor does the psalmist. He answers his own question this way: "You, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.... You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more" (Ps. 10:14-18).

But how, you may ask, does God actually do this? How does He actually bring rescue to girls like Kanmani and Sumita? As with every earthly endeavor that's important to Him, God looks for His people to be his hands of rescue and is bitterly disappointed if there is no one to be found.

“The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and he was appalled that there was no one to intercede” (Isa. 59:15-16). God calls out to His people: “Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17).

Accordingly, the question is not, “Where is God?” For we know where He is. The question is, “Where are God’s people?”

Where Are God’s People?

In the face of injustice in this world, the question is not, “Where is God?” For we know where He is. The question is, “Where are God’s people?” As Jesus said, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:7-8).

The question is not whether God is prepared to bring justice to those who suffer oppression; rather, the question is whether God’s people are prepared to be faithful to the call: “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 82:3-4).

Moreover, I and my colleagues at the International Justice Mission (IJM) have found that God is prepared to work miracles of rescue through His people when we make ourselves available to him and draw near to those victimized by the abuse of power. The IJM receives referrals of human rights abuses from Christian workers overseas when they see abuses in the community but can’t rely on local authorities for relief. As Christian lawyers and criminal investigators, we work with local contacts to conduct a professional investigation of the abuses and to intervene on behalf of the victims.

The last time I saw Kanmani, she wasn’t rolling cigarettes any more. She was coming home from school. She proudly showed me how she had learned to write her own name.

A few months before, an investigative team from the IJM had conducted an investigation of bonded child laborers in her village. They prepared affidavits of bonded servitude from the children and captured the moneylenders on videotape bragging about all the children they had in bonded labor. The investigation exposed a larger syndicate of bonded servitude. Through the intervention of a district magistrate, almost five hundred bonded laborers were released (including Kanmani) and more than a hundred moneylenders were arrested.

Another team of highly skilled criminal investigators from the IJM infiltrated the brothel in Bombay where Sumita and other girls were being held in forced prostitution. The investigators documented the girls’ condition with video surveillance equipment and then worked with a trusted police contact to raid the brothels. Initially, corrupt elements of the police tipped off the brothels; but in follow-up actions, the police were able to release about a dozen of the girls—including Sumita—and place them in a temporary rescue home.

Of course, Kanmani and her family will need ongoing assistance from the local Christian relief and development agency that works in her village, and Sumita will need more miracles to help her recover from her brutalized childhood. But these faithful efforts by my IJM colleagues shatter the paralyzing lie that there is “nothing we can do” to help those who suffer abuse in our world. God does not give us a ministry that He won’t empower. Christ Himself promised when He departed this earth that He would grant us “power” to be His witnesses “even to the uttermost parts of the earth”—witnesses of His salvation, His love, His mercy and His justice. Let others lose hope—but let God’s people trust in the God of justice.

We are all qualified to seek justice. No one of us can share the Gospel with everyone, feed all the hungry, comfort all the afflicted or free all of the oppressed, but all of us, praise God, can do something to advance these priorities of God. Shepherds and teachers lead us to the authority of God's Word to see God's holy condemnation of the abuse of power in this world. Those who witness injustice firsthand can tell the stories of those who are being abused.

Every Christian can go, send or pray. 1) Public justice professionals can make their specialized skills available to the kingdom of God throughout the world in order to seek justice. 2) Behind every professional stands a supportive group that uses their resources to send that professional out. 3) Finally, for those who can neither go directly nor directly send others, there remains the most divine portion of the work—intercessory prayer.

There is much to be done to bring tangible relief to these children and others who are vulnerable overseas. We can't address every injustice or succeed with every intervention, but there are enough viable projects to keep God's people profitably engaged until the very day when Christ returns.

"However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Will we know where He's been? Will we truly know Him? In the words of Jeremiah (22:15-16), "Did not your father...do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He pled the cause of the afflicted and the needy; then it was well. Is that not what it means to know me? declares the Lord."

This three-part series is adapted from an article originally published in re:generation quarterly 4.4, Winter 1998 (www.regenerator.com) and Gary Haugen's book, Good News About Injustice (www.ijm.org). This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request. Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp.

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