

# Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn back in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and 4, page 554-55555 in the Black Church. Let me pray one more time as we come to God's Word.

Our Father, we ask that you would speak and that we would listen because we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Mohammed Al-Fayed was back in the news this week. You'll have seen that.

The one-time owner of Harrods. He died last year, but he was back in the news this week because dozens of women, former staff, have come forward to say that he assaulted them.

It's the age-old story. The rich and the powerful do what they like, and then they die and get away with it. Jeffrey Epstein, New York financier, jailed for trafficking minors for his and his wealthy friend's pleasure.

Then he dies in very dubious circumstances in prison, and he takes a lot of secrets, his and others, to the grave. Jimmy Savile, the same.

[ 1 : 16 ] The rich and the powerful do what they like, and then they die and get away with some terrible things. Where's the justice? Where's the justice?

And it isn't just them, is it? People seem to get away with all kinds of wickedness all the time. We don't need to look too far to see that. There's plenty of crime that goes on around us day by day that the police don't even bother to deal with.

They don't have the resources, and so it just goes unchecked. The security guard can do very little when the people help themselves in Tesco. He might be able to get his body cam kind of in the way to get a photograph of them, but that's about as far as it goes.

And they get away with it. And yet we heard last week, if you were here, in Ecclesiastes 3, about God's complete, total sovereignty.

He has total control over everything under the sun. So what's going on with the injustice? The obvious question that was left hanging last week was, well, if God has made everything fitting in its time as He says He has, what does this mean for all the injustice and all the oppression that we see around us?

[ 2 : 33 ] Solomon isn't blind to that question. In fact, he addresses it straight on. Chapter 3, 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. He looks to the places where justice and righteousness should be upheld, where they should be promoted, and he only finds wickedness.

It's very familiar. The place of justice, the law courts, where the weakest in society, the unborn, are unprotected. The place of righteousness, the church, where in many cases concerning doctrine and morality, good is called evil and evil good.

Just this week, another story broke of a pastor defiling the pastoral office through adultery. Justice, where is it? Righteousness, where is it?

So how do we reconcile this injustice, 3, 16 and 4, 1? Have a look. Chapter 4, verse 1. Oppression. How do we reconcile injustice and oppression with this great claim in chapter 3 to God's sovereignty?

[ 3 : 41 ] If God is in control of the whole world and His plan is fitting, it is beautiful, as He says, if He is both all-powerful and all-good, what do we do with the problem of all this wickedness?

Well, Solomon, it won't surprise you to know, has reflected on the question, and he tells us we need a three-pronged approach. If we're going to be able to handle this, this reality that is in the world that we live in, we need a three-pronged approach.

And the first is this, we need faith. Faith. It said in my heart, verse 17, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

In the same way that he declared last week God's sovereign plan for the world to be fitting, chapter 3, verse 11, so also when it comes to justice, Solomon makes this confession of faith. You remember last time I said, when you look at the world, it doesn't seem like God's plan fits together perfectly.

And Solomon's no different to us. He looks on the circumstances of his life and of the lives of others, and he has to declare it in faith that God has a good plan that is fitting, that is beautiful. [ 4 : 56 ] And it's the same here. He has to make this confession by faith, because this isn't what his experience tells him. This isn't the way of the world.

Everywhere he looks, he's just told us, he sees wickedness. So the fact that God will judge the righteous and the wicked is something that he must take on faith. There is a time for every matter and for every work.

That means there is a time for injustice and a time for justice. And God can be trusted with it all. One day, God will bring every deed into light, and perfect justice will be done.

Now that's a great comfort for you if you have experienced injustice of any kind. Boys and girls, if someone has lied about you or has called you names, God will one day sort that out.

And for the rest of us, if you have been betrayed, if you have been cheated on, if you have been slandered, been ripped off, scammed, assaulted, abused, injured by a drunk driver, suffered because of medical negligence, if you have experienced a time of unrighteousness, in any way, a time of putting things right is coming.

[ 6 : 16 ] And God will do it. Every wrong will be put right. Every single unborn child that was killed will get justice from the judge of all the earth.

That's what Solomon is saying. But because we don't see this now, we need to do what Solomon does here. We need to take that on faith. We need to believe that that is the case.

But here's the thing for us. Here's the thing for us here this evening. We, gathered here as we are, are better equipped to do this than Solomon was.

Because we have the benefit of living this side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. We can trust that justice will one day be done because we have already seen God enter the world.

He has come in the person of Jesus to go to the cross, to bear the curse of sin and death in himself. And then in his resurrection, he showed himself as Savior and Lord of all.

[ 7 : 16 ] Now what that means is three things. First of all, it means that for all who have put their faith in him, the judgment that we deserve has fallen on him. And so we go free. If God is going to judge the wicked, let's be honest.

We know that we're implicated in that. We know that we haven't lived in a way that has pleased God perfectly in his world. We know that we're implicated among the wicked. So we need that issue to be resolved.

And he broke into the world all those years ago in order to do that at the cross. Secondly, any injustice, therefore, that we experience now, we experience in union with Christ.

So it is a sharing, Paul says in Philippians 3, a sharing in the sufferings of Christ becoming like him in his death. What that means is any suffering that we experience now, we experience it in union with Christ.

And God is using those things to make us more Christ-like. Then thirdly, Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of his future judgment.

[ 8 : 22 ] That's what the Apostle Paul preached in Athens in Acts 17. He said, God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

We look back to the empty tomb and the empty tomb is proof to us that God will one day judge. All unrighteousness, all injustice, all wrongs of every flavor and every kind will be put right on that day. It's interesting that the Apostle gave this as a reason why people should repent of their sin and put their faith in Christ. I want to say if you're here this evening and you need to do that, I want to encourage you to do it.

To have the judgment that you deserve because you have lived in God's world according to your rules. Because you have actually sided with the wicked. Put your faith in Jesus Christ and have the judgment that you deserve credited to him.

It's taken away then and you're free. But notice it is also the reason, the resurrection is also the reason why we can trust that the Lord one day will put your injustice right.

[ 9 : 45 ] On that day, that injustice will be overturned and Al-Fayed and Epstein and Saville and whoever tells us that they didn't get away with their evil.

They will one day give an account before the bar of God's justice which is a far higher court than any human court. And on that day, perfect justice will be done. When we look around in our world, this is a great comfort.

And we take it on faith because the tomb is empty. Well, what someone might say, well, is that not a bit of a cop-out? Actually, it's just hoping for the best.

It's a power of positive thinking trick that you're employing there to make a corrupt world bearable. If God really cared about justice, in fact, he'd do something now.

Well, here Solomon takes us to our second point. If the first point is that we have to live by faith that God is going to deal with injustice, the second point is that he reminds us of our finitude. Our finitude.

[ 10 : 50 ] Verse 18, To the person who won't trust God with his plans for the world, to the person who won't trust God with his promise to put everything right one day, Solomon reminds them of their finitude.

By making us wait, God is testing us to see if we will accept that he is God and we are not. To see if we will accept that he is the creator and we are his creatures. To see, to test us to see if we will live by faith according to God's word in God's world.

And the way that Solomon does this is by reminding us of our death. Do you see that? Of our death. He says in that regard we're no different to the animals.

It's not that animals and humans are of equal value. He's saying no, that we are the same in that we both die and we both decompose. Verse 20, All go to one place.

All are from the dust and to dust all return. Since our first parents, since they sinned in the garden, death has been a messenger to remind us over and over again, funeral after funeral, graveside after graveside, that we are finite, that we're not in control, that we're vapor, here for a season and then gone.

[ 12 : 30 ] We find it so hard to accept and yet it is impossible for us to ignore. Death is the ultimate case study that proves that we're not in control of our lives.

You can train as diligently as you want. You can eat as clean as you want. You can get as much sleep as you feel you need, but you do not control your destiny.

You don't. None of us do. And Solomon adds to this, You have no idea what happens after you die. Look at verse 21. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

We talk about people when they die going to a better place or we say that they'll be looking down on us from whatever vantage point they now occupy. But who actually knows this?

No one. Nobody has first-hand empirical evidence of what happens to the human spirit after they die. Does the spirit go upward to God or does it go into the ground and that's the end?

[ 13 : 38 ] When you go to a funeral, where is the person that you once knew? Where are they? And do you have any first-hand evidence of that? None of us can provide that evidence.

Which means we all take what we believe about the afterlife on faith. All of us. The question is, does the ground beneath that faith actually hold?

You see what I'm saying? See what Solomon is saying? None of us know actually empirically what happens after death.

So all of us believe what we do about the afterlife on faith. The question is, does the ground beneath that faith actually hold us? For the Christian, our faith is in the one who has dealt with the problem of death by dying in our place.

He died in our place and then three days in the tomb he walked out again, alive. We have someone who went into death and came out the other side glorified.

[ 14 : 42 ] So we have one who has shown us actually what happens to a human soul such that now we, quote, await a Savior from heaven who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power of his resurrection.

We are finite. And the curse of sin drags us into the dust. But if our faith is in the Lord Jesus who went into the dust and came out the other side, then we have confidence that our future is sure and that his promise to put things right will come to pass.

We must live by faith recognizing our finitude. What's interesting is living in a world that is full of wickedness.

It's one thing to say, live by faith and if you're tempted to question God and what he's doing, remember your finitude, remember how limited you are, remember how finite you are.

But then what? How do we get through? What do we do? Well, Solomon here then moves to push us towards a very practical help. The first thing we need is faith.

[ 15 : 54 ] The second thing is an awareness of our finitude. The third thing he's saying we need are friends. Friends. Point number three is friends. For one, 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. Solomon seems to accept injustice and oppression as a fact of life in a fallen world but what really grieves him is when those who suffer do so alone.

There was no one to comfort them. Indeed he goes so far as to say that it is better to be dead than to face injustice alone. And best of all, verse three do you see they have never been born in the first place.

Better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Companionship, community, having your people in the tough reality of life is one of the ways that your faith endures and you can find joy in the midst of it.

See in a sense here Solomon is giving further shape to the life that he's calling us to in the book as a whole. So when he says in 3.22 can you see he saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work for that is his lot.

[ 17 : 22 ] This echoes, you remember what he said back in 2.24. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. And the point now is that these things should be pursued in relationship with others.

Eat and drink with friends. Work as part of a community. Especially the community of the faithful. This would have been the case for the festival meals that Solomon would have enjoyed within the life of God's people.

This was where those who were oppressed strengthened their bonds in the face of opposition and injustice. This is one of the reasons why hospitality is such an important element in the Christian life.

And why we encourage it here as part of our regular Lord's Day routines. Eating and drinking together is central to building good relationships with others. And those relationships are what we need as we seek to live faithfully in a culture that is awash with injustice and oppression.

We need friends. But you see as well in light of that it isn't just the threat of the oppressors that Solomon identifies.

[ 18 : 31 ] He can identify he also identifies how we damage ourselves in all of this. Look at verse 4. Then I saw that all toil and all skill and work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. Solomon is nothing if not honest. I hope we've seen that by now. And here he presses the uncomfortable point that so much the point is this that so much that we accomplish in life is motivated by our envy of others.

Who they are and what they have. Lance Armstrong the disgraced American cyclist fascinating individual he writes and speaks about how the German cyclist Jan Ulrich was the single biggest reason for Armstrong's success.

He said he couldn't stop thinking about him. What he was doing what he was eating what he was training all that kind of stuff. That was what drove him. Now that can be okay in sport actually.

That can be a great motivator to try and win in sport but when we bring it into everyday life let's be honest it is a really destructive way to live. when we view others as rivals it is yes a powerful motivator for productivity but it destroys relationships and in the end it's going to leave us isolated and it is the antithesis of what we need in the context of oppression and injustice.

[ 20 : 08 ] Plus if Solomon has said that well motivated labor is vapor then what must this sort of envy driven labor be vapor of vapors and here's why look at verse 8 one person who has no other an isolated individual either son or brother yet there is no end to all his toil and his eyes are never satisfied with riches so that he never asks for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure this also is vanity and an unhappy business the solitary worker laboring for himself in his own ends is never satisfied either with the work verse 8 or the reward that he gets for the work or what purpose or person his work is serving and all of this is because our work is designed to be done

alongside others indeed verse 9 can you see verse 9 is very important it is the first place in the book where we see something that actually returns a reward something that isn't vapor verse 9 two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil for if they fall one will lift up his fellow but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up again if two lie together they keep warm but how can one keep warm alone and though a man might prevail against one who is alone two will withstand him a threefold cord is not quickly broken here are the benefits of companionship someone to lift us up when we fall someone to keep us warm someone to help us against attack and if two is better than one verse 12 three is better again threefold cord is not quickly broken unfortunately this text has been used at a million weddings to describe the relationship between husband and wife and God that's the threefold cord who's heard a sermon like that who's given a sermon like that it's not about that you know if it's just the two of you you're vulnerable but if you have God in your marriage well then you'll be strong a threefold cord is not quickly broken yeah fine okay but that's not what he's talking about he's referring to human companionship and to the strength that there is in numbers we live in a broken world a world that is marked by injustice and oppression by rivalry by falling down by getting cold and being knocked down and God will one day sort that all out but while we wait it is far better to face this life with friends than to do so alone and don't confuse real companionship by the way with popularity or recognition that's the point of 13 to 16 at the end there he's talking about leaders and how leaders need trusted friends to tell them the truth verse 16 they can be surrounded by people but without someone to give wise counsel their leadership is also vapor it's all about having companions having friends in the context of injustice and opposition here's the point we need one another and we have been given one another that's what the church is a key part of salvation is the creation of a community as we are reconciled to God we are also reconciled to one another we are incorporated into a new humanity the body of Christ the church and so what is true of us theologically should be expressed practically as we pursue friendship that is genuine to help us endure in the context of injustice and oppression we need to pursue friendship and if this is the case if that is how we are supposed to be we should be aware

of those in our midst who are particularly susceptible to isolation those who live alone singles divorcees widows internationals who just arrived in the country and don't know their way around now of course those sort of relationships and starting that it's not easy but it's what God requires and it's what God will bless we all wish that injustice didn't exist whether it's Al-Fayed or Epstein or Savile or your own experience we wish that that wasn't the case but it is it does exist and it will until the Lord returns it's one of the things that we bear in a fallen world but we trust that he will return he will come back to put it right on a day that he has set the Lord Jesus will bring every injustice to account the whys and the wherefores and the timings those are beyond our finite grasp of things but because of the resurrection we can be confident that God will bring this justice to pass and so we live by faith and while we wait we should forge bonds with others that will enable us to endure until that day friends who will keep us going friends who will stand with us friends who will help us by not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day draw near that's what the writer of the Hebrews says we come together Lord's day by Lord's day we build relationships in the context of the church family because we need each other if we're going to keep going Martin Luther speaking on this passage said this and I'll close with this it is better to be in association with others and to enjoy things in common in society meaning in relation with others there is mutual help common work and common solace let's pray together let's pray together Thank you.