



Ecclesiastes

(4) The Problem of Injustice

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Ecclesiastes deals with hard things about life. The Bible as a whole gives many answers that are comforting, but these answers do not take away all the struggles that we face both in our thoughts about life and in our experience of life. In the section we are going to look at this morning, 3:16 - 22 we are faced with the problems of injustice in the world. Ecclesiastes wants us to think deeply about this problem. In many ways the world is a mess. The extent of injustice is staggering. This is a huge problem for life under the sun.

We can imagine what life should be like. People should treat one another fairly. The strong should not exploit the weak. People should care for one another instead of harming one another. It's not hard to imagine what life could be like if people would just keep the golden rule, to do unto others what you would have them to do unto you. And yet the world is not like that. There are many nice people who are kind to others, but there are a lot of people who are mean, who steal, who abuse others. There are enough people of good will who make it possible for there to be governments that that organize police forces and systems of justice. In some places in the world that works relatively well, like in Canada. In other places in the world it does not work well at all, for instance, like in North Korea. But even in places where it works relatively well, there are plenty of stories of corrupt government officials, corrupt cops and corrupt judges. There are plenty of stories of justice not being done.

And it goes downhill from there as you look at other places where there are even more problems with government and police and judicial corruption. We know that one of the greatest causes of poverty in the world is government corruption. We know that in many places of the

world, in order to get anything done, you must pay bribes to the appropriate people. We know that in many places in the world powerful criminal groups make sure that their interests are served by the civil authorities. We know that in many places the common people fear the police rather than feel safe because of them.

And it has always been so. This was the experience of the people of Israel in the time that Ecclesiastes was doing his thinking about life under the sun. Verse 16, “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” The author of Ecclesiastes is commenting on life as he saw it some 2500 to 3000 years ago. It has been this way in every generation from his time to our own. And it is this way in varying degrees in every country of the world in our time.

Injustice. Most people have an innate sense of justice. Which parent has never heard a child wail, “That’s not fair”? And which of us have never been infuriated by hearing about some terrible injustice. Just think of how it can affect you when you watch a television program and the story involves a dirty cop or a dirty politician. The writers of screenplays know what kinds of things will make our blood boil and get us involved in their stories and injustice is one of them. To witness an injustice or to be the victim of it is profoundly disturbing. And yet the world is full of it.

Well the author of Ecclesiastes is pondering this problem. He comforts himself by biblical truth that God will one day see that justice is done. Verse 17, “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.” It is significant that he brings in the idea of time in this verse. This ties this new subject to the idea that he has discussed in the first part of this chapter. “There is a time for every matter.” He is referring to the fact that God is the God of time and all things unfold according to his plan. There is a time for this and a time for that in God’s plan. There is also a time for justice to be done. In God’s time, justice will be done.

But this does not entirely solve Ecclesiastes’ problem with injustice. He is not finished pondering the problem. The fact that God will judge the righteous and the wicked in his time, does not entirely satisfy him. That

is his point in the next few verses, but the connection is not immediately clear. Verses 18-21, "18I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. 19For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. 20All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. 21Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"

Ecclesiastes has introduced the idea of the problem of injustice, and he has given the comfort of the fact that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. But now he is abruptly speaking about death again. First, we will consider what he says about death here and then we will see what this has to do with the problem of injustice under the sun. Ecclesiastes has a thing about death and how the fact of death makes everything under the sun vain and futile. In this case, it is not obvious why he brings up death at this point. He has been speaking about injustice and all of a sudden, he is speaking about death, but he does not tell us explicitly why he brings up death in connection with injustice.

That means that we have to ponder. We have to figure it out. The author of Ecclesiastes forces us think deeply to figure out the point that he is making. So, let's try to do that. We have the awful reality that the world is full of injustice and wickedness. We have the comforting thought that God is going to judge the righteous and the wicked. And now he makes the point that God wants us human beings to see that we are but beasts. Verse 18 says that God tests us that we may see that we are but beasts. Nobody knows what this testing refers to and the Hebrew word can be translated differently so we can really only focus on the idea of testing here. But if we pass over the idea of testing the thrust of the verse is clear enough. God wants us to know what we are just beasts.

Then he describes how we are just like the beasts. We are like the beasts because we die like the beasts. From the perspective of under the sun – from the perspective of this earthly life what happens to us is exactly the same as what happens to animals. Just like them, we die.

Verses 19-20, “For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all his vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.” So as far as what the experience of life under the sun tells us – death is the end for both animals and human beings.

And then he asks a question that we do not expect a biblical author to ask. Verse 21 “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?” Why would a biblical author ask such a question? The clear teaching of the Bible is that human beings have souls and when we die our souls go either to heaven or to hell. This same author says later on in this same book, in chapter 12, that when people die they go to their eternal home (v. 5) “and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (v. 7). Why does he question in 3:21 whether the spirit of man goes upward?

The reason has to do with progressive revelation. The OT does teach that the souls of those who die return to God, there to be judged, but it is only here and there and there is not what you would call a confident belief in the after-life like you get in the NT. The difference between the OT and the NT in this regard is striking. The OT saints did not have the clear teaching about heaven and hell and the final judgment that we have in the NT. It is there, but it does not have the pervasive presence that it does in the NT. And so, we do not find great clarity and great confidence about life beyond death in the OT. There is something, but it is much more vague and unclear. There is not this confident spirit of victory over death that we have in the NT especially after the resurrection of Christ.

So, we have a verse like Psalm 115:17, which says “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence.” And Psalm 88:109 which asks, “Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?” It is in the light of this that we have to understand the way that Ecclesiastes speaks of death in our text by saying that human beings are like beasts in that they die just like beasts and even asks whether the spirit of man goes upward. As far as what we see and experience in this life, death is the end, and there is no

difference between humans and animals when it comes to death. We both end up in the grave. Death is the end of this earthly life.

And you see, that makes the whole idea of a final justice more problematic. Ecclesiastes has introduced the problem of injustice. He has mentioned the fact that God will judge the righteous and the wicked in his life, but the focus of God's judgment in the OT is more on justice in this life rather than on a final judgment after this life. If you look at the judgment-passages in the prophets, you will see that they focus on God's judgment in this life. And that is why death is a problem for the author of Ecclesiastes in this context where he is struggling with the problem of injustice.

From the perspective of life under the sun, justice is not ultimately done. From the perspective of this earthly life, there is no final justice. From the perspective of what we see and experience, the scales of justice are not balanced. People do not always get what they deserve. People do get away with murder. Many of the drug lords who have terrorized the weak, controlled corrupt governments with their bribes and their threats, and have destroyed the lives of millions with their drugs have died in their beds. When you look at life under the sun, huge numbers of people do not get what they deserve. Many victims die without every seeing those who have harmed them brought to justice. Many oppressors die without every facing justice. Life under the sun is grotesquely unfair. And because both the righteous and the wicked end up in the same place along with the animals, huge numbers of injustices are never resolved. Many people do get away with murder.

Job struggled with this as well. In chapter 21, Job speaks about the wicked and the fact that they often do not seem to get what they deserve. In verse 7 he says, "Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" And in verse 13 he says of the wicked, "They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol."

This is what the author of Ecclesiastes is struggling with. And the struggle was more poignant for him than it is for us because he did not have the clarity of revelation that we do about the final judgment. He believed that God is just, and that justice would be done, but he did not know how because he knew that the scales of justice were not

balanced in this earthly life. And in the light of the reality of death for all men, it seemed that many terrible injustices were never rectified.

Now as I have been saying, we have greater clarity because we have the NT and what it teaches us about Jesus and what he accomplished. We are not OT believers. We are NT believers. And while there are important similarities, there are also important differences. We have much more clarity on the matter of justice and the final judgement.

Just listen to the following verses from Revelation 20:11-15 in the light of this discussion, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it ... And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.... And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done."

Here we see the dead - whom Ecclesiastes compared to animals, rise from their graves and stand before the great white throne and each one judged according to what he had done. This is the biblical answer to all the injustice that is not resolved in this earthly life. In the end, justice will be done. In the end everyone will get what they deserve. The only ones who will not get what they deserve are true Christians because Jesus has taken upon himself the penalty that they deserve. But in the end – no one will get away with anything. In the end all will be satisfied that the final judgment was utterly and ultimately fair. Those who have committed evil and never repented and turned to Christ will experience the punishment that they deserve. And the justice of God will be seen and acknowledged by all. There will be no lose ends.

However, we still live under the sun. We still live in a world where there is much that is horribly unfair. And that is disturbing. Who can watch the news without being infuriated with the lack of justice in so many situations and places? Think of the terrorists who do not get caught. Think of the powerful leaders in corrupt governments who do not face justice. Think even of those who have committed such horrible crimes that life in prison or death seems to be too light of a sentence. You get a sense of that in that situation of that gymnastics coach, Larry Nassar, who abused more than a 150 young girls during his career, that was in

the news this week. The judge sentenced him to 175 years in prison. That sentence gives the impression that the judge felt that she was powerless to give him a penalty that would satisfy justice. It gives the impression that spending the rest of his life in prison and then death is too light of a penalty for what he has done. It is not possible within the parameters of this life for justice to be done.

So even though the problem of injustice that is not rectified in this earthly life, was more of an issue for the OT saints than it is for us because we have a much clearer picture of the final judgment, we still feel that there is a problem if justice in this life is not served. Even though we know that everyone will be judged, and everyone will get what he or she deserves in the end, there is still a lot that is disturbing and troubling about the lack of justice in this earthly life. We wonder, do we not, why God allows such horrible things to happen and why he allows people to wreak havoc in the lives of others and never pay a penalty in this life. We know that eventually everyone will get their due, but that does not answer all our questions about why God allows so many horrible people to get away with gross injustices in this life.

The reality that Ecclesiastes mentions in verse 16 is still troubling for us if we think deeply about it. “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.”

And here we get Ecclesiastes’ answer on how we should deal with this reality as we are troubled by the injustices that such a prominent feature of this earthly life. Verse 22, “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him.”

We have heard this advice before in this book. It is the Preacher’s standard advice for us when we are faced with the conundrums of life. Embrace the fact that you are a creature and not the creator. Ecclesiastes is giving us permission to just be creatures and not God. I want to acknowledge Russ Kosits for putting it this way in our sermon discussion last week.

This is our lot, Ecclesiastes is saying. This is the world that we live in. We do not know why God allows such horrible injustices to prevail. But there is nothing we can do about it. So, embrace your creaturehood. You are not God; don't take his responsibilities on your shoulders. You cannot fix the world. You cannot understand why God does what he does. Therefore, rejoice in your work. Do what God has called you to do and find satisfaction in it. Live the life that God has given you. Enjoy your work and your family. Don't try to understand everything that God is up to and how God will make all things right. Just do your thing. You in your small corner and I in mine.

I like how Zack Eswine paraphrases the Preacher in his very insightful treatment of Ecclesiastes. He imagines an imaginary dialogue between us and the Preacher. First, we express all that is troubling about life and then the Preacher answers. So, we say, "But we are all going to die!" And the Preacher responds, "I know, make a sandwich, cook a fish.... "But the sky is falling!" we shout. "I know have some tea and enjoy this wine with me," he says. "God is here." "But everything is meaningless!" I know, go ahead and wash your clothes." "But injustice racks the world!" I know, go ahead and take a bath or clean your face when you can."

Eswine is trying to get across the Preacher's point as he first presents us with all these conundrums of life under the sun and then tells us to do our work and enjoy our lives. There are things about life under the sun that are very disturbing. But we can't understand everything. We can't fix everything. God is over all. God has given us our lot in life. So, go to work. Eat your food. Read a book. Receive your life as a gift from God.

Now by telling us that "there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot," Ecclesiastes is not saying that we should be indifferent to the awful reality of injustice in the world. He is not saying that we should not care. He cares about these things. He cares about these things enough to think deeply about them. And by his words, he is inviting us to do the same. He is not saying, "Don't even think about the injustices in the world." He is not saying, "Just enjoy your life and don't care about anyone else." That is not his point at all. He is going out of his way to get us to think about these difficult

questions that are raised by life under the sun. He is not saying that we should be indifferent.

He is not contradicting all earlier revelation that taught that we are to care about justice and seek the good and wellbeing of other people. Here what God says to Israel in Leviticus 19:18 “[Y]ou shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The gist of God’s law is that we are to love one another and certainly that means that we must be concerned about justice in the world.

We also have to those great verses calling us to pursue justice in the prophets. Isaiah 1:17, “[L]earn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; being justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s causes.” The biblical teaching is that the people of God are to care about justice in the world and seek to do something about it.

And one application that we can make from the Preacher’s struggle with injustice is to ask ourselves whether we know anything of that struggle in our lives. Are we bothered by injustice as he clearly was? Or are we untroubled by anything as long as it does not affect our own lives? It’s easy enough to care only about ourselves and our loved ones and have little concern about the suffering of so many in the world in which we live because of injustice.

So, Ecclesiastes’ claim that “there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot” does not mean that he is recommending indifference to the injustice that we see in the world around us. Rather he is saying that that we should not lose our faith in God because of it. The injustice in the world is a horrible thing and deeply troubling. And from the rest of the Bible we learn that it is part of our calling to pursue justice as we are able. But God will judge the wicked and the righteous in his time. And we must submit to that as well. Surely, we must care about injustice in the world. We should do what we can to see it minimized. But we must also trust that God in his time will deal with every case of injustice. And so, in the meantime we should embrace our creaturehood, realize that there are mysteries here that we cannot penetrate and live the life that God has given us to live and enjoy life as a gift from God.

Now one of the things that we must take into account, as we think this through, is that we are unjust ourselves. Our perspective pondering these verses has been that of just people looking at and concerned about unjust people. We are the good guys looking over at the bad guys. But the biblical teaching will not allow us to consider ourselves innocent. We may not have committed the most heinous crimes, but we have not always given others their due. We have not always been fair. We have sometimes treated other's badly.

We need to remind ourselves that the only reason we are not on the receiving end of God's wrath, for all the times that we have treated others badly, is Jesus Christ if we are indeed trusting in him. When we are horrified by injustice in the world, we must remind ourselves that we have committed some of the same sins and that we share the same sinful nature as the worst perpetrators. If we are different, we are different because we have been rescued from our sins and forgiven and have received the Holy Spirit. That must always be our stance when we must point out sin in others. We too are sinners. We are different now because of Jesus and his work for us and in us. And even so we are far from perfect. But justice has been done for our sins because Jesus has paid the penalty that we deserve for our sins. And it is from that position of humility and trust in Christ that we consider the problem of injustice in the world. And from that perspective, we joyfully look to him who will come at the end of the age to bring the final judgment.

John 5:28–29, ²⁸"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."