

Life under the Sun

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[0 : 00] Well, please grab that reading from Ecclesiastes, which we'll come to in a moment. But firstly, I wanted to ask you a question, which is, what do you see when you look at our world today? What sort of things do you see? So there's some good things, like there's beauty here, the fjords in Norway, or the lupines blooming in New Zealand, or the clear tropical waters in Fiji. There's also lots of good food to enjoy, like a juicy steak or a bowl of fruit salad or good old pad thai. Are you hungry yet? I'm getting hungry, actually. But because of sin, we also live in a fallen world, as we've seen in our series, a world outside the Garden of Eden, or as Ecclesiastes put it, a life under the sun. And so we also see things like injustice and oppression, things like envy and loneliness. So I don't have slides for these, sorry, Tim.

[1 : 04] So how are we to live under the sun with such things? That's what our teacher seeks to understand today. Last week, the teacher knows that there was a time for every activity under the sun.

So as you can see, chapter 3, verse 1, that's what he said last week. Sorry, under the heavens. And under the heavens is a phrase which means under God. So he saw God's control over every time and season.

But this week, he moves to see things in life. On the next slide, under the sun. And in your readings, he repeats these things. He has observations. He says, I saw under the sun.

And then chapter 4, verse 1, I saw under the sun. Well, you can see it for yourselves on the screen. Life outside the Garden of Eden is a world marred by sin.

And when he looks at the world, he sees the same things we see. Not just the good, but the bad. And as one of God's people, he wants to make sense of these things.

[2 : 11] Now, before I show you this from the Bible, so you don't take my word for it, but God's word, just a quick note on the structure. You can see on the screen there that there's four observations. And they relate.

The first two are related and the second two are related. So you notice on the word, I returned and saw. The word returned isn't in our English translations, but he's returning to the same topic, a related topic.

So the first two observations, injustice, oppression, and the second two have to do with toil or work. Just so you know how the passage hangs together. At the end, the last paragraph, he also talks about wisdom and success.

But I don't think we're going to get time to get there today. Let me start, though, with firstly, injustice and oppression. So point one, verse 16. And I saw something else under the sun.

In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. And when he looked at the world, instead of judgment and justice, he saw wickedness and more wickedness, he says.

[3 : 18] In other words, the wicked seem to get away with what they do. And there's, well, we're left with injustice under the sun. And we see that in our world, too, don't we?

In our own state, a pastor of a church in Narry Warren was arrested for flouting lockdown rules. And I don't think he believes COVID is real.

Now, while I sympathize with his desire to gather together, I don't agree with him. COVID is real. And I don't think he's being a great witness. But instead of being fined, which is what the process is, different fines for different organizations, he was actually put in jail for up to a week, I think it was, before people raised funds to get him out.

Now, is that right? Or on the next slide from the Age newspaper, our state government is meeting secretly with three crossbenchers, doing a deal with them to try and get some permanent pandemic laws that give them more power.

Even the Age, which is pro-Labour, is admitting this is secretly. Is that right? Of course, it's much worse overseas. It wasn't that long ago when China forced the Uyghur Muslims to basically go into concentration camps.

[4 : 35] And more recently, just last month, the Communist Party has been forcibly removing their children from them. The article goes on to say that they were even sterilizing the mothers.

It's hard to know what's truth, but there's enough of these reports coming out that there must be some truth to them. Is that justice? Well, some of you will know Ronald, who used to attend our church and now living in Myanmar.

Last week, he sent through an email with some photos of what was actually happening. So some of them are being tortured. Here's an example of someone being tortured. In fact, 20 were arrested and tortured in jail.

And then their families were told the next day to come and collect their corpses. Is that justice? In fact, I took this photo out because it's a bit too much.

Infants are dying and being placed in cardboard boxes for coffins. In place of justice, there is wickedness in this world under the sun. And so we can feel the weight of this teacher's observations, can't we?

[5 : 41] But how are we to respond, especially if we believe in God? What do we say to the non-Christians who say, look, I can't believe there is a God because look at the injustice in the world.

Well, the teacher says two things to himself. And I think we can say more. So verse 17 is the first one. I said to myself, God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.

As we saw last week, there is a time for every activity under the heavens. And so says the teacher, that must include a time for justice too.

And if there is to be complete justice, it must include all people, both the righteous and the wicked. And it must hold every deed to account for it to be complete. But the teacher doesn't know when this time will be.

He only sees injustice under the sun. And so the second thing he says to himself is rather depressing. Verse 18. I also said to myself, as for humans, God tests them so that they may see they are like the animals.

[6 : 55] Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath. Humans have no advantage over animals.

Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place. All come from dust and to dust or return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth.

It's pretty depressing, isn't it? You know, perhaps God lets this injustice happen, he says, to show we're actually no better off than the animals. Life is meaningless, fleeting, futile.

And like the animals, we too die. Now, of course, as an Israelite, he knew humanity was created in God's image. And so we have greater worth in God's sight than animals, which makes him wonder in verse 21 whether our spirit will go up and the animals down.

And while he thinks that later on in chapter 12, he's still not sure. Because notice verse 21. What does it start with?

[8 : 11] Who knows? Just as he thinks there will be a time for justice but doesn't know when, so here he thinks we might go up, but who knows?

And so the best advice he can give is verse 22. So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work because that is their lot.

For who can bring them to see what will happen after them? This is similar to what we saw last week, to enjoy the good things in life as God's gifts with thanks.

But this week there's no reference to God's gifts, is there? There's this instead depressing resignation that this is just our lot in life.

For who knows what will happen after this life, he says. Whether we'll go up and face judgment and God's people will find life eternal or not.

[9 : 10] Who knows? Instead, he continues to look around at our world under the sun, our fallen world, and sees those who suffer injustice have no comfort.

Chapter 4, verse 1. I returned, or again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter.

Power was on the side of their oppressors, and the oppressed have no comforter. Can you hear his heartbreak? He sees their tears, and twice he says, they have no comforter.

That's a really sad picture. And I'm not sure we in Australia really know this kind of oppression. But it does exist in our world today as well.

Like in Myanmar. Ronald said this in an email he wrote to us. He said, I thought I knew a lot about my country.

[10 : 13] I thought I knew what it means by state violence. I thought I knew about living in fear. But the current crisis in Myanmar crisis is worse than what I knew.

Can you hear his heartbreak, his despair? So much so that for the teacher, he declares, verse 2, that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive.

But better than both of them is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

The teacher says that there is such evil in our fallen world, under the sun, that it would be better not to have been born, than to have lived through it.

It's a pretty extreme conclusion, isn't it? Though I do hear people, couples, for example, talking about the uncertainty of bringing children into this world.

[11 : 13] You see it in movies. I'm not sure if I can bring children into this world and so on. So his conclusion here isn't unheard of. But is that it? To say, who knows when justice will be?

Who knows if we will go up or let the animals go down? Or if it's better to never be born? Is this the only answer we have to the non-Christian who says, surely God can't exist if there's such injustice in the world?

Is there more we can say? Well, thank God there is. You see, the Old Testament is not the end of the story. We don't stop here like you stop in the middle of a novel.

You go through to the end. And as we do, unlike the teacher, we realize we live not just under the sun in this fallen world, but we also live under the S-O-N, Son, Jesus Christ.

And he makes all the difference. His resurrection proves two things. First, that we can defeat death and we can go up. And second, that he is the Christ or King, just as he said.

[12 : 24] The one whom God has appointed, not just to save us, but to judge the world. Paul puts it like this from Acts 17. God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice.

By the man he has appointed, he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. The resurrection shows, proves, not only that we can go up, but that Jesus will judge the world.

That there will be a day when all will appear on the next slide before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

This is what the teacher was longing for, complete justice. But that doesn't then bode well for us, does it? Since we've all done bad things in our lives, whether they are thoughts or words or actions, but then we don't just have Jesus' resurrection, do we?

We have what happened before on the cross, his death. And that also proves two things. First, that we who believe in him are safe, sound from judgment, and that we will enjoy life eternal.

[13 : 39] For his death has paid for our sins. As we'll sing later in that hymn, Rock of Ages, as we bow before the judgment throne, he is our rock and refuge, our cleft in whom we can hide safe and sound from judgment.

And the second thing his death proves is that God cares more about justice than we do. This is what many non-Christians, and I think even many Christians, don't realize.

You see, if God didn't care about justice in the world, which is what he's often accused of, then he would simply let our sins slide, wouldn't he? But he didn't.

In fact, for God to pay for our sins so that there would be justice, that sins would be paid for, someone would take the judgment, what did it cost him to do that?

His only son. That was a huge cost. I mean, would you pay such a high cost to uphold justice? I don't think I would, but God does.

[14 : 47] That's how much he cares about it. He gave his son, not only because he loves us, but because he wants to uphold justice, not let sins slide, but have them paid for.

And so here is the comfort for the oppressed. They had no comfort before, but here it is, that God does care about justice, about their oppression, even more than we do.

He gave his son to uphold it. Plus he has set a day when he will judge those who have abused their power and put all things right.

And here is a better answer to the teacher who says it's better not to be born. For we who are born and believe in Jesus can be certain of going up, passing safe and sound through judgment to enjoy life eternal.

So it is worth being born. We live under the sun in a fallen world, yes, but as Christians we also live under the S-O-N sun, Jesus, which means there is more we can say, more comfort we can give.

[16:00] And so to the non-Christian who says, what is God doing about the injustice in the world? Well, he sent his son to pay for our sin so that there could be justice and to set a day when there will be complete justice.

Of course, the question then comes, well, why doesn't God bring all that about now? And the answer, because God is waiting for you to turn and believe so you don't miss out.

Well, the teacher's next two observations are less intense, thankfully, and they have to do with work or toil. We're not going to make it at point three, so we'll just go to point two.

Well, you're going to go to point two before three anyway. That's how it works with numbers, isn't it? So, chapter four, verse four. And I saw that all toil or work and all achievements spring from one person's envy of another.

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Here, the teacher sees that work under the sun in this world is often driven by envy.

[17:03] You know, we see what others have and want it too, whether it's the latest iPhone or new car or new thing, new gizmo or toy for the house. We often have this fear of missing out.

It's even called FOMO these days. There's an acronym for it. It used to be called keeping up with the Joneses, didn't it? Whoever the Joneses were. So, we have to work and toil to save and get. And in this way, our work is often driven by envy. It's work with envy. And it's what we're taught by advertising in the world, isn't it? One of the most successful marketing campaigns was for Jeep. Do you remember this music? music. They all have these ads showing people who have a Jeep and they're exploring and happy.

They even had Santa Claus who bought a Jeep and finished delivering the presents early one year. But you see, their whole marketing campaign was aimed at making us envious of those who had one so that we might work and toil to buy one.

[18:13] In fact, I remember our kids, it was back in 2014 as we saw, they even started telling us we should buy a Jeep as well. You see, we're taught to envy which drives our work.

Now, the solution to envy-driven work is not to stop working and be lazy because, verse 5, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. You know, to fold hands means to be lazy, to not work with your hands.

but laziness leads to ruin. We do have to work to pay bills, don't we? To buy things we need. And so, if we're lazy, then we cannot do those things and it will lead to our ruin.

So, the solution to work with envy is not laziness but contentment, verse 6. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

Here he says what's better is to be content with less, one handful with tranquility and peace than to have two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

[19:19] And that's what envy-driven work is like, just chasing after the wind. You can't catch the wind, can you? It's a futile task. And it's the same with envy-driven work because as soon as you get that new thing, what happens?

There's another new thing to get and on it goes. It never ends. Work with envy is meaningless. Soap bubbles, remember, futile, fleeting.

But if you're content with less, you'll have peace. This is good advice, isn't it? But contentment is not always easy, is it? And what's more, work with envy is not the only problem he sees.

There's also work without others, verse 7. I returned and again, I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone.

He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. For whom am I toiling? He asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?

[20 : 25] This too is meaningless, a miserable business. Here is a man who's not content but continues to work, toil with envy, yet it's made worse, a miserable business because he has no one to share it with.

And we can feel this too, can't we? You know, when we see something beautiful and enjoy something great, it's often made better by sharing it with others. Whether it's doing a crossword, going for a walk or sharing a nice meal.

In fact, when the kids were younger, I remember I went to the movies by myself. I thought it was going to be brilliant. No crying kids and no romantic comedies.

I got to do an action movie. And while I enjoyed my action movie, it was still actually unsatisfying because I couldn't turn to Michelle and go, oh, what a corny line or how cool was that?

And for the teacher, working with others means not just better enjoyment but better reward. verse 9. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.

[21 : 35] If either of them falls down, one can help the other up but pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. You see, working with others is better because we can help one another, can't we?

There's a better return for your effort. You know, as they say, many hands make light work. Yeah. With two people, you only have to put in half the effort if you like.

That's a pretty good return on your work. Or, verse 11 and 12. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm but how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Now, often these verses are used for marriage. You know, you can keep each other warm on cold nights, support and defend each other and the cord of three strands is husband, wife and God.

And all of that's true. But the three strands here is more about safety in numbers. You know, one is easily overpowered but two can defend themselves and three are almost undefeatable.

[22 : 40] And I wonder if work is still primarily on view. You know, in those days, shepherds worked out in the fields and overnight. You know, they could keep warm at night and defend from poachers.

Farmers stayed out overnight, especially during harvest time and so on. But either way, the point is work with others in community is better because you can help one another.

But what about those who live on their own? Those who are perhaps lonely? In fact, according to Victorian Health Issue, there was an article that said loneliness is the new public health challenge of today.

This is just this month. So just like it's not always easy to feel content, so it's not always easy to find community. But as we saw before, we don't just live under the sun in this fallen world, we also live under the SON sun, Jesus Christ, who makes all the difference again.

Firstly, he gives us strength to be content. And so Paul says that on the next slide. He says, I know what is to be in need and I know what is to have plenty. I've learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.

[23 : 55] I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Notice he says he's learned the secret of contentment. It's something that's happened over time as he's experienced little or lots in life.

And what's the secret? Well, it's not really a what, it's a who. It's him who gives me strength. It's Christ. You see, the teacher is right to say better one handful with tranquility than two with toil to work without envy.

But sometimes it's hard to feel content with just one handful, isn't it? Yet Jesus again makes all the difference. And I've seen this with people at church.

They've gone through struggles with work or life. So some have had to move from their own place to a tiny room in care accommodation which is never easy. And yet they've made it their own and found contentment.

Others don't have much money and yet they're still content with what they have. Sure, some days are hard but rather than toiling for more, they pray for strength and God gives it.

[25 : 06] They can do all through him who gives them strength. Jesus makes all the difference. And so also with working with others. For the teacher working with others is better but for many it's hard to find community.

Yet in Christ we have been brought not just into a community but into a family, haven't we? God's family. Where we have God's spirit such that we're never alone and where we can work together to help and care for one another.

Not just physically but spiritually too. Serving one another to build each other up in Christ. As Paul writes in Ephesians, from Christ the whole body that's the church joined and held together by every supporting ligament, that's us, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

Here is working together. Now to be honest I do hear from time to time people who complain or make comments about those in front of them at church or don't include others in conversations. I guess like families under the sun in this world, you know, domestic families, we don't always get it right as a church family either. But as God's family under the sun Jesus we are to bear with one another and forgive each other so we can work with one another lovingly building up the body, the church and that's what I see more of.

[26 : 35] For example, one of our members recently had to cancel her 90th birthday party because of this recent lockdown. She was in tears as she was telling me about people took her flowers and cards and cake such that she said to me afterwards I felt like my birthday lasted all week.

I know of others who have taken meals to people in need prayed for and with others who are sick. One of our church members from the 1030 congregation last month came close to dying because of surgery that didn't quite go right and last week he wrote considering everything that went wrong I am unbelievably thankful there's been a direct correlation between my recovery and the prayers from many many people.

He's been helped encouraged by working with others or with the restricted numbers over the last couple of weeks the rosters are all out of whack and so some of you have had to step up and serve even when you haven't been rostered on and yet people have done it willingly even today.

Many may find it hard to find community but again Jesus makes all the difference for he brings us not just into a community but a family where we can work with one another. Well as I said we don't have time for point three but I hope you can see that while we live under the sun S-U-N in this world as Christians we also live under the sun S-O-N Jesus and Jesus makes all the difference to life in this fallen world.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father we do thank you for your son Jesus for he brings justice and comfort for the oppressed contentment and community for us that we may work without envy but with others in life.

[28 : 31] So as we live under the sun in this world help us to remember that we also live under your son Jesus who makes all the difference. We ask it in his name.

Amen.