

Justice Is But A Breath

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0 : 00] Good to worship with you guys. Please open your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 3. Thank you, Gary.

We have been in the book of Ecclesiastes for the last four weeks or so, five weeks. And now we're in chapter 3, verse 16, going to chapter 4, verse 3.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word. Heavenly Father, truly there is no one righteous, no not one.

And we stand here before your holy presence because of the merit of Jesus' righteousness. So now, Lord, graciously speak to us as you always do from your Word.

Meet us here in the presence of your Holy Spirit. Lord, conform us to your Word.

[1 : 37] Teach us how to live with the wisdom of humility. Surrender to your will. So we might navigate this unjust world without losing hope, with great faith and love.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you are able, please stand and join me as I read this passage. We stand to honor God's Word that God has given us.

I'll read from chapter 3, verse 16, to chapter 4, verse 3. Moreover, 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.

I 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. 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 is vanity. All go to one place.

[3 : 19] All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth.

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.

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 I thought, the dead who are already dead, more fortunate than the living who are still alive, but better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. A pastor friend of mine passed away last month, and he was in his 70s.

[4 : 28] He died of chronic lung disease. And he used to say this often. He used to say, all you have to do to suffer is live long enough.

I think he is right about that. Suffering in this sinful, broken world is inevitable. You don't have to do anything special to experience suffering.

You just have to live long enough. And one significant cause of suffering throughout the world is injustice. Many people throughout the world have valiantly fought to eliminate evil and to eliminate injustice in this world, but to no avail, as you can see in the world around us.

Some prominent examples of people who have sought to form a utopia, a utopian society, come to mind. One example is John Humphrey Noyes.

I don't know if you guys have heard of him, who founded the Oneida community in 1848 in Oneida, New York. The community was founded on principles of communalism, free love, and equality.

[5 : 37] Sounds good on the surface. But the commune shared everything. They shared all their income. They shared all their possessions. They even shared their partners. Noyes instituted so-called complex marriages where every man in the commune was considered to be married to

every woman in the commune.

So if you think all this talk nowadays is about open marriages and polyamory is new, no, it's not new. There's nothing new under the sun. The members of this commune called themselves the perfectionists and believed that their practices would shape a man-made Eden.

But the experiment crumbled when Noyes was charged with statutory rape and other sex crimes and fled to Canada. Honestly, that result doesn't surprise me at all.

The communes stopped enforcing their idea of complex marriages after that. No matter how hard we try to create a perfectly fair society, a truly just society, even the U.S. is that experiment, there is no way we can hermetically seal ourselves from injustice which always finds a way to worm its way in. That was actually a point of the book which title, the word utopia comes from Thomas More's book, Utopia, written in 1516.

[7 : 12] It describes a fictional island of utopia, which is an ideal society. And the word utopia is a combination of two Greek words, utopos, which literally means no place, because there's no such place as utopia.

Only some of us in this room have been victims of grave injustices, but probably all of us have experienced some kind of injustice. Maybe you were misunderstood or misrepresented. Maybe you were discriminated against. Maybe you were manipulated by a significant other or backstabbed by a friend. Maybe you were abused by those who had power and authority over you. Given the stubborn persistence of injustice in the world, how do we find the faith and the courage to keep fighting for justice? How do we make sense of so much senseless injustice in this world? Ecclesiastes 3, 16, 4 to 3 teaches us the answer to that question. In this unjust world, this is the main point of this passage, where life is breath and death is gain, we should rejoice in our work and wait for God's time of judgment.

[8 : 34] We're going to talk about that in two parts. First, we'll talk about how to live is breath. And secondly, we'll talk about how to die is gain. In chapter 3, verse 16, it says this, 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 repetition of this and the parallel structure of these lines convey the preacher's horror and indignation.

In the very place where justice ought to be residing, there in that place is wickedness. In the very place that should be characterized by righteousness, there is instead wickedness.

Imagine the horror of seeing in the temple of God an idol. That's the kind of horror that you're supposed to feel, the shameless blasphemy of it all.

The word justice here is also translated judgment in other places. It's in the very place where right judgment should be rendered and where the right verdict should be given, where the right judgment should be executed, there is wickedness.

[9 : 45] Take Thomas Maloney, for example, who served as judge in Illinois for 14 years. One of the most corrupt judges in U.S. history. He fixed three murder trials after taking bribes.

Or think of Timothy Evans, a British man who was executed by hanging on March 9, 1950, after being falsely accused and wrongly convicted of the murder of his own daughter.

During his trial, the man insisted, it wasn't me, it's my downstairs neighbor. But the downstairs neighbor was a chief witness, the star witness for the prosecution.

He was wrongly convicted and he was hanged and then later it was discovered that it was the downstairs neighbor who was the murderer. In fact, he had killed seven other women in the same house. He was a serial killer. Imagine the pain, not only of losing your daughter to murder, and then being accused of killing her yourself.

You guys have probably read the book or seen the movie, Just Mercy, where a black man named Walter McMillan was accused of murder and sentenced to death in 1988 despite the fact that he had an ironclad alibi confirmed by dozens of witnesses, including a police officer.

[11 : 07] No motive for the murder whatsoever and despite the fact that there was no physical evidence and no corroborating circumstances, he was still sentenced to death.

Thankfully, this story has a happy ending, but still he was sentenced to death because of the false testimony of one man, a convicted criminal himself, in exchange for a lesser sentence for him. He testified against falsely Walter McMillan.

In the place of justice, even there was wickedness. However, this is no cause for despair because it says in 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.

Remember I mentioned the word justice is the same word that means judgment. It's the noun form of the verb judge here in verse 17. So there's a contrast between the two verses. Humans in the world do not judge righteously, but God does.

Under the sun, we find wickedness in the place of justice, but God judges both the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter and for every work. Now that should ring a bell if you've been with us through this Ecclesiastes series because that phrase, there is a time for every matter, is a repetition of chapter three, verse one.

[12:29] It said, for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. So verse 17 is linking back to that poem about time in verses two to eight that we looked at last week.

And the main lesson of that poem, if you missed it, was this. Yes, God has made everything beautiful in its time. Yes, God has put eternity in man's heart, but God has made it so that we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end.

That's what it says in the Bible. The times that verses one to eight speak of are not our times, but God's times. Eternity and knowing what is going on in this world in the light of eternity is God's unique prerogative and purview, not ours.

That's why it said in chapter three, verse 14, I perceived that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.

God has done it so that people fear before him. God has instilled in the heart of every human being this inkling of eternity, a longing for eternity, but because we are finite and temporal creatures that inhabit fleeting time, we can't quite grasp hold of it.

[13:51] We can't quite make sense of it. We can't understand why everything happens in its season. We can't understand why there is injustice in the world.

God, you are holy. You are just. You are righteous. So why is there so much evil and wickedness and injustice in this world that you've created?

Yes, of course, there are good, logical, and biblical answers that we can give to that question. But even the best apologists cannot fully answer that question because God has hidden it from us because it stretches beyond our scope.

God has made it so that we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end. As finite creatures, we are unable to connect the dots in this great chain of events in our lives stretching to eternity.

We're like rats in an impossible maze. The maze is too vast, and our knowledge and our memory, our experience, too limited so that we cannot connect from the beginning to the end.

[15:05] God has ordained the world to be like this in order to instill the fear of God, it says in verse 14 of chapter 3, so that we might know how small we are and know how big he is.

In the same way, a parent might say to a child, you can't quite understand this yet, but when you're a little older, I'll explain it to you. My kids are probably tired of hearing that from me.

So when the preacher says in 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, he's assuring us that the ultimate time of judgment and for justice is God's time and not ours.

We want justice now. We clamor for justice now. Look at the George Floyd protests in 2020. Millions of people demanded justice and got it. Derek Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison for second-degree murder.

But many other times, we don't see justice under the sun. Take the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China. The government, the communist government, the students protested against it.

[16:27] A million people gathered in Tiananmen Square to protest the Chinese government. But it did not end with the overthrow or the reform of the communist government. It ended with a military crackdown.

300,000 troops sent into that historic square. Killed hundreds of civilians. No human judge presided over that atrocity to condemn it.

In the place of justice, even there was wickedness. But verse 17 reminds us, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

Justice comes in God's time, not ours. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it tends toward justice.

That arc of the moral universe is in fact so long that we cannot see it from the beginning to the end. We can't quite make sense of it, but we can trust that it bends toward God's ultimate justice.

[17:33] The preacher continues his musings in verse 18. I 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. Notice that both verse 17 and verse 18 begin with this phrase.

I said in my heart. The preacher's sayings in Ecclesiastes often begin with a different phrase. I saw. You see that in chapter three, verse 16, verse 22, chapter four, verse one.

I saw, I saw, I saw. These are the observations, his observations of the world and the way it works. But the phrase I said in my heart signals to us that these are his reflections based on those observations.

And so these are key verses for understanding what this passage means. Verse 18 is connected to verse 17. By reserving his judgment and justice to his eternal timeframe to which man has no access, God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

In other words, the preacher is saying the same thing that he said earlier in verse 14. I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it.

[18:45] God has done it so that people fear before him. Once again, God has made his judgments inscrutable to us in order to put us in our place, to humble us, to make us revere him and to put our hope in him and depend on him.

And how does God remind us that we are but beasts? Look at verses 19 to 21. 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 is vanity. All go to one place.

All are from the dust and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. It seems that there was in the days of the preacher this popular idea, speculation, that the spirit of man goes upward when he dies but that the spirit of the beasts goes down into the earth.

It's a predictably prideful and man-centered idea. Of course, our spirits cannot go to the same place as these lowly beasts is the logic.

[19:56] But the preacher pokes holes into that fancy notion. He says, We all have the same breath. And man has no advantage over the beasts for all is vanity.

All go to one place. All are from the dust and to dust all return. Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that human beings are equal to animals.

I remember getting into trouble with one of my friends in college. I was peeling a banana to eat it.

And as I was peeling the banana, she told me, You're opening the banana the wrong way.

And I said, I didn't know there was a wrong way to open a banana. I said, What do you mean it's the wrong way? And then she says, Well, you're supposed to open it the way monkeys open it.

This way. And I, you know, being the, back in those days, I know I was a lot more prideful and contrarian than now.

[20:59] And I thought, you know, I'm going to ask you a philosophical question. I said, Why should a man copy an animal? Why should I learn how to peel my banana from a monkey?

And then she got mad at me. She said, You're just an animal like all of them. You're just a beast. You're just like, And then she got into evolution and we had this long conversation. And, so that's not what I'm saying.

I'm not saying that humans are the same as animals. In one sense, she was right. We are no different from the animals, as the preacher says here. But in another sense, we're all also very different from the animals, aren't we?

In Genesis 1.27, it says, So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. Human beings are the only creatures that God creates in his own image.

In order that we might represent him to the rest of creation as rulers over creation and so that we might resemble him to be like him as his sons and daughters.

[22:04] Only the human beings are created in the image of God. However, with that said, there is still one important sense in which we are no different from the beasts. We all die.

After forming the man from the dust of the ground, it says in Genesis 2.7, that God breathed into the nostrils the breath of life. His nostrils, the breath of life. And the man became a living creature.

That's how we become living creatures. The breath of God. The spirit of God. And this applies not only to mankind, but also to the animals.

It says in Genesis 1.30, and to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

So then, only mankind is created in God's image, but all creatures have the breath of life. We depend on it for life. And the Bible teaches consistently that when creatures die, our bodies return to the dust, but our spirits return to the God who gave it.

[23 : 13] We see that in Ecclesiastes 12.7, Job 34.14.15, Psalm 104.29-30, among other places. And that's the point that the preacher is making here.

In this sense, we are all but beasts. We have no advantage over the beasts. This is what we call the creator-creature distinction.

God is not quantitatively different from us. He is, but he's not merely quantitatively different from us. He's not just a superlative form, a bigger and stronger and wiser and kinder version of man.

He is qualitatively different from us. He is, as one theologian, Karl Barth calls it, a holy other. He is different from us. No matter how advanced or perfected or wise we become, we will never be God.

That's the creator and creature distinction. God is as different from us as the potter is to the clay.

God is as different from us as the author of the book is from the character that's in the book.

[24 : 18] God transcends time. We are confined to time. God is sovereign and we are subjects.

God is the infinite creator and we are finite creatures. And this is why we cannot grasp hold of eternity.

This is why we can't make sense of the injustices in life. And this is why we stand in awe of God in worship because we see that he is big and then we are small and we can't quite see all that he is up to.

What then? Do we simply despair of justice in this life? Answer is in 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? Notice the same word work which we saw in verse 17 where it said God will judge the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

Ultimate judgment is God's work which will occur in his own perfect time. But there is still work for us to do here on earth which is our lot it says here.

[25 : 28] Yes, there is no ultimate justice here on earth but we are still required by the Lord in Micah 6.8 to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

Yes, there is no ultimate justice under the sun but we are still supposed to long for that justice and pray for that justice as the psalmist does in Psalm 82 verses 3 to 4.

Give justice to the weak and the fatherless. Maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy. Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. But when we learn the wisdom of Ecclesiastes it radically alters the way we go about doing justice in our work.

it enables us to rejoice in our work. If we think of doing justice if we think of justice as something that is within our grasp and something that is ultimately up to us as human beings then we're going to try to make it happen in our time.

We're not going to wait for or hope for God's justice. We're going to become impatient. We're going to become triumphalistic. We're going to become sinfully angry and we're going to take things into our own hands and then that's going to create new miscarriages of justice.

[26 : 48] And then the pendulum swings back and forth back and forth back and forth. And then when we're faced with setbacks which is inevitable in this world we will be plunged into cynicism and despair.

that's what pursuing justice apart from God looks like. But if we recognize that God's ultimate justice is coming then we can rejoice in our various works of justice.

Is our work to bring about justice futile? Yes. In an ultimate sense yes it is in this life under the sun.

Will we ever eradicate injustice from this earth? No we will not. But it is still the right thing to do. We are obeying God and we are honoring God and we are imitating God who is just and who is righteous and that's why there's pleasure and joy to be had there.

Knowing that the arc of the moral universe and the arc of human history is bending toward God's ultimate justice. We can do justice not out of desperation or frustration or anger but out of faith and

hope and love.

[28 : 18] Then in chapter 4 verses 1 to 3 the preacher returns to the theme of oppression and injustice. He says, 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 I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. The phrase no one to comfort them is a common feature of lamentation and mourning in the Bible. It occurs repeatedly for example in the book of Lamentations. It is meant to evoke great pity. At least most of us have shoulders to cry on in times of sorrow. But there are some people some oppressed people in the world who have no one to comfort them.

How pathetic is the person who has no one to comfort him or her? Have you beheld these tears of the oppressed?

[29 : 28] Maybe you think the preacher is being a little bit overly dramatic. Oh, it's still definitely better to be alive than to be dead. Let's consider some of these examples. First one is a fictional one.

I recently watched one of my favorite shows Les Miserables. So it has been on my mind. In the show the details are sparse but if you look at the book which is the original source Victor Hugo's novel Les Miserables Fantine is a young naive girl working class girl with bright future ahead of her but then she's impregnated by a rich student who then abandons her leaving her to raise her daughter Cosette by herself.

Needing child care in order to work and provide for her she entrusts the care of Cosette to the thenardiers who are innkeepers not knowing that they actually abused her daughter treat her as a slave and then lied to her in their letters to extort her of more money.

Fantine sinks further and further into the moral mire of society in order to provide for her daughter. She's unjustly fired from her work by a meddling supervisor forcing her to work at home which earns her a meager sum barely enough to support her daughter let alone herself which leads to her overworking and then which leads to her becoming sick with a fever and a cough.

The thenardiers lie to her saying that they need 10 francs to buy Cosette a woolen skirt and then so Fantine having no other way cuts off her long beautiful locks of hair sells them saying to herself my child is no longer cold I have clothed her with my hair not realizing that Cosette will never get to wear those woolen coats or the woolen skirt.

[31 : 20] Desperate Fantine takes on a lover who uses her beats her and abandons her again. Then comes another letter from the thenardiers who demand 40 francs to buy medicine for Cosette claiming that she has fallen ill in order to make the money Fantine has her two front teeth removed and sold and her woes still don't end and in order to keep up with the thenardiers ever increasing demands she eventually prostitutes herself sacrificing her dignity and self-worth and hitting rock bottom and in that role she is still again harassed by a man and when she retaliates she's the one who is arrested.

With John Valjean's interpretation she's freed but still in the end Fantine dies of tuberculosis not knowing whether Cosette is going to be taken care of after she dies.

and then her body is unceremoniously tossed into a public grave. Can anyone tell Fantine it was better for her to live than to die?

And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. Yes, she's a fictional character but things like this happen to real people in real life.

Why is power so often found on the side of the oppressors? There's some people in the world who have known such deep suffering and injustice that they think death more fortunate than life.

[32 : 54] Take the example of Job from the Bible. Job 3, 3-5 he says this Let the day perish on which I was born and the night that said a man is conceived let that day be darkness.

May God above not seek it nor light shine upon it let gloom and deep darkness claim it let clouds dwell upon it let the blackness of the day terrify it.

How bleak does your life have to be for a man to say something like that? Jeremiah 20 14-17

Cursed be the day on which I was born the day when my mother bore me let it not be blessed cursed be the man who brought the news to my father a son is born to you making him very glad let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity let him hear a cry in the morning and

an alarm at noon because he did not kill me in the womb so my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?

Most of us are desperate to live another day longer because we haven't experienced such suffering is anyone in our society more weak and vulnerable more than children?

Earlier this year a 16 month old toddler named Jalen died in Ohio because her mom left her in the crib and took a 10 day beach vacation with her boyfriend in that jail cell of a crib she was dehydrated she died of dehydration and starvation she whimpered and howled through the night but nobody heard her cry there was no one to comfort her she was found emaciated with sunken eyes with fecal matter smeared all over her dry lips and between her fingertips physical pain is one thing but can you imagine the psychological and emotional pain of a child a toddler at the peak of separation anxiety being abandoned like that?

[35 : 08] According to the Guttmacher Institute 66 million children have been aborted in the United States since 1973 Roe v. Wade 66 million and we like to pretend that we are civilized that we're better than those people who lived in the ancient world 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 who comforts those unborn children who are aborted by their own parents who are meant to care for them who wipes away their tears did you know that infants in the womb babies in the womb cry?

I learned this this week they don't have air in their lungs so they can't make sound but apparently they mimic everything that a born infant does when they are subjected to certain stimuli they cry in the womb but even they are better off than Jalen because they were never born and I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive but better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously said life is nasty brutish and short this is the condition of this fallen world ravaged by sin we work in a cursed ground that produces thorns and thistles reducing all of our labor to futility Genesis 3.18 says as Romans 8.20 says the creation was subjected to futility so that it presently groaning together in the pains of childbirth that word futility in Romans 8.20 is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word hevo the same word that's translated vanity vanity of vanities all is vanity in Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verse 2 and the new obituaries that get written every single day remind us that we still live under this futility all of us who live under the sun experience this futility whether you're a Christian or not and in this kind of unjust world life is breath and death is gain but is there an end to this?

is there any hope for us? by God's gracious intervention this seemingly endless cycle of life and death will come to a decisive end when God brings the new heaven and a new earth when God redeems our mortal bodies in the resurrection life and that's when this cycle will finally end and that's why for us those who have repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus for salvation to live is Christ and to die is gain in a far deeper and greater sense in this world where in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness that is true but there was one time and only one time in human history all of human history when in the place of wickedness there was justice and in the place of wickedness there was righteousness and that's on the cross of Jesus Christ for the Greeks and the Romans crucifixion was torture and execution wrapped in one reserved for the lowliest of slaves and criminals the most shameful kind of death you can die and that's where

Jesus the son of God the holy one the righteous one the perfect one the unblemished lamb of God died on that cross in the place of wickedness there was righteousness hanging there there was justice hanging there why?

he did not deserve to be there I deserve to be there he's the only man who did not deserve to be on that cross every single one of us deserve to be there that's what Romans 3 says no there's no one righteous not even one because if you're honest with yourself and you examine your own heart in all of us there is this heart of darkness there is this thing that the Bible calls pride of self glory and self love and self righteousness and self centeredness which is at the root of every evil and every injustice in this world and so in every single one of us resides in seed form the very thing that grew into Hitler and Nazi Germany that's us we deserve to be on the cross but Jesus died on the cross he took our place to pay the penalty for our sin because God loves us and he wanted to save us that's the one place in history where righteousness took the place of wickedness and that's why we

read in our assurance of pardon today in 2 Corinthians 5:21 for our sake

[41 : 28] God made him Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God so now if you renounce yourself you repent of your sins you turn from your sins you renounce yourself and you pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior then here in our hearts in the place of wickedness now there is justice and here upon our lives where there is wickedness in the place of wickedness now we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ that's what we were singing about today our sins they are many his mercy is more praise the Lord his mercy is more stronger than darkness new every morn our sins they are many his mercy is more that's mercy only people who have received mercy can rejoice in the work of doing justice in this unjust world so