



# Ecclesiastes

## (5) The Problem of Oppression

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

Psalms 94:1-7

Luke 4:16-21

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This morning our studies in the book of Ecclesiastes take us to the subject of oppression. It is another subject that has to do with what is wrong with the world in which we are living. It is another subject that calls us away from our immediate concerns to think about one of the great problems of the human race. The author of Ecclesiastes has noticed that there is a lot of oppression in the world and he is troubled by it. And by bringing it to our attention he wants us to be troubled by it as well and to ponder why it is that there is so much oppression under the sun.

So, he says in verse 1, "Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them." What is he talking about when he talks about oppression? Well we can get a pretty good idea from just considering this verse. There are oppressors and there are the oppressed. The oppressors have power and the oppressed have tears and no one to comfort them. What we have is people without power suffering at the hands of those who have power. Oppression has to do with the misuse of power. It has to do with the relationship between people with power and people without power. When there is oppression, the people who have power use their power for their own advantage at the expense of those who are weaker. And those who are weaker suffer because of being abused by those who are stronger.

The word “oppressed” is used a number of times in the story of the slavery of the people of Israel in Egypt. In Exodus 3:9, God says to Moses, “And now behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.” The Egyptians had the power in their relationship with Israel. The people of Israel were the weak ones in the relationship and the Egyptians used their power to force the Israelites to serve them as slaves. And the result was suffering on the part of the people of Israel so that they cried out to God. This is an important biblical example of oppression.

Later, after God freed her from her slavery in Egypt, Israel was forbidden from oppressing the weak in her society. For instance, in Exodus 22:21, God says to his people, “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” A sojourner was a person who was from another country but living in Israel. Such a person would likely be weak and vulnerable because he or she would be away from the regular support of family. God tells his people that they are not allowed to take advantage of the weakness of a sojourner and oppress him.

One of the groups that God especially warns against oppressing others were employers. Deuteronomy 24:14 says, “You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy....” Another group who are especially warned not to oppress others were the rich who tended to have more power than the poor. Proverbs 14:31 says, “Whoever oppressed a poor man insults his Maker....”

But in spite of these warnings against oppression, it was a common problem in Israel. Isaiah 58:3 accuses employers for oppressing their workers. Jeremiah 6:6 says of Jerusalem, “This is a city that must be punished; there is nothing but oppression within her.” Ezekiel 22:29 says “The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy and have exhorted from the sojourner without justice.”

This is what the author of Ecclesiastes is struggling with. “Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them!”

He is also sympathizing with the suffering of the oppressed. The reality of oppression is not just an intellectual problem for him, he feels the pain of the oppressed. Verse 2, "I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive." He sees the tears of the oppressed. He sees that they have no one to comfort them. He sees people enduring horrendous suffering and he sees that they are left to fend for themselves. And he concludes that the dead are more fortunate than the living.

What kind of world is this that the lives of vast numbers of people are so awful that they would be better off dead! All of these people, barely able to survive, or robbed of their freedom and living miserable existences would be better off dead than to continue to bear the burden of their miserable lives! And that because the powerful are using them for their own gain – taking advantage of their weakness to exploit them!

And further he goes on to say, "But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun." It can be agonizing to consider the extent of evil and suffering in the world. History is full of it. The present is full of it. Everywhere you look you see horrible oppression and because of it, vast numbers of people living miserable lives! And he says to himself, "I wish I had never been born so that I didn't have to witness a world full of people suffering at the hands of the rich and powerful."

Now he is not recommending suicide, although some suicides today may come from these kinds of thoughts. But he is expressing the horror and the dreadfulness of the suffering of so many people in this world because of more powerful people who take advantage of their weakness. He is deeply disturbed by the extent of oppression in the world and the terrible suffering because of it. He is profoundly troubled that it is so common for people with power to use their power to use and exploit those who are weaker than they are. He says that many of the suffering people would be better off dead because he has thought deeply about their extent of their pain. He has some understanding of the terrible nature of their suffering and he dwells on it rather than quickly turning his attention to something more pleasant. He is staring

this terrible reality in the face and it shakes him to the core of his bearing. What kind of world is this that half of the people would be better off if they had never been born!

Now things have not gotten any better in our day and age. They are better in some parts of the world and we are blessed to live in one of them, but the reality of the powerful abusing and taking advantage of the powerless is a pervasive reality in our world. It is a massive reality. Think of slavery. It is still a huge reality in our world. The organization called "Free the Slaves" claims that there are 21-36 million people in the world today who are slaves. 78% of them are labor slaves – forced to work for others against their will. 22% are sex slaves. 26% are children under the age of 18. 60,000 of them are in the United States. 6500 of them are in Canada. Another organization, called the "Walk Free Foundation," estimates that there are 18.35 million slaves living in India; 3.39 million in China; 2.13 million in Pakistan and 1.53 million in Bangladesh.

These numbers are incredible. These are just estimates but even if they are off by a lot, there are an awful lot of people today who are living as slaves, whose lives are controlled by people more powerful than they are for their own gain. These people are suffering from oppression.

And this is only one form of oppression in the world. Millions of people in the world today are oppressed by their governments. The corrupt governments have the power and they use that power for the financial gain of government officials at the expense of the people who do not have the power to resist their government.

Then there is economic oppression in which the rich take advantage of the poor. Often this takes place when rich business owners pay unfairly low wages to people who have no alternative than to take those jobs or starve. There is class oppression where one class has the power and they use that power to the disadvantage of those of a lower and weaker class. There is gender oppression where men treat women as property and as slaves. There is racial oppression where one race has the power and uses the power for its own advantage and for the disadvantage of minorities.

Now there are lots of situations where what is going on is clearly oppression – the powerful exploiting the weak. But we will also be aware of the language of oppression being used today in ways that are highly questionable. The language of oppression is being used today by progressive liberals in ways that are not in harmony with biblical teaching. For instance, it is considered oppressive to have a biblical perspective on the morality of homosexuality or transgenderism or the relationship between husbands and wives in the home. And there are other areas in which there may be a grain of truth, but the solutions are extreme and dangerous. Here I am thinking about identity politics where whites and men are considered to be oppressors of all kinds of minorities. I say that there is often a grain of true in some of identity politics because racism is still a problem even in the West and women are not always treated fairly by men even in the West. But identity politics is characterized by sweeping generalizations and reliance on government power to force the changes that it desires and there is the danger of itself being oppressive.

I mention this because the language of oppression today is often used as part of a social and political agenda that is in opposition to the biblical worldview. There is often the desire to use the power of the government to force Christians to affirm the lifestyles of people that the Bible condemns. We see that in the cases of bakers and wedding-photographers who have been penalized for refusing to take part in homosexual wedding. Here we have a case of oppression against Christians because they hold unpopular views based on the Bible. All this to say that the language of oppression in our day is complex and much of it is informed by anti-God and anti-Christian worldviews.

But clearly there is such a thing as oppression in the world and clearly it is a massive global reality. This is what the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is struggling with based on the vast extent of oppression that he witnessed in his day. “Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.” And he says that the agony of many people was so great that it would be better off for them to be dead.

Now it is interesting that Ecclesiastes leaves us hanging at this point. Verse 4 begins another subject. The problem is mentioned. The extent of it and the horror of it is emphasized. But no comforting perspective is given. Of course, he expects us to ponder this problem in the light of what he has already said and in the light of what he is yet to say in this book. He has already spoken about the fact that God has everything in his time and we cannot understand “what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). He has already reminded us that “God will judge the righteous and the wicked” (3:17). And he has already reminded us that it not our calling to fix everything or even understand everything, but we are allowed to “be joyful and to do good as long as [we] live; also, that [we] should eat and drink and take pleasure in all [our] toil...” (3:12).

Certainly, these perspectives give us valuable instruction about how we are to think about the terrible reality of oppression and the suffering that it causes in the world. But as we have seen in earlier sermons, valuable as these perspectives are, they do not answer all our questions and take away all our struggles. And that is the case with oppression as well. The reality of oppression is massive in our world. The amount of suffering because of it is overwhelming. And we should feel the weight of that. We are to weep with those who weep. That applies in the first place to entering into the suffering of our fellow Christians. Many of those who are oppressed are Christians. But further, Jesus tells us that we are to love even our enemies, and so, we should not be indifferent to the plight of the sexual slaves and the economic slaves and the people who live under corrupt governments whether they are Christians or not. We may not be indifferent to the tears of the oppressed. It should trouble us greatly that there are millions in this world who suffering because the rich and the powerful are exploiting them for their own advantage.

So, we should look at what these 3 verses of our text say about oppression and ask the question, what should be our response to the issue that it raises. What is the response that the Word of God here is requiring of us? And part of the answer to that question is that we should be crying out to God, not only to bring justice, but to bring relief to the millions and millions of people whose lives are so awful that

death looks appealing to them! These verses intend to drive us to earnest prayer to God to do something about the horror of so much oppression and so much suffering because of it.

You see there is a huge incongruity between the existence of so much oppression in the world and what we know about God. There is a great tension between the existence of millions of people whose lives are horrible because of mistreatment by others and what we know about the compassion of God and his special concern for the weak and the poor and the oppressed.

Listen to what we read in Psalm 10:17-18, "<sup>17</sup>O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear <sup>18</sup>to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more."

This is the tension that is reflected in our text. If God hears the desire of the afflicted – if God does justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, why are there so many afflicted who wish that they were dead? Why are there so many oppressed who live in terror of the powerful men who exploit them? This is where our text drives us. How can a God who claims to care about the oppressed allow the world to be full of them?

These verses of Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 press us to pray like the Psalmist of Psalm 94 prayed in the first 7 verses of that Psalm. "<sup>1</sup>O Lord, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! <sup>2</sup>Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! <sup>3</sup>O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? <sup>4</sup>They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. <sup>5</sup>They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. <sup>6</sup>They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; <sup>7</sup>and they say, "The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.""

This psalmist saw what the author of Ecclesiastes saw, and he pleaded with God to do something about it. He was appalled at what the wicked were doing to the people of God and to the widows and the sojourners and the fatherless. And he turned to the Lord in prayer and cried out, "[H]ow long shall the wicked exult?" How long is this going to continue? How long are you going to allow the powerful to oppress the weak and

powerless? And the underlying conviction here is that God is not the kind of God to allow injustice to go on and on and on. God is not the kind of God who does not hear the cries of those who cry out to him. God is not indifferent to the suffering of the oppressed. Why then is it continuing? If God is the kind of God that he says he is, why is there so much suffering in the world? And there is the cry to God to do something about it – to bring it to an end – to deliver those whose lives are so awful that they are not worth living.

Now part of the answer to this dilemma is the fact that God had done something about the horror of oppression in the world. He had delivered Israel from the oppression that they had faced in Egypt and he had told them never to forget that they had been slaves in Egypt and they must not be oppressors themselves. God had delivered his people and he had given them his law so that they could be a kingdom who would demonstrate to the world the blessedness of living together under God in love and peace and justice and righteousness. It was God's plan that his people be an exhibit to the world of living together in love and that the nations would be attracted to their God and adopt his ways. God was doing something about the oppression in the world and Israel was at the heart of that plan.

But as it turned out Israel failed to live as God had saved her to live. God's plan to end oppression in the world had Israel at the heart of it, but Israel had failed to put God's wise and gracious laws into practice. And it is in the context of Israel's failure that God revealed that he was not giving up on his plan but that he was going to send a Saviour who would deal with what is at the heart of all the oppression that is in the world which is sin. One thing that all the oppression in the world shows is the horrible nature of sin. It is mean. It is cruel. It is selfish. It is heartless. It is indifferent to the suffering of others. Sin is at the root of all the suffering in the world. And sin is not an abstract force in the world. Sin comes from sinners. All of the oppression in the world is the result of people who are sinful.

And one day, many years after Ecclesiastes was written, a man named Jesus stood up to read from the Scriptures in a synagogue in Nazareth in ancient Palestine. And he read these words from Isaiah 61, <sup>18</sup>“The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" And then he rolled up the scroll and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4).

Jesus is God's answer to the dilemma posed by the author of Ecclesiastes as he agonizes over the horror of oppression in the world. God sent Jesus to proclaim liberty to the captives and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. But Jesus went about fulfilling that mission in a very unexpected way. He did it by entering into suffering himself. He did it by being on the receiving end of oppression himself. Isaiah prophesied of him, in Isaiah 53:7 "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth...." And verse 8, "By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?"

You see the reason for oppression is sin and God's mission, culminating in Christ, is to deal with sin. Jesus broke the power of sin by taking its penalty upon himself so that we might be set free from the power of sin in our lives. We may not be oppressors in the worst sense of that word, but we are oppressors in that we sometimes use whatever power we have to take advantage of others to their hurt. None of us has always used whatever power and influence we have to serve others rather than using them. God's mission to solve the problem of oppression in the world required that he deal with the sin that lives in each of our hearts. This is what he has done through Jesus Christ and his life, death and resurrection.

And when he applies that salvation to us he not only forgives us of our sins, but he also changes us so that we begin to use whatever power and influence we have to serve others rather than exploiting them. And he enlists us to participate in his mission to bring the solution to oppression to the ends of the earth. That solution is the gospel. It is only through the gospel that the hearts of oppressors are changed so that they begin to use their power to serve others rather than exploit them.

And that same gospel gives comfort to those who are suffering oppression if they will embrace it because those saved by it are comforted knowing that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ.

The author of Ecclesiastes says that there was no one to comfort the oppressed. But there is for those who look to God for their comfort and that is much more clear with the coming of Christ. Those who embrace the gospel are assured that for them, “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

Part of the answer to the horror of oppression in the world is that we who belong to Christ are to use whatever power and influence God gives to us to serve others rather than exploit them. That will involve being part of the Christian witness in the world against all forms of oppression. It will also involve being part of the Christian witness in the world to the gospel which alone has the power to turn oppressors into servants of the weak and powerless.

But another part of the biblical answer to the horror of oppression is God’s promise concerning the future at the return of Jesus Christ. The biblical answer to the problems of this life are finally resolved in the complete fulfillment of all the promises of God. The Bible is constantly pointing us to the future beyond this life. There will one day be a world without oppression. There will come a time when all who have trusted in God will be released from all their suffering and all who have refused him will reap what they have sown.

This perspective does not answer every question, but it does offer salvation to all who hear the gospel. The great questions of life will be resolved at the second coming and the final judgment. The message of the Bible is how we can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ so that we might belong to those who will one day be released from all suffering. And in the meantime, we who belong to Christ, are to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem through the grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.