

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

Oppression, Death, Hope

The book of Ecclesiastes often grabs us by the shoulders and turns us around making us look full face at life in our world. And it is not often a pretty picture. Last Sunday we learned from Solomon that there are various times in life. All of us face good days and bad days. In each and every life there is,

A time to weep,
And a time to laugh;
A time to mourn,
And a time to dance¹

But when we put a wide angle lens on our view of life, we can see that there is a lot of injustice and oppression in our world. There are political and ideological fights. People are wounded and die in terrorist attacks. There is racism and genocide in many nations around the world. There is duplicity and cheating and injustice and unrighteousness in almost every area of life.

The wise teacher of Ecclesiastes reflected in this gut wrenching problem. He was well aware of the evil and wickedness in our fallen world. And even though he was a king, Solomon was burdened by the fact that there wasn't much he could do about it.

Moreover I saw under the sun:
In the place of judgment,
Wickedness was there;
And *in* the place of righteousness,
Iniquity was there.
(Ecclesiastes 3:16)

We've seen this terrible problem too, haven't we? There is evil and unrighteousness where justice should be found. Sadly there is wickedness and injustice in our governments, in our courts, with the police, in schools, at work and even in the church. Innocent people are convicted of crimes that they didn't commit. Others get away with murder, because they have the money to hire the best lawyers.

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:4

People are cheated out of jobs and money, by those who are unprincipled. There are genocide, terrorism, sex-trafficking, slavery and street children. God hates oppression and injustice. In Isaiah the prophet cried out,

Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees...
[who] rob the needy of justice...Woe to men...who
justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice
from the righteous man.
(Isaiah 10:1, 2; 5:22, 23)

And Jesus Christ rebuked the religious leaders of his day saying,

Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and
all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love
of God.
(Luke 11:42, 43)

Justice is one of the great longs of the human heart. It is one aspect of the image of God in us. And so we chant in protest "What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now!"

I mean, wouldn't it be terrific if after a drive ran you off the road his tires would explode 5 minutes later? Of if you got cheated in a business deal or by some company wouldn't it be great if they went bankrupt the next month? Or if someone yelled at you unjustly or lied about you, wouldn't it be sweet if all their teeth fell out over night? The trouble is, we would have to live in that world of instant justice too. Do we really want to face instant justice for the wrongs we do?

Still, what do you say when people ask where God is concerning all of the injustice and unrighteousness in our world? We can point to the Scriptures and tell them that judgment is coming!

I said in my heart,
"God shall judge the righteous and the wicked,
For *there is* a time there for every purpose and for
every work."
(Ecclesiastes 3:17)

The wicked will not get away with their evil deeds. Psalm 37:1, 2 declares,

Do not fret because of evildoers,
Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity.

² For they shall soon be cut down like the grass,
And wither as the green herb.

You and I are called to do what is right and good. We are to promote what is right and just in our society. Yet in this fallen world, even our best efforts will not bring an end to injustice. Our confidence for ultimate justice does not lie in worldly courts but in the Chief Justice, Jesus Christ. We are told in Acts 17:31 that God,

has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.

God's ultimate and final judgment does not fall on us instantaneously, because He is merciful and patient not wanting anyone to perish.² Our present lives are a proving ground. Will we seek God's will and obey it? Or will we live independent of Him like beasts?

I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are *like* animals."
(Ecclesiastes 3:18)

This test of life is not for God's benefit, but for our benefit. Will we see ourselves for who and what we are without God? On our own, as noble as we can be at the bottom line, without God, we are like animals. People without God can behave like brute beasts and like brute beasts we die.

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all *is* vanity.
²⁰ All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. ²¹ Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?
(Ecclesiastes 3:19-21)

Humanity was originally created to bear the image of God. But there is a greater difference between me and God than between me and a dust mite. As the dust mite dies so do people under the sun. In the words of an old nursery

² 2 Peter 3:8-13

rhyme, "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down." Under the sun this is our fate. Psalm 49:12 reveals this truth:

Nevertheless man, *though* in honor, does not remain;
He is like the beasts *that* perish.

There is nothing immortal about humanity. Scripture tells us that only God is immortal.³ We must seek immortality as a gift from God.⁴ So what is our response to the certainty of our mortality? Some people simply ignore it. They live life without God with spiritual blinders on as if nothing is ever going to happen. But Hebrews 9:27 tells us that "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." And for those living under the sun, outside of Jesus Christ, the judgment will be the second death from which there is no escape.

So what do you tell people who are without Christ and thus without hope? We tell them what God has always said. In Ezekiel 18 God said,

Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin...For why should you die?⁵

In Romans 6:23 we are told that,

the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is why John 3:16 is such an important verse of Scripture!

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

We are to speak the truth in love. Some people will hear and believe. Some people will not. Other than that we can only say what Solomon said.

So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

³ 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 Timothy 6:16

⁴ Romans 2:7

⁵ Ezekiel 18:30, 31

All an unsaved person can do is enjoy the fleeting happiness of the moment. That is their only heritage; their only inheritance. But this is not true for those who trust in God through Jesus Christ. Psalm 49 declares that those without God, without hope are like the beasts that perish. But it also declares another profound truth. Let's read it.

Nevertheless man, *though* in honor, does not remain;
He is like the beasts *that* perish.
¹³ This is the way of those who are foolish,
And of their posterity who approve their sayings. Selah
¹⁴ Like sheep they are laid in the grave;
Death shall feed on them;
The upright shall have dominion over them in the morning;
And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling.
¹⁵ But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave,
For He shall receive me.
(Psalm 49:12-15)

God will redeem the souls or the lives of His people from the power of the grave. We shall be raised up to everlasting life and glory. We shall inherit a new world and all the blessings of God in that new world. Revelation 5:9, 10 is a prophetic song to Jesus Christ and here are the joyous lyrics.

You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
¹⁰ And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth.

Those who live under the sun, apart from God, can only enjoy what is under the sun until they come to the end of their days, or until oppression and injustice takes it from them. They cannot take it with them in the grave. Let's again read Psalm 49.

Do not be afraid when one becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
¹⁷ For when he dies he shall carry nothing away;
His glory shall not descend after him.
¹⁸ Though while he lives he blesses himself
(For men will praise you when you do well for yourself),
¹⁹ He shall go to the generation of his fathers;

They shall never see light.⁶

²⁰ A man *who is* in honor, yet does not understand,
Is like the beasts *that* perish.
(Psalm 49:16-20)

Those who reject God, who seek only worldly glory, will have only worldly glory. Let's return to Ecclesiastes 4. Solomon understands the great loss of those under the sun. But his heart still breaks because of oppression and unrighteousness.

Then I returned and considered all the oppression that
is done under the sun:

And look! The tears of the oppressed,
But they have no comforter—

On the side of their oppressors *there is* power,
But they have no comforter.

² Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead,
More than the living who are still alive.

³ Yet, better than both is *he* who has never existed,
Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.
(Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)

You can almost feel Solomon's pained heart. The oppressed have no one to comfort them. People suffer tragically and then cry themselves to sleep at night. Sometimes there is such crushing sorrow that it seems it would have been better not to live at all.

How are we to respond to all of this? In our sinful, selfish world no one seems to care. But there is someone who cares and cares deeply, because he bears the full image of God without distortion. He is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages,
teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel
of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every
disease among the people. ³⁶ But when He saw the
multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them,
because they were weary and scattered, like sheep
having no shepherd.

(Matthew 9:35, 36)

Jesus saw the multitudes of people who were "weary." They were harassed and oppressed and he was moved with deep, profound compassion.

⁶ Or more literally "they shall never see the light of life." In other words they perish, forever.

Therefore Jesus met the physical needs of these weary people. And he also met their deepest need. He taught them God's Word, especially about the coming kingdom of God where justice will roll like a mighty river.⁷ Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said this:

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. ³⁸Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."
(Matthew 9:37, 38)

Shall we be those laborers? We can't meet every need, but we can meet some. We can't heal every hurt, but we can heal some. We can't right every injustice, but we can some. And we can't save everybody and bring them into the kingdom of God, but we can bring the good news of Jesus Christ to some.

Let us pursue peace and let us be just. Let us give and serve and love and be merciful and kind. And let us share the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ, because through Christ God will one day wipe away every tear⁸, and the wicked will be punished forever.

⁷ Amos 5:24

⁸ Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 21:1-4