

Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16

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Preacher: Jeremy Meeks

[0:00] Please remain standing if you are able for the reading of God's word. 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. 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. 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.

[1:08] 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. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, 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?

[2:15] This also is vanity and an unhappy business. 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. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been poor.

I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.

Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. I don't know about you, but I love...

[3 : 28] Categorizing people. For example, there are those of us that are really happy that it's snowing outside.

And then there are the rest of us who are sane, who are wondering why we don't live in Miami.

There are those of us that are lamenting this morning because the Bears inevitably lost. And there are those of us that don't care about football at all.

There are those of us that love hugging other people and being hugged. And then there's the rest of us who constantly get asked the question, who hurt you?

And the answer is everybody. You a hugger? Regardless of whether you are or not, the truth of the matter is there are some things that you and I have to embrace in life.

[4 : 47] Some of them are easy. Some of them are hard. A lot of them are enigmatic.

They're not the worst of all things, but they're not always good. Whether you're a Christian or not this morning, there's a question we're all going to have to answer in life.

How can we embrace it all in a fulfilling way? That's the question I think this text sets out to answer.

How is it that we can embrace all of it, all of life, in a fulfilling way? Last week, this guy, this preacher, talked about the importance of now.

There's different times in life. You can't change the time. All you can do is deal with the time that you're in, knowing that the next time is maybe going to be better, maybe going to be worse.

[6 : 01] But there's a time for everything, which is not good news, just news. What you've got to figure out is that now is the only time you've got.

So how do you live faithfully between the now and the not yet, knowing that what we do doesn't last forever, but thank God what he does lasts forever?

How are you going to embrace it all in a fulfilling way? The title of the sermon is Embracing It All. I'd like to tell you that most of what this text is talking about is good stuff.

But if you were even remotely paying attention to the reading, it's not. Which is helpful because most of life isn't. You know, this preacher guy in this book, if you want to kind of imagine this whole book, the way I like to imagine it, it's like watching a one-man play.

He gets introduced really early on, and this guy comes walking out, and he's blindfolded. And there's a nebulous object in the middle of the stage. You can't exactly tell what it is.

[7 : 06] There's a sign over the object, and the sign that points down at the object says life. And the preacher guy, this blindfolded guy, is talking to us about the things that he's feeling and experiencing about this life thing.

He doesn't quite have it all figured out, neither do you. But he's really trying to get his arms wrapped around it. Today, he's got some not-so-easy things to figure out.

I wonder if it sounds familiar. I mean, it's always, you know, kind of some comfort when you read things you wish weren't true in the Bible, but very much resonate with our experience.

It kicks off here. In place of justice, wickedness. In place of righteousness, wickedness. Everything is just kind of messed up. Which is a bummer.

But isn't it true? Like, I don't care where you come from or what you believe. Isn't that your experience? It's all, like, not the worst, but it's all just kind of less than it could be.

[8 :15] There's a small consolation that the preacher holds on to. God's going to judge. That's in verse 17.

Because there's a time for everything. Okay. Good news. Comforting. At least for those of us who believe in God.

Like, even if you don't believe in God this morning, don't you wish that there was somebody who was going to fix everything? Everything? This whole first section is about what you're going to have to embrace.

And the first thing is just that it's all kind of messed up. God will fix it in the end, but if the end isn't here yet, that means it's not all fixed. The bummer is, you're going to die.

That's what he's saying right here. It's a really weird statement in verse 18, especially if you were in adult education this morning. 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.

[9 :37] You're like, oh, this preacher doesn't know what he's talking about. Because as I read in adult education, Genesis chapter 1, God created humans in his own image. So take that.

Remember that when people say things, you've got to figure out why they're saying them. Question. What's the difference? Between a platypus, a porcupine, and a person.

You're like, I got so many of them. Right? I mean, the platypus ain't nothing like the platypus. Porcupine's got spines on it. I mean, some people are spiny. That's why they don't like getting hugged.

And one says there's all the difference in the world between those three creatures. And yet the preacher goes, yeah, but not really. In what sense?

Well, in this sense. Verse 20. All go to one place. Now, some of you are like, yes. I've been asking the question my whole life.

[10 :43] Do all dogs go to heaven? Nailed it. I'm going to quote Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verse 20 with a confident yes. Cats? No.

Dogs? Yes. Shoot. But if cats are animals, then they're all going to the same place. I guess heaven will be full of animals. Not exactly. What's the place that he's talking about?

You just got to keep reading. It's one of the benefits of the Bible. If you just read it further, you figure things out. All go to one place. What's the place? Well, just keep reading verse 20.

The dust. In other words, you came from the ground. You're going back to the ground. You're just like the animals. Ain't no difference between the platypus, the porcupine, and you.

In the sense that you're all going to die. You've got to get your arms around it. It's not easy.

[11 :44] How should we respond to this? Well, here's what the preacher's going to say. Maybe you caught it when we were reading it. You're like, wait a second. I was tracking.

That all made sense up until that weird thing where he takes a hard right turn. Verse 22. So, in other words, in light of all that, in light of the fact that I'm no different than a zebra or a lion.

I'm just going to die. Everything's full of wickedness. This is great. It's freezing outside. I was hoping for some encouragement. This is not great. Then, all of a sudden, how are we supposed to respond to this?

Verse 22. So, I saw there's nothing better than that a man slash woman, you know, all of us should rejoice in his work. That's his lot.

Who can bring him to see what will be after him? Like, okay, cool. So, the way I deal with wickedness, tainting everything, and the fact I'm going to die is go back to work tomorrow.

[12:43] Cool. Cool. Cool. Cool. now here's what he's saying remember there's a time for everything this is the one shot you got so what else you gonna do now here's the crazy thing if you're a christian you've got a little bit more information than the preacher and it's some great information so for example it sounds good that god's going to judge the wicked in the end but the christian knows that that's truly true now it's always been true it's always been the case the preacher had good reason to believe it the christian just has way more reason to believe it because god hasn't just always judged wickedness in its own time which is not our time but according to the rest of the story the part over here heading towards the back of the book we learned that this guy jesus shows up who he sang about and prayed about and all that kind of stuff who's going to be the one who fixes everything in fact there was a lot of confusion when he came because everybody's like all right so go ahead and do that thing and he's like well i'll do some miracles they're like cool keep doing it like you know boot out rome let's go glory town and he's like ah my time's not your time and they're like well we're not really happy about that then he dies large part because people weren't down with what he was all about and look there for a minute that uh all the hope in the world was lost maybe there's somebody else who's going to come except for the fact that three days later he rises from the dead just like he said he was going to tell death and the devil take that i win and then tells his people who followed him why don't you go tell everybody that i win as you read all the way to the end i'd encourage you to do it this afternoon read revelation 20 and 21 at the very end of the book what you'll learn is two things number one that jesus guy is coming back to fix it all he's going to be the one who brings the judgment and he's going to be the one gives you hope after death paul in first corinthians chapter 15 at the very end of going on and on about the wildness and the greatness of the resurrection will say the craziest thing in light of the fact that jesus rose from the dead and that death isn't the end for those who trust in him your labors aren't in vain which is really good news come tomorrow because let's be honest your job is okay so is mine and i have the benefit of having the best job in the world i get to train people to do what i'm doing right now it's awesome but it's yeah it's fine i have to deal with some of the people in this room pray for me you know but here's the cool thing i have the confidence that what the preacher says has always been true yet it's more true because of this jesus guy i wonder if you believe in him today and i don't mean like yes there's this one time in sunday school where i cried and i got baptized i mean are you believing him now you're facing the wickedness of the world and going like okay it's never going to be all fixed but i'm getting my arms wrapped around it i'm gonna die but that's not the end of the story jesus is gonna fix it in his own good time which is not always easy to believe but i'm believing it therefore i can work and labor is that you this morning if so awesome if not and you're like what are you talking about come find me after service because i'd love to explain more and i wish i could say so let's just go home and you know stay warm everybody there's a problem which is first of all the text i've been assigned isn't over

and second of all it's a good thing because that's not where all this ends we've got to embrace the fact that there's wickedness that corrupts everything we've got to embrace the fact that we're going to die but the question remains okay fine uh i i got it jesus fixes it all in the end but what about now the preacher is radically dedicated to the nowness of the world and there's still some tough stuff we got to embrace it's right there in chapter 4 verse 1. it's all the oppressions that are done under the sun the tears of the oppressed they had no one to comfort them i mean come on man wickedness corrupts everything i'm gonna die go back to work because it's all it's all you got oh by the way oppression is everywhere and it's never gonna end cool again i i i i wish all the sometimes i wish all the bible passages were like everything is awesome believe in jesus it'll go perfect for you but of course if that's all the bible said i would quit christianity right now because that's not the way life is it's not easy to read that like oppression is always there and there's nobody to comfort them but i go like hey i i don't like that but that's the world i live in one of the benefits of seeing this written a long long time ago is you go oh that's the way the world's always been guess what friends i don't know what you're currently fighting against you just might be successful just buckle up because it's not going to last real long ask the old head revolutionaries amongst us who were victorious for a minute and then go yeah something else comes he's not saying like don't worry about oppression but he's just saying like it's it's just always amongst us and you got to get your arms wrapped around this there there is no end to it it's hard to see oppression because you can't fix it so the preacher goes you know what's better verse 2 uh being dead because at least they don't have to deal with it anymore this is the one nice thing about being dead right i mean it's kind of a bummer and everything but at least you don't have to put up with the mess anymore then he's like okay so bummer to deal with oppression you know not the greatest better to be dead here's the here's what's even better than that though to not even have been born yet can you imagine right we got some babies and wombs around here living their best life now warm well fed it's great and you kind of think i mean you got to feel bad for mom sometimes now you're not supposed to say this stuff but it's true but in light of this passage imagine it we're like this is as good as it gets pretty soon you're going to come out into the world and in one sense it's a bummer but here's the crazy thing about ecclesiastes you're like yeah but being alive is also kind of awesome and you're like yup you got to take it all in you got to embrace it all i mean because even this is why the book is constantly talking about better it's right there in three but better than both is he who has not yet been has not seen the evil deeds that are done in the sun you're like oh great yeah but if that baby actually comes out he's just going to be like the people who are that's better but it ain't everything wickedness everywhere you're gonna die oppression that won't end

what are you guys supposed to do with all this well thankfully the preacher gives us a few options here's the first one verse 4 chapter 4.

then i saw that all toil and all skill and work come from man's envy of his neighbor this is vanity and striving after the wind like let me just ask you a question what are you trying so hard for look seriously you're like oh man i wish i just want to get ahead yeah why do you want to get ahead because i want a bigger boat why because my friend has a boat i'm gonna get a bigger boat than him post on instagram it's gonna be awesome i can pretend that i have the ideal life i'm gonna get ahead why because i want a bigger office why i don't know because that other person has a bigger office than me you can just join the rat race that's one that's one option and it's an option that you and i are sold as something that is going to work and you and i very dumbly buy into it all of the time right you're like we look we read statements of the mighty titans of the past like rockefeller who get interviewed hey when's it gonna be enough how much is enough rockefeller just looks back he goes yeah just a little bit more god fool which he is until you're like i'll retire when i get another hundred grand in the bank and you're like you're just a mini rockefeller the rat race is one possible way to confront a world that is not awesome just put it out of your mind just work just work that's one there's another option it's right there verse five the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh gross that's another option right you're the okay again we could divide the room there's some of you that are like that whole rat race thing was rather offensive and other people like yeah get after him i'm just gonna go home netflix and chill for the rest of my life the rat race people are the people who think these people are like yeah it's fools he didn't call the rat race people fools it doesn't have to they're blatantly obviously fools giving up on life is also foolish like just eating just consuming yourself you're like oh that's that sounds gross it is that's another way to face a world that you'll never fully understand and go like okay i'm not gonna embrace it i'm just gonna put my arms behind my back and sit in this easy chair until i die that's you this morning how's it going you're like pretty miserable yeah thankfully that's not the only two options in life none of them are going to work you go down the rat race path the the seductive thing about that one is it it'll work for a minute the whole like you know just give up on everything that'll work for a minute or you could pursue the third path it's in verse six better is a handful of quietness and two hands full of toil and striving after the wind quietness i mean you know this it's chicago on a sunday morning when it's snowing isn't it awesome when you just walk outside and everybody's like forget this i'm staying inside like i'm freezing to death but at least it's quiet for once in chicago this isn't just an external quiet this is an internal quietness we're just like yeah this is great can you imagine just being at peace the wickedness exists you're going to die and oppression is everywhere you go but here i am and this is okay you go like well i mean that sounds great

but now we're back to fantasyland there's no way that could possibly happen maybe how is it that we can actually achieve that life we've seen what we have to embrace and in verse seven to the end he's going to say well here's how we actually do that how is it that we actually embrace it all in fulfilling kind of way it starts with a negative example you could go at it alone that's one option this one doesn't seem to work real good this is verses seven and eight this is the solo attempt you know all you got to do is pay attention to the repetition here no other no end eyes are never satisfied never asks unhappy business like that sounds bad now let me be clear that he is not talking about solitude solitude is necessary so that's we all have varying levels of how much solitude we need in life interestingly as i get older i need more i used to be like let's have 20 people that live in our house all the time then i was like no we all need solitude some of it's just like five minutes a day right and we're like i'm good other people are like uh most of the time i need to just be by myself we have differing levels we're not talking about solitude in fact some of us could do with more solitude but solitude prepares us to be with other people he's not talking about solitude he's talking about loneliness and i don't know if you figured this out yet but you and i live in a society that is plagued by loneliness you don't have to raise your hand this morning but are you lonely you would be in the majority the apa american psychological association in 2025 did a study and found that 60 percent of people feel lonely or disconnected most of the time 60 that means all of these people in this room maybe the worst part is that that same group that was studied 92 percent of them believe that human relationships are very important to them you can try and go it alone it's not going to work you just end up miserable and if that's you this morning first of all i'm sorry second of all thankfully it doesn't have to be that way you see because the way to embrace it is not going at the solo attempt no here's the way we should go go about it like a team effort that's how you and i get our arms around the tough things in the world i mean really what this guy's arguing in this passage is this we should hold on to the tough stuff together which you might go like well yeah okay that's blatantly obvious a yeah god's wisdom it is pretty obvious uh buckle up for the rest of ecclesiastes it's going to be a whole bunch of stuff you already know you just don't happen to believe or live in light of but you would hope right i mean if god is really the creator he set all this up said like hey here's the way not only that i would like you to live in the world but it would be good for you then it would make sense

[29 : 25] so here it's like don't just go about the solo attempt this is a team effort gives a few you know word pictures to figure this out verse 9 two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil i mean this is a lot of the guy who just toils all for himself stacks cash in his room just hoards it all you're like well that's not good but isn't jesus right it's more blessed to give than receive and if you're like i don't know what that's about congratulations you're selfish and you're stingy just try it you know give back i just give back because like you know generosity is a good thing although it is but we as christians ought to give back because of what god has given to us and it's great thing when you labor not only for your own benefit but for somebody else's it doesn't matter what it is it's not just like your job read a book don't you just read a book for you but then share your wisdom with somebody else make a meal and make extra so you can bring it for your chicago core students who constantly forget their lunch it's great then all of a sudden you're like i'm doing this for somebody else you need you you need like proof of this it's because we're on food we'll stick with it you ever just cooked for yourself it's like the most like miserable thing in the world isn't it like ah every time my wife leaves i'm like yup we're eating eggs by we i mean me every day marge is home i'm like what's the next 16 hour process i could go through it's great i mean 10 if they fall one will lift up his fellow obvious but woe to him who's alone when he falls and has no other lift him up again if two lie together they keep warm but how can one keep warm all alone which might not make sense to you because you have what we call indoor heating but in a desert society where it gets really cold at night you just lying there all by yourself that's a bummer two great no a man might prevail against one who is alone two will withstand him you get in a fight with somebody who can beat you up you're gonna get beat up you got a buddy and you're like i'll bring it on and he just stacks on top of three fold cord isn't easily broken look he's just doing math two is good three is even better that's all that means more the merrier like here's the way this building right these people and if you're like i don't even know what i'm doing here guess what here's one of the things we get to do we get to embrace it all together because uh you haven't figured it out yet there's some things that are very easy for you to embrace that other people can't possibly imagine embracing there are going to come times where you're going to need other people to do some of the simplest stuff for you to explain something to help you with something and one of the benefits of the church is that we all get to do that and if you're like i'd like to learn more about that congratulations we didn't plan it this way but pastor bing's doing a great job on tuesdays together to learn how to be a friend if you're like how do i do this come on tuesday you get to learn how to do it and b you get to eat food and hang out with other people that sounds pretty good if you listen see here's the weird thing about god's wisdom it's really true of all of life if you've ever had kids or students or anything you said this a million times there is a world of difference between hearing something and listening to something it's always a bummer when like you were told that your whole life and you're like whatever

and then you're put in the position of telling that to other people like on a daily basis but it's true right and that's what he's going to cap off with this very strange weird story about some kings and stuff i think what he's trying to drive home is this you you know what to do question is you're going to listen verse 13 better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer had to take advice you know how to take advice friend and the proof of it's like whatever you do with whatever's been said here take the advice of trusting in a god that knows better than you who's in control of all of this and will fix it in the end through his son jesus listen to the advice to trust in him listen to the advice that you might not want to put your arms around wickedness and death and oppression but until you do you're just gonna work yourself to death or distract yourself to death now you got to get your arms around it together with other people why is it this poor wise youth that's better than the old and foolish king who no longer had to take advice why well because he went from the verse 14 prison to the throne though his own kingdom he had been poor saw all the living who move under the sun along with the youth who was standing in the king's place there was no end of all the people of all who he led yet those who come later will not rejoice in him surely this is also the vanity striving after the wind you're like what the heck is going on sometimes you know there's these people who spend their whole lives reading studying the books of the bible and they write these things called commentaries every once in a while you stumble on a line that's so good you got to quote it here's one this is hebrew at its worst and you're like yeah all right because i'm confused everybody's like we don't even know what this means i think it's this it's way better to be somebody who can take advice but know this even the person who takes advice isn't going to just fix everything they'll appreciate him for a while then they'll just walk away because they don't actually appreciate what's going on you see some of us actually are laboring so hard because we want to leave a legacy guess what uh everybody's going to forget you when you die here's what you can do you can take it all in right now for as long as you've got not just for yourself but for the people around you get your arms wrapped around those very prickly issues of wickedness everywhere death coming for all of us oppression ain't gonna end but with one another we can take some quietness together hold on to the tough stuff trusting in a god who rules over it all who we don't always understand we don't have to because what we know is enough and we can do it together let's pray god we thank you for this complicated strange little book of ecclesiastes

i pray that you'd help us take it all in i pray this morning for the lonely would you first of all help those of us who aren't befriend them would you help the lonely be willing to be befriended help us embrace the complicated nature of now to take it all in together in a way that would not lead us to join the rat race or become apathetic to everything but live with true peace and contentment together trusting that you know what you're doing you'll make it all right in the end you can actually help us live well now help us to listen live in light of what we know pray these things in jesus name amen