

Life under the Sun

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Christian and David. It would be great if you hold on to those readings from Ecclesiastes. But I want to start with that question we had for our fellowship break, which was, when you look at the world, what do you see in it today?

And I guess if we're honest, there's both good and bad. There's good things like natural beauty, the fjords of Norway, or the lupines blooming in New Zealand, or the clear tropical waters of a Fijian island.

There's also good food to enjoy, like a sizzling, juicy steak, or a fresh bowl of fruit, or even good old pad thai.

Are you hungry yet? But because of sin, we live in a fallen world, don't we? A world outside the Garden of Eden, or in the words of Ecclesiastes, a world under the sun, S-U-N.

And so we also see things like injustice and oppression, or envy and loneliness. And so how are we to live under the sun in this world with such things?

[1 : 10] That's what our teacher seeks to understand today. Last week, the teacher knows that there is a time, on the next slide, a time for every activity under the heavens, that is, under God.

But this week, he moves to see things in life under the sun. I noticed the phrase of, I saw, so there's observations being made, and the repeated phrase, under the sun.

He's observing things in this world outside the Garden, a world marred by sin. And when he looks at our world, he sees the same things that we see today, don't we?

Not just the good, but the bad. And as one of God's people, he seeks to make sense of them, like we try and make sense of them. 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.

So the two observations, the first two are grouped together, the same topic. In fact, it literally says, I returned and saw. And so you've got the topic of injustice, oppression.

[2 : 23] And then the second two observations are also grouped together. They have to do with toil or work. That color didn't come out very well, sorry. And then the third paragraph, the last paragraph in your readings is about wisdom and success.

But I doubt we'll get to that point today. Instead, let's kick off with point one, verse 16. He says, on the next slide.

Thanks, Tim. Sorry. And I saw something else under the sun. In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there.

That is, when he looked at the world, instead of justice, he saw injustice. In fact, he says he saw wickedness and more wickedness. And people are just getting away with evil such that there is no justice under the sun.

And again, we see that in our world too, don't we? In our own state, a pastor of a church in Nary Warren was arrested because he flouted the lockdown rules just a couple of weeks ago.

[3 : 34] He doesn't think that COVID is real either. Now, while I sympathize with him wanting to gather as church, I don't agree that COVID is a hoax or that we should be breaking these laws in this case.

But instead of being fined, which is what's supposed to happen, you know, certain fines for individuals, bigger fines for organizations, he was actually imprisoned. And people had to save up money to get him released.

Now, does that sound right? Or on the Age newspaper, I think it was last week, the Andrews government secretly is negotiating with three crossbenchers permanent pandemic laws.

They're actually doing deals behind closed doors with these three crossbenchers so that they get their votes behind closed doors so they have more power.

I don't know if that doesn't quite seem right. Of course, it's much worse overseas. It wasn't that long ago when, as we saw before, China persecuted that minority Muslim group and, in fact, forced them to essentially, they call them re-education camps, but it's basically concentration camps where they were forced into hard labor as well.

[4 : 51] And just last month, there was another report where they were forcibly taking their children from them. And I don't know if this is true, but the report was also saying that they were also forcibly sterilizing the women to stop this group, you know, from getting bigger, basically.

Or even more recently, the coup in Myanmar where military tortured and killed those they deemed as protesters. In fact, Ronald, who is one of our link missionaries, he used to come to our church. He last week sent me an email with some photos, just so he knew. Here's one of his friends who have been tortured. And many of them, in fact, one day, 20 of them are rounded up, tortured, and their families told the next day or two days later to come and collect their corpses.

That's what's happening. In fact, even little babies are dying. I removed this picture because it was a bit much, and the babies are being placed in cardboard boxes for coffins.

Where is the justice? In place of justice, there is wickedness in this world under the sun. How do we respond? What can we say to the non-Christian who says, I can't believe in God because of all this injustice in the world?

[6 : 10] Well, the teacher says two things to himself. The first is in verse 17. 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, under God. And so the teacher assumes this must also include a time for justice, for judgment of the wicked.

And if there is to be complete justice, then, as he says, it must include all people, both the righteous and the wicked. And it must hold every deed to account.

But the teacher just doesn't know when that time will be. He only sees injustice in the world. And so the second thing he says to himself is verse 18.

I also said to myself, as for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals.

[7 : 15] 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 or come from dust and to dust or return. And who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth.

It's cheery stuff, isn't it? The teacher says perhaps God lets this injustice happen to show that actually we're no better off than animals.

Life is meaningless. And like animals, we too will die. Life is fleeting and futile, which is pretty depressing. Now, of course, as an Israelite, one of God's people, he knew humanity was created in God's image.

So we do have greater worth in God's sight than animals, which makes him wonder in verse 21 whether our spirits will go up.

[8 : 22] And he thinks they will. In fact, he says something similar in chapter 12, but he just doesn't know for sure. Do you see what two words verse 21 begins with?

Who knows? Just as he doesn't know when the time for justice will be, so he doesn't know if we will go up or not.

And so the best advice he can give is verse 22. Now, this is similar to last week, to enjoy the good things in life.

But last week, we were told there are God's gifts. This week, there's no reference to God at all in this hit point. Instead, there's this depressing resignation that this is just our lot in life.

For who knows what will happen afterwards? Whether we will go up to face judgment and God's people to find life eternal or not.

[9 : 36] Instead, he continues to look around at our world under the sun and sees that those who suffer injustice have no comfort. 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?

As he looks at their tears, telling us twice that there is no one to comfort them. It's a really sad picture. And I'm not sure we really understand this kind of oppression in Australia. But it does exist, like in Myanmar at the moment. Ronald, in his email, also wrote this. And see if you can hear his heartbreak.

I thought I knew a lot about my country. I thought I knew what it means by state violence. I thought I knew about living in fear. But the current crisis in Myanmar is worse than what I knew.

[10:49] It's heartbreaking, isn't it? So much so that for the teacher, verse 2, I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive.

In fact, better than both of those is the one who has never been born, who does not or has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

Here the teacher says there is such evil in our fallen world under the sun that it would be better not to have been born than to live through it. It's a pretty extreme conclusion, isn't it?

Although I do hear couples, you see it in movies as well, where couples are saying, I don't know if I want to bring a child into this world. Have you heard that before? And so this conclusion is not unheard of.

But is that it? You know, to say, who knows when justice will be? Who knows if we will go up or like the animals, just go down? Or if it's better never to have been born?

[11:54] Is that all we can say to the non-Christian who says, look at the injustice in the world? Where is God? Is there more we can say? Well, thank God there is.

For unlike the teacher, we don't just live under the sun in this fallen world. We also live under the sun, S-O-N, Jesus. Remember, the Old Testament is just part of the story.

You don't read a novel and stop halfway through. You go to the end for its fulfillment, and so too with the Old Testament. And as we do, we go through to Jesus.

His death and resurrection has made all the difference. His resurrection, for example, proves two things. Firstly, that we can defeat death and go up.

And second, that he is indeed the Christ or king that he promised to be, the one through whom God would judge the world. Paul puts it like this in Acts 17.

[12:58] God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, the Christ, the king. And he's given proof of this to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead.

And so we can be certain there will be a time of judgment, a time for complete justice, as we heard in the second reading.

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

You see, his resurrection proves we can go up and that there will be a time of justice, of putting things right. But here's the sting in the tail for us.

That means we too will have to give an account for all the things we've done, whether good or bad. The bad thoughts, words, deeds.

[14:05] But like his resurrection proves two things, so his death proves two things. Firstly, we who believe can be safe and sound from that judgment and enjoy life eternal, for his death has already paid for our sins, which is great news.

That's what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper. And as we'll sing later, Jesus is our rock of ages, so that when we bow before the judgment throne, we can hide in Jesus our refuge, our rock, our cleft, safe and sound from the judgment our sins deserve.

But the second thing his death proves is that God actually cares about justice more than we do. I mean, people say, doesn't God care? Well, what's he doing?

Well, he's done something. He sent Jesus to establish a day of justice at the end, but also to deal with our sin and bring justice now as well.

Let me explain. If God didn't care about justice, then wouldn't he just let our sins slide? If justice doesn't matter? If he loves us?

[15:22] Oh, just come on to heaven. Don't worry about sins. But you see, he does care about justice, so someone had to pay for them, and the cost of our sins was his only son.

That's how much God cares about justice. I mean, would you give up an only child to uphold justice? I don't think I would, but God did.

God cares more about justice than you or I do. And so here is the comfort for the oppressed. God does care about justice, and God will put all things right.

Judge the oppressors who abuse their power and bring justice to the world. And here is the better answer to the teacher who says it's, well, it's better never to be born, for we who are born and believe in Jesus can be certain of going up, safe and sound through judgment, to life eternal. So it is worth being born. We live under the sun, S-U-N, in a fallen world, yes, but as Christians, we also live under the sun, S-O-N, Jesus, who makes all the difference.

[16 : 45] And so to the non-Christian who says, where is the God of justice in this world? We can point them to the cross and show them God cares about justice. He's already paid for our sins at the cross.

Point them then to the resurrection, which proves Christ is the king and judge who will put all things right. Of course, the next question then comes, why doesn't God do all this now?

And you know the answer, don't you? The answer is them, that they might have more time to believe and not miss out. Well, the teacher's next two observations are less intense, thankfully, and have to do with work or toil.

We're going to skip point three, but we'll still do point two. Chapter four, verse four. And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another.

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Here, as the teacher makes another observation, he sees that work in this world is driven by envy.

[17 : 53] We see what others have and want it too, whether it's the latest iPhone or a new car or some new toy or a better house and so on. Now, we often have this fear of missing out.

It's an acronym now, isn't it? FOMO. It's now replaced the oldest saying. We used to say keeping up with the Joneses, if you remember that. I don't know who the Joneses were, but that's what people used to say.

And so we have to work and toil to save up for it. And in this way, our work is often driven by envy. In fact, it's what our world teaches us through advertising, isn't it?

One of the most successful marketing campaigns that I can ever remember was for the Jeep. Do you remember this music? Is it bringing back memories? I remember it still to this day.

And the adverts would always show people who have escaped and they're happy, they're exploring life, all because they have a Jeep. In fact, one season close to Christmas, they even had Santa buy a Jeep and he finished delivering his presents early and he was home with his feet up, having a hot chocolate.

[19 : 04] But you see, their marketing campaign was aimed at making us envy so that we might work and toil to buy one. I remember our kids even told Michelle and I, you should buy a Jeep too.

We are taught to envy, which drives our work. The solution, of course, to this envy-driven work is not to stop working completely and be lazy because on verse 5, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.

To fold your hands means not to work at all, to be lazy, but it's foolish because it only leads to your ruin. We need to work to earn income, pay for bills, buy food, those things we need.

And so laziness is not the solution to this work with envy. No, no, the solution is contentment, verse 6. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

See what he's saying? It's better to be content with less. One handful and have peace than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. And that's what it's like with this envy-driven work, a chasing after the wind.

[20 : 21] It's impossible. You can't catch the wind. You can never get there. And it's the same with buying new things that you envy because as soon as you get that thing you envied, what happens?

There's another new thing to envy and so it goes. What are we up to in iPhones? iPhone 12. Oh no, then there's the 12 Pro Plus. Who knows?

And so it's futile. Work with envy is meaningless. Soap bubbles, empty, doesn't last. But if you're content with less, you'll have peace. Now this is good advice, but contentment is not always easy, is it?

We're so wired to want more. And what's more here, work with envy is not the only problem the teacher sees. There's also work without others. Verse 7 and 8.

Again, or I returned and 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, his work, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

[21 : 28] For whom am I toiling? He asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless. A miserable business.

Here's a man who's not content but continues to work with envy, yet it's made worse. A miserable business because he has no one to share it with.

Neither son nor brother. And we can feel this too. We understand the idea of enjoying things with others, don't we? You know, when we see something beautiful, enjoy something great, it's often made better by sharing it with others.

You know, whether it's even a crossword, going for a hike, sharing a meal. When the kids were much younger, I remember going to the movies by myself. I thought it would be brilliant.

You know, no crying kids, no Jane Austen to sit through. And while I enjoyed my action movie at the cinemas, I found it actually unsatisfying.

[22 : 27] There was no one to turn to and laugh about that corny line. Or no one to say, how cool was that action sequence? And as 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. 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 each other. There's a better return for your effort as people say, many hands make light work.

Yeah. With two people, you only have to put in half the work, which is a pretty good return for your labor, isn't it? And or verse 11. 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 at a wedding.

[23 : 32] You know, you keep each other warm at cold nights. You can support and defend each other. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. The three strands, husband, wife, God.

And there's truth in this. But here, it's really more about safety in numbers, the three strands. That one is easily overpowered. That two can defend themselves.

And three, well, they're almost undefeatable. And I also wonder if work is still primarily on view. You know, in those days, shepherds worked out in the fields together.

They would keep warm at night, huddling, and defend from poachers and the like. Even farmers, particularly at harvest time, would stay out overnight to protect their harvests.

But either way, the point is, work with others in community is better because you can help each other. But what about those who live on their own?

[24 : 29] Those who are perhaps lonely? In fact, the latest Victorian health issue says that loneliness is the new public health challenge, even for our state.

There are many who are finding it hard to break into a community. And so, just like it's not always easy to feel content, it's not always easy for people to find community.

But again, as we saw before, we don't just live under the sun in this world, we also live under the sun, the Lord Jesus. And he makes all the difference.

At first, he gives us strength to be content. As Paul says in Philippians, he has learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. And he can do all this through him who gives him strength.

Notice it says it's something that he's learned. So being content is a process. It takes time. It happens as he experiences lots and little in life.

[25 : 32] But he's learned the secret of being content. What's the secret? It's actually not a what, it's a who. It's him who gives me strength. It's Jesus in this context.

You see, the teacher is right to say one handful with tranquility is better than two with toil, you know, to work without envy. But it's sometimes hard to feel content. Yet Jesus makes all the difference.

And I've seen it with people at church as they've gone through struggles with work and life. As some have had to move from their home, which they've known all their lives, into a tiny room at a care accommodation place.

And yet, they've made it their own and found contentment, even though it was really hard. Or others don't have much money and yet they're still content with what they have.

Sure, they all find some days harder than others, we all do. But rather than toiling for more, they relied on Christ's strength to help them be content.

[26 : 36] And they were. Jesus makes all the difference. And so also with working with others. For the teacher, working with others is better. But again, for many, it's hard to find community.

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

And we can help one another, not just physically, but spiritually too, serving one another to build up the body, the church. Paul writes in Ephesians that from Christ, the whole body, that's the church, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, that's you, us, grows and builds itself up in love as, notice, each part does its work.

Now, to be honest, I do hear from time to time people who complain about others or make comments, negative comments about people at church or don't include others in conversations. This one's quite regular as well. They talk to someone, they ask all the questions and they never get asked any questions back. It's one of those, have you had those conversations, one-sided conversations?

[27 : 51] And yet, like families, domestic families under the sun in this world, the church family won't always get it right. You know, we're imperfect. But as we're encouraged to do on the slide, we are to bear with each other and forgive so that we can get on working with one another to lovingly build the church in the likeness of Christ.

And that's what I see people doing much, much more. For example, one of our members recently had to cancel her 90th birthday party because of the recent lockdown. And she was in tears as she was telling me about this.

But then people took her flowers, cards, and cake. And she said to me afterwards, she said, Andrew, it felt like my birthday went all week. I know of others who've taken meals to those in need or prayed with and for them.

One church member last month from our congregation actually came close to dying due to surgery. And last week, this is what he wrote, he said, considering everything that went wrong, I am unbelievably thankful.

There has been a direct correlation between my recovery and the prayers from many, many people. How's that for working together to care and help one another?

[29 : 13] Or even with the restricted numbers over the last couple of weeks, the rosters are all out of whack. And so people have had to step up and serve even when they weren't rostered on, like today actually. And yet people have done it willingly, joyfully.

It's terrific. Here is working with others. It may be hard to find community, but again, Jesus has made all the difference because he brings us together as, well, more than community, family. We've gone out of time so we won't get to point three, but I hope you can see that while we live under the sun in this world, as Christians, we also live under the sun, the Lord Jesus, who makes all the difference to injustice and oppression and even to contentment and community.

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 all who believe, that we may work without envy but with others in life.

And so as we live under the sun in this world, help us to remember we also live under your son, the Lord Jesus, who makes all the difference. In his name we pray.

[30 : 38] Amen.