

Hard Realities of Life

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[0 : 00] All right, well, please turn your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 3.! And this morning, our attention is going to be directed to verses 16 through 22.

! Those of you who were here for the past two sermons in this Ecclesiastes message series, you recall that I indicated that Ecclesiastes 3, chapter 3, marks a new section or a transition point in the book.

Prior to chapter 3, the preacher had given himself to understanding the scope of human activity on the earth with a view to understanding and discovering what was good for the children of men to do under the heavens during the time of their brief lives on the earth.

And so much of chapters 1 and 2 is taken up with the preacher telling his original audience and also telling us that all that he did was in his quest to understand how we should live and what is best for us in our time on the earth.

And so as we come to chapter 3, we notice this transition and we are able to see that the preacher's been thinking long and hard about life. And so what he does beginning at chapter 3 is his experiments are over, but he now begins to tell us the observations that he made, the conclusions that he came to as a result of all of his earlier experiments.

[1 : 37] But what we are able to see is that the preacher didn't just kind of like sit around and think about life. He thought about life, but he also engaged life. In other words, the preacher kind of got out of the palace.

The preacher got into the real world where people lived and he saw many things. The preacher observed real life. And the life that he observed is a fallen life.

And because of that, the preacher observed some hard realities as he looked at life. And he helps us to see that life is hard because we live in a fallen world.

And he helps us to see that life is the way it is, but life was not meant to be the way it is. And this morning, as we conclude in chapter 3, we come face to face with some of these observations that the preacher made about the hard realities in this fallen world.

So let's read together. Ecclesiastes chapter 3, starting in verse 16. I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

[2 : 49] Please follow along as I read. 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.

- [3 : 53] All are from the dust and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth.
- So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work. For that is his lot.
- Who can bring him to see what will be after him? Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for your word. Lord, we thank you, Lord, for your care that you've expressed by preserving your word for us.
- We thank you for the wisdom that is contained in your word. And Father, we ask this morning that you would posture our hearts to hear and to understand and to apply your word in our lives.
- Lord, I ask that you would give me grace to be faithful to your word and grace to proclaim your word.
- [5 : 00] Father, I pray that as a result of hearing your word, we would all leave this place and we would live lives unto your glory and for the good of this world in which you've placed us.
- Father, would you meet us now as we open your word? We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. When we consider these words before us, one of the helpful ways to understand it and to apply them is to remember that the preacher's original audience was really no different from people like us.
- His audience was comprised of people just like us. We are thousands of years removed from them, but we are otherwise no different from them. They lived in a fallen world.
- They lived in a fallen world. They were fallen people in a fallen world. We are fallen people in a fallen world. And in these seven verses, we come face to face with the fallen world of the preacher's day.
- And we immediately see that it really is no different from our day. And so what's the point of what the preacher is saying to us in these seven verses?
- [6 : 27] Here's what I believe he's saying to us. Life's hard realities are better endured when we remember the judgment of God, the depravity of man, the depravity of man, and the goodness of work.
- I believe when we encapsulate what he says in those seven verses, that's a faithful summary of what he says. Life's hard realities are better endured when we remember the judgment of God, the depravity of man, and the goodness of work.
- And so now remaining time this morning, I want to unpack those three realities that he addresses in these seven verses.
- The first part deals with the judgment of God. Look at verses 16 and 17 again. He says, 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. The preacher observed two hard realities, the realities of injustice and unrighteousness.
- [7 : 51] Or to put it another way, the preacher observed perverted justice and corrupted righteousness. And what's important for us to see this morning is that the preacher did not just observe injustice and unrighteousness.
- No doubt the preacher like us had always seen injustice and unrighteousness. We see it all the time. It doesn't take long when we get into the real world to see injustice and unrighteousness.
- That's not what grabbed the preacher's attention. The preacher, no doubt, was accustomed to seeing unjust merchants overpriced their goods in communities where people had little option but to purchase from them.

Perhaps he observed unjust employers who overworked and underpaid immigrant workers or children or other marginalized people. We've seen that.

Those are examples of injustice. No doubt in the preacher's time, as in our time, the husband or the wife who commits adultery is an example of unrighteousness.

[9 : 03] Likewise, lying and stealing and gossip and slander, those are acts of unrighteousness as well. The preacher saw those. We see those all the time. That's not what grabbed the preacher's attention.

The injustice and the unrighteousness that grabbed the preacher's attention were of a different kind. If they were ordinary, I doubt they would have caught his eyes. Let me try to illustrate the point I'm trying to make.

Recently, there was a break-in at BTC at R&D; Plaza. And normally, when there's a break-in, a crime of some sort, it's tucked away in the police report.

You read in the newspaper and you go down the list and you see the things that are there. And it normally does not make the news beyond the day that it's reported. But this one made headline news. It made headline news on the day that it was reported and it made headline news for several days after it was reported.

And the reason is that when that store was broken into, two police officers were dispatched there. And instead of investigating the crime, they committed crimes.

[10 : 23] They stole cell phones. They stole iPads. And the hidden cameras revealed that that was what they did. So here you have these officers who are dispatched to enforce the law and they themselves break the law.

They're dispatched to catch criminals and they themselves are criminals. The preacher observed something similar. Again, notice again what he observed in verse 16.

He noticed that in the place of justice, where justice was supposed to be, there was wickedness. And perhaps the best example of the place of justice is in the courtroom.

And maybe that's what the preacher saw. Maybe he was one day out and he was at the tribunal and he saw injustice taking place where people had gone for justice. And sadly, our times are no different.

In courts of justice, sometimes there is no justice. And that's because sometimes judges and juries and witnesses and prosecutors and defense lawyers do things that they ought not to do.

[11 : 38] And that's because there are fallen people like the rest of us living in a fallen world. And so justice sometimes is perverted. A judge accepts a bribe or he shows favoritism.

Jurors are intimidated or a witness gets up and lies under oath. And justice is miscarried. I'm sure we have followed cases where under particular circumstances someone has denied bail and under almost the exact circumstances somebody else has given bail.

We've seen situations where for no apparent reason other than the connection of the accused person cases are dropped and never pursued again.

And the preacher calls such miscarriages of justice by their correct name wickedness. But that's not all the preacher saw. That's not the only contradiction that he mentions.

He mentions also that in the place of righteousness there was also wickedness. And for the preacher the highest place of righteousness no doubt would have been the temple.

[12 : 47] The temple of God. And for us that would be the church of God which is not this building but really the community the people of God. And perhaps an example of wickedness in the preacher's day was an unfaithful priest.

Priests like the sons of Eli who the Bible says were worthless men because of the corrupt things that they did. And they were not in the preacher's time they were before the preacher's time but they would be an example of the kind of corruption in the priesthood that the preacher may have seen.

In our day an example of wickedness in the place of unrighteousness would be an unfaithful pastor who is supposed to be the shepherd of the sheep but instead he is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Instead of protecting the sheep he harms the sheep. And the last place a person would expect to be harmed and taken advantage of is in the church.

But many are. And so in the place where you'd expect righteousness there you find wickedness. And on our island the name Randy Frazier is an iconic example of this.

[13 : 59] Where a mother entrusts a young daughter to him to be counseled and he betrayed that trust and carried on a manipulative sexual relationship with the child.

And he even engaged in sexual relations in the very house of God the physical house of God prior to going to so-called study the word of God with men.

That's the height of wickedness where righteousness should have been. And what's even worse than that is this morning perhaps even as I stand here he is standing in a pulpit.

Or perhaps getting ready to do so. But the truth this morning is that more than just when pastors are the cause for wickedness to be in the place of unrighteousness whenever there is unrighteousness among the people of God it is a contradiction because it ought not be.

Among the people of God is to be the place of righteousness. And it is a glaring contradiction when there is found wickedness.

[15 : 16] But as the preacher observed these contradictions he seems to comfort himself with the fact that those who commit injustice and wickedness will be held accountable. Notice what he says in verse 17.

He says as 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. Here the preacher continues with the thought that there is a time and a season for every matter under heaven and essentially what he is saying is there is a time for judgment.

And this judgment may be now or it may be later or it may be both. And so I want to ask you this morning what's your response to the contradicting realities of injustice and unrighteousness as you traverse life and you find them in places where they ought not be.

You find them in surprising places and perhaps some of us have experienced it ourselves. Maybe people close to us have experienced injustice where we should have gotten justice.

Where we were surprisingly mistreated when we did not expect to be mistreated in that direction. My question this morning is is your response like the preacher's response?

[16 : 44] Do you take comfort and remind yourself that God will judge? He will judge the righteous. He will judge the wicked and God will clear the righteous and he will condemn the wicked.

I want to confess to you this morning that as I studied this I became painfully aware I'm not like the preacher in that regard. Sometimes I forget. I forget and I can be so focused on the injustice or so focused on the contradiction in that situation and I forget that God will judge.

That there is a time and there is a season for judgment. And God has a perfect time and a perfect season that he will judge all things and brothers and sisters think about this if God allows one single act of injustice or unrighteousness to go unaddressed he's less than holy.

He's less than holy. And let us not think that because of the passage of time and it seems like someone got away with something that it means that God overlooked it or it's not going to be judged it will be judged and as you've heard me say many many times sin is going to be judged in one of two places.

It will be judged on the back of Jesus on Calvary's cross or it will be judged on the back of unrepentant sinners in hell. And so for those of us who have put our trust in Christ this is in no way to cause us to be fearful that we will be judged for our many sins.

[18 : 25] Now our sins have been judged on Jesus and God is not unjust to charge twice. He will not charge Jesus for our sins and then cause us to pay for our sins. If you're trusted Christ your sins have been paid in full God's judgment was poured out on Jesus on the cross and we will not hear condemnation when we stand before him.

But those who have not yet done that their judgment is in limbo their sins will be judged. And so I forget this and I was so encouraged as I studied and I was just saying Lord help me to remember this and even as I considered some of the things that troubled me I was comforted in being reminded of these words God will judge the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

Perhaps this morning some of you in your own heart experiences you have had or loved ones have had you experience injustice or even wickedness where you expected that there would be righteousness I want to say to you take heart and hear the words of the preacher that God is going to judge.

So that's the first way that we can better endure life's hard contradicting realities by remembering the judgment of God. And next we come to the depravity of man.

The depravity of man. The preacher is no doubt still considering some of the unbelievable acts of injustice and unrighteousness committed by men against men.

[20 : 20] And he makes a conclusion about them in verse 18. He says, 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.

He's thinking about these gross acts of injustice, these gross acts of unrighteousness and the reality is they don't happen in a vacuum. They are committed against people.

And he says, you know what? God is testing men to help them to see if you're capable of doing that, you're just like a beast. He says, as I thought about it, I said, maybe this is what God is doing.

God is just saying, look at what you're capable of. Now, theologians who are much smarter than I say that verse 18 is better translated this way.

I said in my heart, with regard to the children of man, that God is testing them, that they may see that left to themselves.

[21 : 36] Not that they may see themselves, but that they may see that left to themselves, they are but beasts. Now, there are all kinds of considerations that go into translations and there are just various theologians who have pointed this out, that this is a better rendering of the text, that what it is talking about is men and women, people like you and me, left to ourselves, we're but beasts.

to put it another way, when people are left to themselves, they are capable of the most gross injustices, the most heinous sins, and the word for this is depravity.

The word for this is depravity, that we are depraved. Although we are God's crown creation, the fall has affected every single part of who we are, every single bit of our person, every single bit of our inner self, has been affected, and the fall has left us depraved.

And the truth is that only the restraining grace of God, David talked about it this morning as he exhorted us as we were giving, and he talked about common grace. It is only that common grace of God that restrains us and keeps us from many sinful acts of injustice and unrighteousness that would otherwise reveal themselves in our lives and show that we are really no different from beasts.

See, oftentimes we think of ourselves, we watch other people do things, and it's so easy to think, well, it's because of my upbringing or my commitment to Christ, or I'm just not that way. But truth be told, if the restraining grace of God is removed, we are beasts, and we are capable of the most heinous sins.

[23 : 42] We are able to be an Idi Amin for those of you old enough to remember him. He ate people, drank their blood. We are able to be an Adolf Hitler if God leaves us to ourselves.

Every single one of us in this room is capable of that. I'm not saying that you'll do that. And I think there's a distinction. Because we may not do something doesn't mean we're not capable of something.

And when we realize this, it humbles us, it sobers us. I will never forget, I had like an epiphany one time, I was doing prison ministry and I was in a room with all kinds of men.

All kinds of men. One guy had been fitted for to be hung. He had been fitted, the suit that he was supposed to wear and everything else, he got a last minute reprieve.

And his life was spared. Men who had molested their children, raped young boys, I mean you name it, armed robbery, ran drugs, all kinds of people were in that room.

[24 : 50] And I just, out of, it seemed not connected to what we were talking about, I looked at these men, I felt the Lord just say to me, you're capable of all those sins. And it was humbling, it was sobering.

And what it caused me to do is to recognize I need to stay close to God. I need the restraining grace of God in my life because but for the grace of God, there go I, and there go you.

Scottish Pastor Robert Murray McShane said these words, the seed of every sin known to man is in my heart.

The seed of every sin known to man is in my heart. Now what makes this quote startling is he was a godly man.

McShane was known more for his godly piety than his great preaching. He was a godly man and one of the realities of sanctification and growing in godliness is the more you are sanctified, the more you draw near to God, the more you realize how sinful you are.

[26 : 15] See, because when we are away from God and the light that he brings in our lives, we think we're okay. We think we're not capable of those other sins, but when we draw near to him, we will cry out like Isaiah and say, I am a man of unclean lips.

I dwell among people of unclean lips. McShane was a godly man, but he said, the seed of every known sin is in my heart.

And so when the preacher observes men acting as beasts, he concludes that God is testing them to show them that without him, they are but beasts.

And then he goes on and he notes that there are some physical similarities between men and beasts. In verse 19, he points out that both die. The same thing happens to them.

They have this life in them, but they both die. They have the same breath in their bodies. He's saying you live and you die and you return to the dust from whence you came.

[27 : 27] You go back to the ground. And as he utters those words, as he pens those words, we get echoes of the fall from Genesis 3 where the Lord tells Adam, dust you are and to dust you will return because of his sin.

Now, some people think that the preacher is really saying that there's really no difference between men and animals. But the preacher is much smarter than that. Notice that he makes a distinction in verse 21.

He says, who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. If the preacher was making no distinction, he would not separate their spirits. He would say, who knows what happens to their spirits?

If the spirits were one and the same. But he makes a distinction. He raises this question about who knows whether one spirit goes up or the other one goes down. But we also know that the preacher is not commingling them because later on in this book, in chapter 12, verse 7, he says that the spirit of man goes back to God.

God. He says when man dies, he goes to the dust, but his spirit goes back to God from when it came. So we know that the preacher is under no darkness or illusion about what happens to the spirit of man.

[29 : 00] That's not the point that he is seeking to make. Now once again, I have to lean on theologians who are much smarter than I. And they say this word for knows in the original language, which in this case would be the Hebrew language because we're the Old Testament, means to not just know, but to comprehensively know.

To know in totality, to have a full, assured understanding. And so what the preacher really is saying in verse 21 is who comprehensively knows, who absolutely knows, rather the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth.

So he's just asking a broad rhetorical question and the answer is, well, we really don't comprehensively know. Nobody comprehensively knows that.

But we should simply understand that what the preacher is saying is that left to ourselves, we are beasts, we are born like animals, animals, and we, if we're living without reference to God, we will live without any awareness of him in our lives and we will then be just as beasts, just the way they live, with no awareness of anything divine, going about life, just making their way as they go.

We'd be just like that. That's the point that the preacher is making and we should not press it beyond that because if we press it beyond that, we'll cause there to be a contradiction where we know the preacher is not saying that man and beasts essentially are the same because what makes us who we are is not the bodies we have, but the person, the personhood, the spirit inside of the body.

[31 : 08] The preacher's point is that left to ourselves, we are depraved people who will act as beasts. So once again, have you stopped to consider how it is only the grace of God?

Is it work in your life? Those of us who have trusted Christ that restrains us from being as bad as we can be. that restrains us from some of the sins that we have no desire to commit, no pleasure in, but that's not just because we are good, that's because God's good and his restraining grace is at work in our lives.

Have you stopped to consider that? we need to consider that. It is the grace of God. So how then should we respond to this reality of God's judgment and the fact that human beings are mere beasts without God?

Well, the preacher gives us the answer in verse 22, which brings me to my third and final point, the goodness of work. Look at what the preacher says in verse 22.

So I saw that there's nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

[32 : 42] to the preacher in light of these two realities, the reality of the judgment of God, the reality that left to ourselves we are beasts, that we are depraved people, the preacher says, you know what?

Here's what I saw. Here's my conclusion. There's nothing better than a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

But the preacher is telling us, the preacher is telling us that enjoyment of work is a gift from God. Remember, he said that earlier in chapter 2.

We saw that. If you go over to verse 24 in chapter 2, he says, there's nothing better for a person than he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This also I saw is from the hand of God for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. And you remember when we looked at that verse some weeks ago, we talked about how at the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the preacher observed that God had given all men this wearisome toil.

[34 : 03] This wearisome toil under the sun. And then he now talks about those who can enjoy their work, those who have received this gift from God where they can take pleasure in their work because it's a gift from their hands.

And we concluded that something had to happen to bring that group of people out of this mass of toil, this humanity that's just toiling away, living with their backs towards God, something changed.

And what we concluded that was the saving grace of God that took them out of that situation into another situation where they are receiving this gift from God's hand of enjoying their work in life.

Another aspect of this verse that helps us to see that he is pulling God into view in here is when he says, for that is his lot. That is his allotment.

That is his divine allotment. God gives this. God allots this. The psalmist says, Lord, you have caused the boundary lines for me to fall in pleasant places. And so what the preacher is saying to us is in this fallen world where we see all these contradictions, where we recognize our own depravity, that if God leaves us to ourselves, we are worse than beasts.

[35 : 19] He says, here's the best thing. The best thing really is to be living in relationship with God, receiving your lot from God, and enjoying the life that God has given to you, enjoying the work that he has allotted for you to do in his providence, whatever that may be.

He says it is a gift from the hands of God. And so when we see injustice and when we see unrighteousness, our consolation must be that God will judge the wrongs.

He'll judge both the righteous and the wicked. He will declare the righteous and condemn the guilty. And our recognition of our own depravity should cause us to trust the Lord and just do our work.

I know that he is going to watch over all of those injustices and that he is giving us grace so that we don't live as beasts and so that we are not as sinful as we can possibly be and we enjoy life, the God allotted life that he has given to us in this fallen broken world.

you see when we don't do that we become distracted by all these other realities of injustice and unrighteousness and instead of focusing on the allotted life that God has given to us and enjoying it and giving our best to it and trusting him to right the wrongs we're bent out of shape and we're not focused on the task at hand and our worry will never bring to pass the things that only God can do.

[36 : 58] And so that is what we are called to do in the face of these contradictions in this fallen world and the world where many people live with their backs to God and they live as animals indifferent to divine things, indifferent to spiritual things.

Like an animal, they're born, they live, and they die. But there's going to be a judgment. They're going to be judged.

And the preacher says to us, you know what? Live with reference to God. Enjoy the allotment that he has given to you.

Enjoy the fruit. That is a gift from God's hands. Rejoice in it. And trust God. He's going to right the wrongs. He's going to, in his time, bring justice and he's going to bring righteousness.

The preacher concludes with a somewhat difficult to understand question when he says, who can bring him to see what will be after him?

[38 : 14] But it seems like what he's saying to us is it makes no sense speculating about life in terms of what life is going to be afterwards.

He seems to be communicating that there's the need to focus on life that is at hand, give all of our energies to that, and not be concerned about what's going to come after you, because really there's no one who can tell us with any degree of certainty about all of those details.

The Bible certainly tells us absent from the body presence of the Lord, we know that. But people who begin to speculate and go into details about what heaven is like and all those other things, we don't know what's going to come after that.

So what we must do is we must live with reference to God, enjoy the enlanguishment of life that he's given to us, the work that he's given to us, and we trust him in his time to right all the wrongs and to judge the righteous and the wicked.

You see, when we don't do that, we focus on speculative things at the expense of the life that is in front of us, that God has called us to live, he's called us to enjoy.

[39 : 35] So the preacher says, there's nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot, from God.

Brothers and sisters, of all the contradictions in life, like in justice where there should be justice and unrighteousness where there should be righteousness, the greatest contradiction in all of life was seen on a hill called Calvary.

sin. Because that is where the holy, perfect Son of God became sin for sinners. That is where the innocent suffered for the guilty, that is where the righteous took the place of the unrighteous, sin.

But it is through that great contradiction that God saves sinners. And we who have come to Christ must be grateful to God for that great contradiction in human history.

Those of you this morning who are present and you don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and personal Savior, remember the words of the preacher. Man left to himself is a beast.

[40 : 56] Now you'll be thinking that doesn't apply to you because you certainly aren't doing beastly things and you're a pretty good person. But the only reason for that is the restraining grace of God, the common grace of God in your life that restrains you and me from being as bad as we can be.

And so I encourage you this morning to turn to Jesus, trust in Jesus. He is promised that those who come to him he will not turn away. And those who come to him are then enabled to do what the preacher says to embrace their lot in life from the hands of God as a gift from God that they can rejoice in their work even as they observe the contradictions in this fallen world because they know that God is going to judge it.

God is live in their lives that they can live better than a beast, aware of God and worshiping God and really serving the Lord.

That's available to all who put their trust in Jesus Christ. And I pray if you have not done that that you this morning will do that. Let's pray together.