

Oppression in a Fallen World

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please turn your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 4. In my younger years, I was a dedicated fan of Bob Marley and his music.

By the grace of God, I never bought into the smoking marijuana aspect of it, which really in those days went hand in hand with reggae music, but I was a dedicated fan of Bob Marley.

I was a committed follower of Christ, but I identified with his music because I found the lyrics in his songs to be so true to life, and they just spoke about life, that you knew this is true.

I still remember the words of a lot of his songs, and from time to time, they're triggered in my mind. Something I read or something I hear, and lyrics would come to mind.

And that was the case as I looked at this passage that we have come to this morning in Ecclesiastes chapter 4. As I read the opening verses of Ecclesiastes 4, the line of one of his songs, Who the Cap Fits, came to mind.

[1 : 2 0] And those of you who are Bob Marley fans, you probably remember that the opening line of Who the Cap Fits is, Man to Man is so unjust.

You don't know who to trust. But then there was another Bob Marley song that came to mind as well, as I considered these words. And that one is Babylon System.

How many of you remember Babylon System? Yeah, a few of you dating yourselves. Well, Andrew isn't dating himself. He just knows because he knows. But Babylon System came to mind.

And actually, not just a line of Babylon System communicates, I think, what we will be considering this morning, but the entire song does. But there's this repeated line in the song, The Babylon System is a vampire sucking the blood of the sufferers.

Bob Marley was a great social commentator. And he was able to see that there was injustice between men. He was able to see that there was a system that oppressed people like a vampire and sucked their very lifeblood out of them.

[2 : 3 7] But one of the things you would never see in Bob Marley's songs is you would never really see the root for the injustice. You would not see the root reason for the injustice, the root reason for the oppression.

But this never came out in his songs. And I believe that's because he didn't know. I think it's because Bob Marley, like most people, tend to see the world at face value.

They tend to see the world for what it is. And he just commented on that in his music. But there's more to the world than what we see. We who are followers of Christ must not look at the world and say, it is what it is, as some people like to say.

The truth is, something went wrong with the world. The world that we see with our eyes is a very different world from what it was intended to be.

Something went drastically wrong. The world that we see is not just filled with injustice because it's filled with injustice. No, something happened.

- [3 : 46] And what happened is recorded in the third chapter of Genesis where it records that man rebelled against his creator. And it's what theologians refer to as the fall.
- And all humanity in this time-space world in which we live fell into sin and the effects of sin. And what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes is this wise preacher commenting on life in a fallen world.
- And really, the words that we have in the book of Ecclesiastes are not just the words of a wise preacher. They are the very words of God. They are the words of God that he inspired by his Holy Spirit and caused this author to write them.
- So let us hear God's word this morning as we consider Ecclesiastes chapter 4. But we will just be considering the first three verses. I initially intended to preach a message on the entire chapter but got into it and realized that that just would not be profitable and effective.
- So this morning we consider the first three verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Verses 1 through 3. 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.
- [5 : 20] On the side of the 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 born, who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.
- Let's pray together. Father we are so grateful this morning that we are able to gather in Jesus name based on his finished work on the cross.
- We thank you Lord that you have not only joined us to yourself but you have joined us in your big family. Lord you have put us in a local church.
- And fathers we are seated together to hear your word. Would you help us to posture our hearts both to hear and heed what your word says to us. Lord we thank you that you know what we need corporately.
- [6 : 35] You know what we need individually. And we trust you Lord in the preaching of your word to meet those needs. Father I ask for grace to help me to be faithful.
- To care for these whom I love but whom you love even more. And Father I pray that you would mediate your word to our hearing and to our hearts.
- And we pray in no other name than the name of Jesus. Amen. In these three verses before us the preacher makes a sobering point.
- And the point is this. Oppression in life can cause some people to despair of life. Oppression in life can cause some people to despair of life.
- I want to unpack this thought this morning by considering these words of the preacher under two simple headings and they are number one oppression and comfort and number two oppression and despair.
- [7 : 54] And I want to consider each in turn so let's begin with the first one oppression and comfort. For those of you who are joining us for the first time this morning the author of Ecclesiastes refers to himself as the preacher throughout this book.
- So when I refer to the preacher I'm not talking about myself but I'm talking about the author in Ecclesiastes. Last week we heard as we concluded chapter 3 a startling statement by the preacher.
- The startling statement that he made is found in verse 18 of chapter 3 where the preacher says man left to himself is a beast. Or to put it another way man without God is a beast.

And the preacher says that as he looked at the injustices that he saw he felt that God was testing man to just let him go to his worst extremes to help him to see that left alone he is nothing but a beast.

let's look at verse 1 again in chapter 4 and let's consider what the preacher says he says 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 one side of the oppressors there was power and there was no one to comfort them.

[9 : 27] Now just to be sure that we're on the same page I want to just give us a definition of oppression. Oppression is prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority.

It's prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority. So what is the preacher saying? The preacher is not saying that he saw every single act of oppression.

He's using he's certainly generalizing and he's trying to say that he saw it comprehensively but he's not saying to us that he saw every single act of oppression.

He's just making the point that the oppression in his day was really widespread. It grabbed his attention. And he's also helping us to see though that he didn't see these oppressions from a distance.

He didn't see them from afar. He saw them up close. He talks about saying the tears of the oppressed. And here we have the preacher helping us to see that the oppressors were not just kind of like equal and oppressing them.

[10 : 41] He says they had concentrated power on their side. He said on the side of the oppressors there was power. So they weren't just oppressors they were powerful oppressors.

And the preacher also makes another important observation. It's so important that he mentions it two times. Two times the preacher says about those who were being oppressed that they had no one to comfort them.

he is making a point about the importance and the need for comfort when we are oppressed. And I think when we consider it in the full context of chapter four he is talking about companionship.

He is talking about having those who walk alongside us when we meet with life's difficulties and life's hardships when we meet with life's oppressions.

He is speaking about a kind of compassionate companionship that comes alongside and does whatever it can to bring comfort. And if we had covered the entire thing this morning you would see down in verse nine where he talks about two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil.

[11 : 59] If one falls then the other would be able to lift him up. He says but woe to the one who is by himself. He is talking about the blessing of companionship and how it really makes a difference in our lives when we need to be comforted.

There are times when we see oppression and there's absolutely nothing that we can do to intervene to stop it. Sometimes the oppression is from a distance.

We listen to it or we watch it on television. We hear about it. It's in another country. Perhaps the oppressor is the government or a powerful institution like a bank that takes advantage of clients through high interest rates and through unreasonable terms and practices.

But even though we aren't able to do something every single time to intervene to stop oppression, I think what is important is that we resolve to do whatever we can to the extent that we can to bring comfort to those who are oppressed.

It may be by praying. It may be by speaking up, just speaking concerning a situation of oppression, writing a letter, signing a petition.

[13 : 19] It may be, if possible, to withdraw your patronage for a particular business that may be oppressing people in a particular way. And sadly, in the world that we live in, sometimes that's just not possible.

I mean, I think, for example, if it's a utility company and you're in a situation like ours, what do you do? It's somewhat difficult to really get around. When we read these words of the preacher, it's easy to take for granted that the preacher saw oppressions and he saw these tears.

But the truth is, in our fallen world, as we go about our busy lives, we can so easily overlook and be comfortable with oppression and injustice.

It just doesn't register, it's there, but we just don't see it. Unlike the preacher, we can easily overlook the many oppressions that we see in our fallen world as we go about our busy lives.

And when we do see them, sometimes it's easy to reason that that's just the way things are. We don't see the tears and we don't hear the cries as the preacher did.

[14 : 41] And there's no doubt when we consider these words of the preacher, for most of us, I believe it's kind of hard to imagine this kind of oppression. Maybe if we think long and hard, we can think of some situations in far removed parts of the world.

But in the world that we live in, I don't think that most of us can bring to mind quickly many situations that would mirror what the preacher is describing here.

This kind of amazing oppression that is almost indescribable. But the truth this morning is that we do see oppression and we do see injustice.

this. And naturally, we respond and we react to the oppression that we face and that we experience, and we should, because it's what we deal with.

But the question this morning is how do we respond to and how do we view oppression and injustice when it's not us who's being affected, when it's somebody else?

[15 : 47] Let me try to illustrate what I'm getting at. One of the things I observe, I read the newspapers and I follow the news, and as most of you know, we have an out-of-control rate of violent crime, murder in particular.

And one of the consistent responses that I read about families who lose loved ones to murder is they would say, oh, the government has to do more.

And they would call people to get together to do various kinds of things, to bring pressure on the government, to enforce capital punishment, and to do other things.

And I don't know those people. But my general suspicion is that many of them were not as concerned when that was somebody else, when it was another family weeping because of a loved one who was lost to murder.

But when it comes home, it makes a big difference. And so we should scream when it's on our doorstep, so we're not credible. We are more credible when it's on someone else's doorstep. And then we scream and we identify, we try to make a difference.

[17 : 10] And I think the same is true with injustice. The same is true with oppression. It is easy to overlook oppression in the lives of others until it comes home to us or it comes home to those who are near to us.

And I'll give an example. It's not a dramatic example like what we see the preacher dealing with, but it's the kind that we see, so I think it's the kind that we need to consider.

Perhaps there's someone on your job who is being oppressed, who is being unjustly treated, a person who is being victimized for no particular reason, giving, receiving unfair evaluations, being overlooked for promotions, being unrewarded with raises and opportunities for training and to grow and to be and to advance.

And maybe, again, some of you may be seeing this on your job right now, where you are aware that someone is not being fairly treated, someone is really being oppressed, maybe because of a supervisor with bad blood for many, many years, and the person is at that person's mercy.

mercy. And the question is, how do you respond? How do you respond to that? Or better, how should you respond if you were to face that?

[18 : 45] But I think when we consider these words of the preacher, we should see that we should respond with compassion, and we should seek to bring whatever degree of comfort we can to that oppressed person as much as we can.

It was difficult for me to read these words and not think about oppression in our own country. We had years of minority white rule where blacks were oppressed and marginalized.

Blacks weren't able to vote because voting was tied to ownership of land, and many of them did not own land. Very few did. There were certain jobs they could not take, they could not get, certain businesses they could not patronize, certain schools they could not attend.

And I imagine that this account of the oppressions that the preachers saw in Ecclesiastes, perhaps if we lived back then, perhaps we could have seen some oppressions that brought tears to people's eyes.

those of you who know your Bahamian history would recall that those were the days of a party called the United Bahamian Party or the UVP. But by the grace of God, there were people who were in a position to oppose the injustice of that day.

[20 : 17] And among them were some whites. among them were some whites who stood shoulder to shoulder with blacks who were able to stand on the front lines and to fight against the injustices, fight against the oppression.

And they worked together to bring an end to those oppressive years. In 1967, those years of oppression officially came to an end.

And for the first time in our nation's history, we elected a majority black government, the Progressive Liberal Party. And that ushered in the era that we called the Pendling Era that lasted until 1992.

And then during the Pendling Era, and I think many of us would still remember it, we were young enough and still old enough to remember it, it was marked by incredible victimization, incredible oppression, no longer based on color, but now based on politics.

And victimization and oppression were widespread if you did not support the government or if you were thought to not be supporting the government.

[21 : 38] I think some of you are old enough to remember, for example, Reverend Carlton Francis. He was one of the most educated Bahamians at the time.

He served as a minister in the PLP government at that time, and he resigned because he opposed the PLP's decision to go back on its word regarding casino gambling.

The former administration, the UBP, had entered into some agreements to expand casino gambling, and the PLP campaign saying they would not do that. But when they were elected, they changed their minds and they did exactly that.

And Carlton Francis, I'm told, wrote his resignation on a napkin and turned it in. He did that in 1973.

He was an ordained Baptist minister as well. And from that day, he was economically victimized and oppressed. He was prevented from getting work in the country.

[22 : 46] The government would not give him work at COB or any of the schools and any other institution that would have hired him would have been victimized. So he was a persona non grata through and through.

And he struggled financially until the date of his death in 1985. I'm sure that some of us remember that.

And I think most of us in this room who do remember that were probably so young that even if we wanted to do something, we couldn't do anything.

But I wonder if you can think back and try to recall how did you think about it? What did you think about it? And better still for the rest of us, how do you think about that right now?

certainly none of us would have been any match for the victimization machinery of the PLP in those days. But we could have responded with prayer.

[23 : 55] We could have responded with concern. We could have responded by seeking to bring personal comfort to Reverend Francis and his family if and when we had the opportunity. As I recall this story as I was preparing, I couldn't help but reflect on my father.

My father reached out to Carlton Francis, sought to be a friend, sought to comfort him. I remember when I needed tutoring in math, my father took me to Reverend Francis, particularly because he wanted to support him.

He did tutoring, actually not too far from here at Kemper Union Baptist Church, which is now Kemper Ministries on Kemper Road. My father would take me there in the afternoons and he would help me with math.

Let me mention, that's dated and I know some of you probably don't identify with that, but let me mention another example of oppression, oppression that we see and sometimes we allow it to go by, it doesn't register.

This one is more current. How many of you received a video and an audio, this would have been like maybe a day or so after the carnival that they had, and it was a video of an alleged attack on two homosexuals and there was also an audio clip that went with it.

[25 : 26] How many of you got that on your phones? Just put your hand up, don't be ashamed, I mean, so long as you didn't circulate it. All right, I got it, didn't circulate it, but I got it. I wonder what you thought about that when you watched the video, when you heard the audio.

These two men were allegedly attacked because they were on the parade holding hands. Now I think for some of us, I pray for none of us, but I think perhaps for some of us, there could be indifference because they were homosexuals.

There could be indifference because, though that is a gross injustice, though that is gross oppression to be attacked simply because of walking the streets holding hands, yes, a practice that is not accepted by the majority of people in our country, but our constitution guarantees basic rights like freedom of association and freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

Yet for so many, I saw in the video, and of course it's hard to tell what the reason was as you watched police officers walking away from what was going on.

It could have been that they felt it wasn't something they could control and they made a judgment to not do that. It could also have been that they figured that's a homosexual, so I'll just turn my back on it.

[27 : 19] Brothers and sisters, when we see injustice as those who belong to Christ, our response can be to gloss over it.

Our response should be to respond in a way that is consistent with all that we see in Scripture. And that is to do whatever we can to stand against that injustice and to bring comfort to those who have been wrongly treated and wrongly oppressed.

And I raise this point this morning because prejudice can cause us to be blind and indifferent to oppression. But we are to not be blind or indifferent to oppression for any reason.

Because if it's oppression, if it's injustice, it doesn't matter. It is oppression and it is injustice and we need to stand against it. At a minimum, we can pray when injustice is done.

At a minimum, we can pray when people are oppressed. Minimum, we can do that. And then we can do more as God gives us capacity and as God gives us opportunity.

[28 : 45] opportunity. Those of you who are paying attention would realize that this particular issue, the whole issue of homosexuality, the whole issue of transgenderism and gender confusion, that is becoming increasingly a reality that we will face in our country.

And we need to respond the way Christ would have us to respond. we need to see them as souls who need a Savior. And we need to be the Lord's hand extended to them as we would for any other people.

And if that's not resting on your heart, in an amen way this morning, I encourage you to get before the Lord and ask him to help you to so align your heart with him and his word that when you see injustice, even if it's injustice done against someone whose lifestyle you may not approve of, that you would stand and you would do whatever you can to stop that injustice and to bring comfort to that person who is oppressed or that person who is unjustly treated.

Well, the preacher did not just see the oppression, he thought about it and reflected upon it. And we find his thoughts and reflections in verses 2 and 3 and they bring me to my second and final point, oppression and despair.

Look at the preacher's thoughts in verses 2 and 3, let's consider them again. He writes, and I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

[30 : 37] life. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

The oppression that the preacher saw made him conclude that death was better than life. It was of such extreme proportions that he said, you know what?

Death is better than to be facing and living with that kind of oppression. And he considered those who had not been born better than those who were living and those who had died.

He said, if you'd never seen the light of the sun, if you were never born, you're better off than those who have been born and those who experience that kind of oppression.

Now, it's interesting that we don't know the oppression in particular that the preacher saw. We don't know the oppressions that he saw. We get no specifics. But we can only imagine that it must have been so severe if the preacher, on behalf of those who were oppressed, entertained thoughts of death for them.

[31 : 58] And I think his words give us something to think about. His words give us a window into the reality that many people who are oppressed oftentimes face.

If observing the oppression made the preacher entertain thoughts of death for those being oppressed, what do you think about the people themselves? I can only imagine that some of them in the midst of their oppression, they entertain thoughts of death themselves.

and perhaps in some cases, death may have been pursued by way of suicide. These two verses give us a window into oppression and despair because under oppression and unjust treatment, sometimes people despair of life itself and they take their very lives.

And they should help us to appreciate sometimes how people can become so engulfed in darkness, engulfed in the darkness of oppression that in that moment, death looks like a better option than life.

I remember a number of years ago, the first funeral that I did for someone who committed suicide. And I remember interacting with the family and they just could not believe that this individual committed suicide.

[33 : 36] And they had all kinds of theories about who killed this individual and how things happened and so forth. And they just couldn't believe that a person could get to a place where he or she so despairs of life that death seems like a better option.

I think the preacher in these three verses helps us to see this. And here we should remember that it's not just extreme oppression and extreme despair that could bring a person to despair of life itself.

sometimes based on our constitutions and our constitutions are different. Sometimes based on a person's constitution what may not faze someone else to even entertain a thought of death?

That person because of their constitution may very well entertain the thought of death. And I think this is so helpful for us as a community because as we have seen over the past ten or so years the many distresses we face in our country where many people have despair of life and taken their lives.

I think these words should remind us to slow down to be more thoughtful more considerate and realize that people are of different constitutions and how despair can set in.

[35 : 07] so much so that it causes a person to despair of life itself. And the truth this morning is that God's people are not exempt.

We're not exempt from despair. We're not exempt from the despairs that result from oppression and hardship in life. And we're not exempt from not only entertaining thoughts of suicide but even acting upon those thoughts of suicide.

And some of God's people in the midst of deep thick darkness and despair have taken their very lives. But again the encouragement for us this morning is that God's word reminds us and assures us that nothing separates his people from his love.

not even suicide. We read these words written by the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the church at Corinth and here's what he writes.

For we do not want you to be ignorant. 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 8 through 11. For we do not want you to be ignorant brothers of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

[36 : 46] Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death. death. But then he transitions and says but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

He delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Notice verse 11. He says it's God who delivers us. We set our hope on the Lord but he says this to the saints at Corinth. You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

See this is what we can do for those minimum we can do this for those who are oppressed for those who are despairing even of life itself. Paul says yeah God is going to take care of us he's going to deliver us but he says in verse 11 you must help us by prayer.

So let us not miss this point this morning that when we see oppression when we see injustice we can come alongside and try to bring comfort minimum by praying and then sometimes God gives us opportunity and capacity to come even nearer and help to bring comfort in a more tangible way.

[38 : 23] But the truth this morning is that no matter how much we try we won't see all oppression and even the oppressions that we see we don't see the full extent of it because some of it is hidden.

for there's one who both sees all oppression and who knows the full depth of all oppression.

And as we heard last week he will one day in his way and in his time he will judge. he will judge.

In his gospel Matthew helps us to see the one who sees and the one who knows the full depth of all the oppressions known on this earth.

In Matthew 9 35 through 36 Matthew records and Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

[39 : 38] When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus the good shepherd saw people helpless and harassed as sheep without a shepherd.

And one of the things we know is that shepherds give sheep both direction and protection. and no doubt the people that Jesus saw were under political oppression from the Roman rulers and religious oppression from the Jewish leaders.

But you know what? Their greatest oppression was not from the Roman rulers nor from the Jewish leaders. Their greatest oppression was the oppression of sin.

And brothers and sisters in our fallen world today, sin still is and will always be the greatest oppression that men, women, boys, and girls face. Both their own sin and the sins of others, the sins committed against them in the form of oppressive acts.

And so as we look at our world and we desire to and we seek to bring comfort to the oppressed, let us remember that it is only God, who's true Christ, can address the root cause of oppression, which is sin.

[41 : 13] And that's why Jesus came. Jesus came to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself on the cross. As we look at our fallen world, a world that is broken by oppression, let us remember that Jesus is the only hope to finally and totally end oppression.

Everything else that we do is really a stopgap measure and we should have no illusions about that. Yes, let us do what we can, but let us understand that we are not able to finally bring an end to oppression.

Jesus brings an end to oppression, he does it in part when he sets us free from sin's oppressive chains and he will do it finally when he returns in glory. When he does what scripture says that he will do, that he will come and he will receive his own to himself, he will judge the world and he will usher in new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness.

And so as we observe oppressions, no doubt, not to the degree that the preacher observed. Let us do what we can to bring comfort, but let us remember that ultimately oppression is dealt with through Jesus Christ, both now and when he finally returns.

And he is the one to whom we need to look to end all of the oppression in this fallen world. God the writer in Ecclesiastes doesn't give a solution, he moves on just to his next observation.

[43 : 06] And I believe that it reminds us of why Jesus had to come. Jesus is the answer to this oppression that the preacher saw.

let's pray together.