

**“THE INJUSTICE OF LIFE”**

After taking the first half of chapter 3 to explore the frustrations that we experience as time-bounded creatures who have a God-given sense of eternity in our hearts, the Preacher shifts his focus in this passage to the injustices of life and our inability to overcome them. And it is clear that he sees injustice within the context of God’s sovereign rule over his world. Nothing takes place apart from the Lord’s providential control, not even injustice. As the Preacher said in the previous section, the things that take place in this world are, ultimately, things that God has done. And the Preacher elaborates upon this in our passage by telling us that the reason why the Lord allows injustice to continue is to test us and to cause us to see our finitude. The injustice of life is another reminder of the disappointing and frustrating and perplexing nature of this life under the sun. And in this passage the Preacher honestly confronts this reality.

Our passage begins with a statement about justice and wickedness. The Preacher says that he saw wickedness in the place where there should have been justice, evil in the place where righteousness should have been upheld. He is talking about the place where justice is administered in this world: the law court. When you go to a court of law, you expect to see justice. You expect to see each case being weighed carefully and fairly. This is symbolically depicted in our courtrooms by the image of a blindfolded Lady Justice holding a set of scales in her hand. This image reminds us that judgments should be rendered in an unbiased manner. Decisions are to be made on the basis of what is right and true. And oftentimes, that is exactly what you see in our courts of law. This is

one of God's gifts of common grace. It is one of the ways in which evil is restrained in our world. God has created the world with a moral order. There is a natural law that is accessible to all human beings. One theologian defines natural law as

“the moral order inscribed in the world and especially in human nature, an order that is known to all people through their natural faculties (especially reason and/or conscience) even apart from supernatural divine revelation that binds morally the whole of the human race.” [VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, 1]

The existence of this natural law is the only reason why there can be any degree of justice in our world. God does not allow wickedness to run rampant in his world. He restrains it by means of the moral order that he has woven into the universe. For this reason, human courts of law are a blessing of God's common grace to all mankind.

However, our courts of law do not always administer justice in a manner that is in keeping with this moral order. This is the Preacher's point. There are times when those who are entrusted with upholding justice fail to do so. We can think of plenty of examples of this. One that comes to mind is the Supreme Court decision that was made just over thirty-seven years ago, on January 22, 1973, a decision that made it legal for people in our country to take the lives of unborn babies. The highest court in our land, the place where justice should have been upheld, committed a grave injustice against a

defenseless segment of the human race. In the place of justice, even there was wickedness.

The Preacher's point in calling our attention to this is to cause us to realize that the only final and certain justice is with God. The mystery writer P.D. James once wrote a novel entitled *A Certain Justice* that illustrates this very truth. While justice is often upheld in this world, it is not always upheld. Judges and juries make mistakes. Worse yet, their fallen nature sometimes causes them to choose what is wrong, what is evil, instead of that which is right and good. The Preacher wants us to see that the only certain justice is with God.

As the Preacher makes this point about certain justice, he returns to the theme with which he began this chapter, the cycles that the Lord has appointed for this life under the sun. And he uses this theme to assure us that justice will be upheld in the end. He writes, "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." There is a time for every matter, even a time for final justice. God has appointed a time to right all of the wrongs that have ever been committed in this world. He has appointed a day of judgment for all men.

The topic of final judgment is an unpopular one, even among some Christians. Perhaps this is even the case for some of you. But there is no getting around it. It is a doctrine that is found throughout the pages of holy Scripture. We see it here in Ecclesiastes, in the book of Genesis, in the Psalms, in the book of Daniel, in the writings of the apostles Peter and Paul and John, in the letter to the Hebrews, and even from the

lips of our Lord Jesus himself. That's right. Some of the Bible's most explicit teachings about hell come from the lips of Christ in the Gospels. It is Jesus, not Paul, who speaks of the outer darkness, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, of everlasting fire, and of the unforgivable sin.

The reason why there has to be a final judgment is because the God of the Bible is a just God. He cannot, he will not, allow sin to go unpunished. As he says in the book of Exodus, he "will by no means clear the guilty." [Ex. 34:7] And when you really think about it, who among us would want to live in a universe that was ruled by a God who did clear the guilty? Who would want a world in which God was unjust? We should be thankful for the fact that God is just. It is a source of great comfort and hope. As the psalmist says, the LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.

At the same time, God's just nature also reminds us of the seriousness of our sin. Because God is just, he cannot simply overlook sin. He cannot look at a sinner and say, 'Well, at least you weren't as bad as that other guy. I guess you tried your best. You can come into heaven.' No. The Holy One of Israel could never say that. The Judge of all the earth shall do what is just. He will not clear the guilty. This is why the only way of salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. There are only two possibilities on the day of judgment: either Jesus, in his death on the cross, bore the punishment that your sins deserved; or you will have to bear that punishment yourself, for all eternity, in hell. The Lord will uphold his holy justice on the day of judgment. He has appointed that day for this very purpose.

But some might ask why God allows injustice to go on for so long. Why doesn't he intervene sooner? The apostle Peter addresses that question in his second letter, where he writes, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." [2 Pet. 3:9] In other words, by delaying his day of judgment, the Lord ensures that all of his lost sheep will be brought to saving faith. The Preacher says something similar to this in verse 18, where he writes: "God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts." God delays the day of final judgment in order that we might come to see our sinfulness and our finitude. The fact that we have to live in a world in which we see so much injustice should humble us. The wickedness that we see in our world, the wickedness that we see in our own hearts, should cause us to see that we are no better than brute beasts, controlled as we are by our appetites, impulses, and desires.

The Preacher continues on in this vein by pointing out that we share the same fate as the beasts. Like the other creatures on the face of this earth, we all die. Recalling the words that the Lord spoke to Adam in Genesis 3, the Preacher observes that both man and beast return to the dust from which they were created. Once again, he points to death as the great leveler. In the end, all people share the same fate, and it is a fate that we share with all the creatures of the earth.

At this point, the Preacher says something that we have to slow down to consider carefully. He writes in verse 21: "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?" The reason why we have to

consider this verse carefully is because it sounds as though the Preacher is denying that man's soul continues to exist after he dies. If that is what he is saying, then we have a problem, because this text is in conflict with other passages where the continuing existence of the human soul after death is clearly taught. One example of such a text is Revelation 6:9, where the apostle John hears the souls of martyred saints crying out to God for vindication as they wait under his throne in heaven. Another is Philippians 1:23, where Paul describes death as departing to be with Christ. And the Preacher himself says at the end of this book that the spirit of man returns to the God who gave it. In light of such passages, verse 21 cannot mean that human beings meet the exact same end that other creatures meet when they die. The Preacher cannot be denying the continued existence of the human soul after death. In order to understand what he does mean, we need to remember his vantage point. He is looking at things from an "under the sun" perspective. He is saying that man cannot know, from mere observation, whether or not his soul will survive the grave. From a purely human point of view, we are unable to discern any difference between what happens to us when we die and what happens to animals when they die. And this is something that should humble us. It stands as another reminder of our finitude.

After offering these thoughts on man's finitude, the Preacher repeats what is becoming a frequent refrain in this book: "there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot." By repeating sayings like this, the Preacher presents us with a rich theology of work. While reminding us of the limits of human toil

and productivity, he also affirms the goodness of work. Work is not a result of the fall, though it has been deeply affected by the fall. We were made to work. We should be as productive as we can with our lives, serving the Lord in all that we do. We should find satisfaction in the work that we do. And we can find satisfaction in our work, even when it may not be all that enjoyable for us. This is especially true for the Christian. We can find satisfaction and contentment in the work we do because we believe that it is through our work, even through seemingly insignificant and mundane work, that the Lord cares for his world. God feeds the world through the work that is done by the farmer, the agribusiness executive, the factory worker, the truck driver, the stock-boy, and the cashier. There is an innate dignity in all of these jobs, because the Lord works through each of them to care for his world. That is what God is doing through the work that he has given you to do. And this includes both paid and unpaid labor. It is not only those who earn a paycheck who do work. This is one of the reasons why we should rejoice in the work that the Lord has given us to do. For this is our lot, this is the business that God has appointed for us in this life “under the sun.”

In the last paragraph in our passage, the Preacher returns to the theme with which he began: the theme of injustice. And he is even more blunt here than he was at the beginning of the passage. As I have said before, this is a man who does not soft-pedal things. He calls things as he sees them. And when he looks out upon his world, he sees a great deal of oppression. He sees people shedding tears for the oppressions that they have to suffer, and he sees that there is nobody to comfort them.

The Preacher's world is the same world in which we live. We see the same oppressions that he saw. The powerful exploit the weak, and there is nothing that they can do to change this sad fact. Of course, the Preacher's words are not intended to be taken in an absolute sense. He is not saying that there is never a time when the oppressed find relief. He is simply saying that oppression is a reality in this life under the sun. Try as we might, we cannot put an end to it. The powerful use their power to exploit the weak. This is not to say that we should not speak up for the oppressed. We certainly should do that. But we will never be able to eradicate oppression. It is one of the inevitable fruits of our fallen nature.

The Preacher's words in 4:2-3 sound extremely harsh to us. He says that it is better to be dead, better still not to have been born at all, than to have to endure the oppressions and evils of this life. As bleak as this sounds, the Preacher is not advocating a suicidal kind of despair. These are the words of a man who, in his search for meaning, has come to realize that all is vanity. This is a man who is not happy with the way the world is. He expects more from it. He has eternity in his heart. And he can see very clearly that things are not right in this sad world. Derek Kidner's words on these verses are helpful to consider. He writes,

“If [the Preacher's] gloom strikes us as excessive at this point, we may need to ask whether our more cheerful outlook springs from hope and not complacency.” [Kidner, 44]

It is easy for us, at least when we do not feel the sting of injustice very much ourselves, to be complacent about the injustices of life. And while the Preacher does want us to be content with the business that God appoints for us in this life, he does not want us to be complacent with the way the world is. All is not right with this world. There is far too much injustice, far too much oppression. And like the Preacher, we need to call these things as we see them. More than that, we should do what is within our power to right the wrongs that we see. But as we do so, we also need to realize that we are not going to be able to fix everything. We human beings are very resourceful. We can accomplish a great deal when we set our minds to something and when we work together at it. But we cannot change the fact that we all have a fallen nature, a nature that poisons this world and all of our doings in it, a nature that makes us subject to the same fate as the beasts of the earth. Like them, we will return to the dust from which we came.

There is only one person who can solve the problem that is at the root of all of the sorrows that we face in this world. That person is the Man of Sorrows, the one who by oppression and judgment was taken away, the one who was stricken for the transgression of His people, the one who swallowed up death forever. God's Word tells you that if you entrust yourself to him, then he will raise you up from the dust on the last day. He will bring you to a world where there will be never again be mourning or crying or pain or injustice of any sort. He can do this because by his death he has caused the former

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things, the things that belong to this “under the sun” world, to pass away. And in him all things are being made new.