

"Injustice and the Mercy of God" Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you for this book of Ecclesiastes, that it is wisdom from you to see real life, would see areas where we need to repent from. Lord, that we would see areas that we need to seek your healing for. Lord, in your word, by your spirit, everything we need is available to us. And Lord, we pray that we would be so bold this morning as to ask for these things. Bless this time, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We are on page 16, but before we get into the text, a bit of a story to help us contextualize our time in God's word this morning. So when I was single in my early to mid 20s, I and a few others, actually some people here this morning, lived in a lower town, downtown

Ottawa, in a house that served both as kind of like communal living, but also as an evangelistic outreach to the area. One Christmas, we did kind of like a blitz of the neighborhood where we handed out tracks and the Jesus DVDs. Have you ever heard of the Jesus DVD? It's like in well over 100 different languages. It is like the worst quality of filming ever. But it is remarkable at how this little DVD has made such an impact, especially in the 1040 window, where there's primarily a lot of Islam. Anyways, that's such an aside. There's this one apartment where we lived, close by, and through this distribution, I met this lady, an elderly sweet lady from South Sudan. And she would have me over and some other people over every now and then. And she'd make tea or oftentimes, it was pretty much the same dish. It was a spicy fish dish with some kind of stewed vegetable and some kind of grain. I don't know what else it is. I'm not sure. It was good. And she would just talk. She'd tell us about her experiences. And one time she told us a story about how she fled the Sudan. This is before

South Sudan became a state. She fled the Sudan into Cairo. And she stayed there essentially as a stateless person for about five years. Like eking out whatever kind of income. She had some of her children with her.

Anyways, before she came to Canada as a refugee, one of her daughters was murdered. Couldn't believe it. It was the first time I'd heard a story like this. And it wasn't the first time she told the story. Another time when she was bringing up, her other daughter was there. And her other daughter got terribly upset recalling the story. Because in this murder, being sub-Saharan African, being stateless, being in Egypt, no justice was given to them. The police didn't bother seeking out the murderer. It was kind of forgotten. And they had to swallow it. Anyways, the daughter that was in Canada when this elderly lady was telling the story, she was livid, and rightfully so. Her mom said, we have forgiven those people. That's a sermon and an illustration for another time.

[3 : 54] Just a remarkable lady. I bring up the story to highlight how egregious the miscarriage of justice and wickedness can be.

How horrible it is to experience and how it totally unravels the very fabric of society. For this lady, thank God, her and some of her children were able to come to Canada where we do have a far more robust legal system.

Nevertheless, injustice exists in our country. It exists in our city. It exists in our neighborhoods. So far, the sage in Ecclesiastes has been leading us on a quest for meaning.

He's demonstrated that human purpose and ultimate meaning, it cannot be found in pleasure or work or morality or creativity and other similar pursuits.

We've seen that already in three short chapters. And the reason is is because as human beings we live an existence under the sun. The sage, I've talked about it in other weeks, the sage describes this life under the sun as seeing and feeling and engaging with the material world but not really having a grid to understand the spiritual life or a metaphysical understanding of reality.

[5 : 29] To live under the sun is to live in the here and the now with all of the difficulties involved in it. This week, the sage continues to deepen this exploration by helping us to understand that one of the main reasons humanity cannot find meaning under the sun is the enduring human tendency towards injustice and oppression.

So we're going to sit at the sage's feet again this morning and we'll come to understand what injustice and oppression looks like and then what it does to us and then hopefully, hopefully, hopefully we will see a pathway to real justice and real righteousness and real mercy.

We'll jump right into the text. I'm not going to be going through it sequentially but we're going to touch on every verse. Look with me at verse 16 of chapter 3. 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.

Before talking about justice, injustice rather, and oppression, it would be good to talk about justice and righteousness and why it is so very necessary for our society to flourish or any society to flourish.

So we're looking at verses, just verse 16 of chapter 3 and the ideal of justice that is implied here, that's behind the text, is symbolized by Lady Justice, a blindfolded woman holding scales and an unsheathed sword.

[7 : 10] We have a version of Lady Justice at our Supreme Court. Interestingly, it's not, she's not blindfolded. I have no idea why. I'm not going to read into that. Nevertheless, she's there.

And the idea is that justice is impartial. It seeks the truth. It has legitimate authority to prosecute. It aims for righteousness. It seeks to suppress wickedness. Without justice, society, it descends into chaos because the rule of law cannot be maintained and there is no recourse for the wicked. Without justice, we live in an anarchic state. I always think of the movie Waterworld and I don't care what you say, it's a good movie.

It's maybe one of Kevin Costner's top three. Okay, I'm pushing it. But this is what happens when justice is not realized. Okay? Things break down.

[8 : 15] People suffer. Wickedness is allowed to flourish. So thank God we live in Canada. We are fortunate to reside in this nation. It strives to uphold the rule of law for all citizens.

However, we know at a very fundamental level that our justice system is far from perfect. It's good. It strives to be excellent, but it is not perfect. These days, it is poorly staffed.

Many of our justices adopt a more progressive approach to legal interpretation. And it allows child abusers to be released on day parole or individuals who have committed aggravated assault to serve their sentences and be released with time served.

Now, that's not all the time, but it happens. On the flip side of it, just this summer, we had an example of a man being charged with aggravated assault and assault with a deadly weapon for trying to defend his home and his family from home invaders.

Okay? We have a great justice system, but when stuff like this happens and we have this kind of contrast, we know fundamentally, fundamentally, it is not perfect.

[9 : 35] Again, when justice is not administered with fairness and impartiality, wickedness has room to flourish. Let's pause there.

We'll flip the page over to page 18 and we'll read chapter 4, verse 1. Yes, just verse 1. Again, I saw the, again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun and behold the tears of the oppressed and they had no one to comfort them.

On the side of their oppressors, there was power and there was no one to comfort them. Here we have the consequences of allowing oppression to persist for wickedness to flourish.

The oppressed have neither power to fight back nor comfort to help them in their time of need. The word oppression is mentioned three times in this one verse.

this differs somewhat from the injustice and wickedness described in verse 16 of chapter 3 as here it refers to a cheating or a defrauding or a robbing of one's neighbor.

[10 : 47] Using one's elevated status and power to exploit someone who is vulnerable in some kind of way. my friend who suffered the loss of her daughter in Egypt was oppressed.

There's no advocate for the oppressed verse 1 says. And because injustice has replaced justice and wickedness has replaced righteousness the oppressor operates or sorry the oppressor operates without restraint.

Therefore we observe two forms of wickedness here. We observe injustice and oppression. And this the sage is helping us to understand reflects the reality of life under the sun.

Life that does not take into account that there is a judge that there is a higher power an ultimate power. Injustice wickedness and oppression become commonplace.

Failure in failures injustice and abuses of power again they will persist in this life no matter how much we strive for an equitable and fair society if we are trying to solve the problems as people living a life under the sun.

[12 : 13] So before we continue on I want to clarify this a bit for us because sometimes we think in generalities and sometimes it is difficult to apply wisdom and truth to our specific lives to the day in and day out of what it means to live here in Ottawa in 2025.

The reality is we are a suburban church situated in one of the city's wealthier areas. We luckily don't face much injustice ourselves or face oppression.

We don't see first hand the effects of wickedness on our streets at least not necessarily the kind that are described by the sage yet if we examine the root of both injustice and oppression we see that the very causes of it reside in our hearts and in our families and in our neighborhoods and in this part of town as well.

favoritism surely exists in our day in our area maybe within our families. We also see the deadly sins of envy and gluttony pride and greed and boastfulness and we must consider we have to consider how we might be guilty of these on a smaller less obvious scale nevertheless even if they're smaller they still cause damage and harm relationships and start to unravel our social fabric. A couple of examples I say this often but again I want to say it this is me not talking down upon you this is me talking with you okay some of these examples they apply to me who here has dismissed their spouse's genuine concerns not giving them the benefit of the doubt on minor issues making mountains out of molehills how many of us have been harsh with our children oppressing them with our words or expectations or withholding affections for them or how might we undermine our co-workers we are impatient we are quick tempered we see them as obstacles not as people that we can help and guide not as teammates how many of us steal from our employers oftentimes time these are all examples of how wickedness can overshadow righteousness how we can oppress in small ways on the flip side maybe we are the ones that are oppressed!

[15 : 18] Maybe we are the ones that are quickly dismissed or spoken to with a harsh tone or dismissed church be on your guard be on your guard do not let complacency or delusion blind you to your own potential to hurt and to harm do not think that you are immune from unrighteousness don't think that you are immune from wickedness remember that you live this life under the sun such injustice and wickedness they have serious effects on us as we have seen they also distance us from our identity as image bearers they also cause us to have a deranged and a bent and distorted ability to understand the world around us and to understand

God's truth what do I mean we'll get to our second point now look with me at verses 19 and 20 of chapter 3 so we'll flip back to page 16 of our scripture journals 19 and 20 so at first glance it appears that the sage is merely making the connection that both humans and animals are created beings we share similar traits very specifically that we are physical beings that we are mortal and that we are subject to death and it's true it's very obvious observation worth our consideration but given that verses 19 and 20 come immediately after verse 16 it seems that the sage is drawing us to consider something much deeper how verse 19 and 20 relate to injustice and wickedness and then later on in chapter 4 verse 1 oppression the sage has already affirmed that humans are a distinct and unique part of God's creation if you remember if you were here last week we looked at chapter 3 verse 11 where the sage he says that God has written eternity onto the hearts of man which is to say that we are made in his image

I won't go into great detail last week I went into a bit more detail but the short end of it is that we are created by God to image God to reflect God in his image and likeness no other creature in all of creation is described this way it is the very intention of God that goes back to creation itself in the earliest verses of Genesis therefore we ought to live out this defining characteristic of being a human that means embracing the things God embraces and fighting back against the things that he hates so why then would the sage then claim that we are no different from animals and this is a bit of a maybe a Bible teaching moment about how different genres work in the Bible the sage is writing wisdom literature and in wisdom literature he is constantly wrestling and ruminating on an idea or an aspect of reality and its implications so sometimes he does the investigation through the

lens of one who is entirely under the sun someone who can only see and understand the physical world without the slightest understanding of eternity other times he is thinking and dwelling upon the nature of who

God is and how that reflects and pertains to us here he is wrestling through what it means to be a human under the sun in light of our mortality in light of our propensity to engage in injustice and oppression and wickedness so with the wisdom literature what we are seeing here is the sage on one hand in chapter 3 verse 11 he affirms human uniqueness that we are made in God's image and then just a few verses later still in chapter 3 he compares us to animals and the point is for us as we are also ruminating on what the sage is saying we are to say this seems like a contradiction I'm struggling to understand how the sage can say one thing and then a contradictory statement just a few verses later and what the sage is doing is he's forcing us to dig to ask questions to turn over rocks so back to the text it's not that the sage here in verses 19 and 20 is comparing human beings to animals as to renege on what he has said in chapter 3 verse 11 where he is saying that we are essentially created in the image of God but rather he is casting doubt on our distinctiveness when wickedness and injustice become the defining marker of the human being more than being an image bearer of God instead of living into image bearing and therefore living justly and righteously and fighting against injustice and oppression we take the very structures that establish order and reflect

God's good design that are intended to glorify him and to benefit us and we hijack them so that we glorify ourselves and unlike God who when glorified everything is blessed when we seek to bless ourselves putting ourselves on the very throne of God it necessitates oppression of others it's not that we can glorify ourselves and everybody else is lifted up with us it necessitates us to engage in wickedness to misuse power to act unjustly to embrace all sorts of sin and vices see when we look to glorify ourselves righteousness becomes an obstacle because it demands humility and sacrifice which are the antithesis of the autonomous hubris self and what the sage

[22 : 34] I believe is trying to help us to see is that when we try to become God we become very animalistic it only proves that we are even more a part of the creation than we ever thought in the animal world such behavior is acceptable it's neither good nor bad within the animal kingdom to oppress I mean it's weird to even use those terms because animals just are some eat some get eaten some get knocked off their thrones so to speak there's no justice or injustice but for humans such actions diminish our resemblance to God and therefore such behavior isn't indifferent but it's reprehensible and it's sinful the sage says that this revelation is given to us by the Lord for a very specific purpose we see that in verses 17 and 18 look with me

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 verse 18 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 you catch this God is testing human beings so that we may know our place and that place is not his throne but as his children in a general sense for he is the creator and father of all we must see this as an act of divine mercy that we come to this realization that we are a part of God's creation but we are not the creator himself so whenever we read the Lord testing his people throughout the Bible almost always it's a positive act of God intending to reveal either sinfulness or to illicit faith if you think about the binding of Isaac Abraham he is faithful to the

Lord he is the father of faith he has a child in his old age the child of promise and he loves Isaac oh he loves Isaac okay then God says sacrifice him to me and what does Abraham do he's being tested and he goes the distance again an incredible remarkable story but the result of that was that Abraham understood that God needed to be first and not Isaac that the love of God had to supersede everything so in that example the testing of Abraham was for his benefit so too is it in our text this morning the sage is helping us to recognize that on one hand we are creation a part of creation we are not the creator on the other hand we recognize that such participation in injustice and wickedness and oppression resembles the base animal instincts rather than the all powerful triune God that we ought to reflect as image bearers because we will return to the ground like any other animal we are reminded that we are the creature again and not the creator it's such an important aspect of the Christian faith there is only one

God there is only one Lord there is only one uncreated one one giver of life and we do not have the authority or ability to assert this divine power for we are like beasts we are created beings from the dust we were created to the dust we shall return so such wickedness it doesn't merely cause us to

act like animals to thumb our nose at God and his good design for us to be image bearers but it also causes us to devalue life what do I mean by this look with me at verses two and three of chapter four and I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive but better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun this this could very well be one of the most hopeless verses in the entire bible wickedness is so bad it is better that people not exist than to experience it the sage is positing that the unborn and dead are actually the real ones to be envied again the sage makes this observation as one under the sun

I think it would be inappropriate to take these two verses and somehow apply them generally to life again the sage is constantly ruminating and pushing the boundaries of understanding in his investigation to understand the meaning and purpose of life and I think what he is getting at here is that when we do not have a heavenly vision when we are living life completely under the sun and we engage in injustice and oppression and wickedness we inevitably will not value life and life is something to be valued to be valued all the way so we see this evident in our society today we panic at the prospect of incurable illness and uncontrollable disasters and poverty and addiction and seemingly endless conflicts where peace is nowhere to be seen we feel oppression and sometimes we think what is the point so that's on the macro even on the micro we feel the oppression and we are weary and we think what is the point it would be better if I didn't live see when the oppressed continue to oppress and the power of the oppressors is it's never curtailed hope begins to fade and when hope is lost we feel the weight of this oppression and we again we begin to test the limits of verses two and three we embrace verses two and three life is no longer a blessing but a liability death or non-existence seems like a better option than life itself and again if there is all if all there is in this life is under the sun then hopelessness it truly is our lot however we have already seen that the sage he is alluding to God allowing such suffering to draw people to himself if you were here last week we looked at chapter three verse 14 where the purpose of all of the suffering that the sage was recounting was so that people would fear

[30:17] God and likewise here we see him alluding to the hope of divine justice in verse 17 of chapter three and it is with this next section verses 21 and 22 of chapter three where we will find the antidote and the hope for the injustice and the oppression in this life so our final section turn with me to verses 21 and 22 again page 16 in our scripture journals who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the ground 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 although it is obvious enough that humans share mortality with animals and therefore are not gods there is something unique about us again chapter 3 verse 11 God has written eternity onto our hearts but the sage again with the lens of somebody that's entirely living life and viewing life under the sun he cannot be sure that there will be anything that comes after him this line of question very much is a materialist view that is all we see is all there is but again we remember that the sage he is helping us figure out the meaning of life and yet he is not yet arriving there and the irony here in verses 21 and 22 of chapter 3 is that the sage is exploring the far limit of rational exploration only to discover that we are no greater than irrational animals when left to our own devices it's incredible that this is what he is finding because he is right if all there is is to live and die and to oppress and to be oppressed to come from the dust and go back down to the dust then what is the point of life how are we different from irrational animals he is helping us to see that the problem of wickedness injustice and oppression cannot be solved by us frail humans we cannot even differentiate ourselves from the behavior and the fate of animals it is a remarkable insight into the nature of humanity under the sun so what does it lead us to again we're ruminating on this we're struggling through this we're wrestling with!

we might have more questions than answers but the sage is directing us to our need for a divine breakthrough we cannot handle this life solve the problems of this life by ourselves we need some kind of power from outside of us we need a divine breakthrough we need to know that we are more than beasts that we have hope beyond what our best efforts can achieve so although we are image bearers our sinfulness makes it so that we are constantly moving away from being image bearers away from the likeness of God and towards the base and evil things of this world and yet in his mercy God the son of God he takes upon himself our frail flesh and this is why the incarnation matters like as a doctrine of first importance it's not that Jesus came to earth and had the appearance of a man but that he was a man because he takes upon himself our frail flesh and he

lifts it up to himself there is only one pure purely just and righteous one and it is God and this is also why in the incarnation even though God the son of God gives up his divine prerogatives he doesn't cease to be God so that in Jesus he's fully man and fully God but a human being that is purely just and righteous and therefore through his life and his death and resurrection he dispels the power of wickedness because he is completely oppressed!

he doesn't just alleviate the momentary pain but the problem of pain itself he suffers all there is to suffer because of sin because of our animalistic baseness that is a result of sin and thereby he defeats sin forever and so as we put our faith in him what he gives us is a release from our common fate to continue this perpetual cycle downward of wickedness and oppression because like he has taken up human frail flesh into himself so we will also be taken up into him he will judge justly and the promise is that injustice will not continue he will bring us to see that we are created to be image bearers of the triune God and to enjoy his justice and righteousness and comfort all of our days and we would not understand this if he did not open our eyes to the frailty and the animalistic behavior of what it means to be people that live solely in existence under the sun what is the result he gives us his holy spirit as a down payment of what is to come but also as the means by which we live this life out in the here and now so that we don't do it perfectly but by God's strength and by his spirit we begin to see oppression cease we begin to see justice take hold we begin to properly bear the image of our God again not perfectly but we then walk and journey and quest towards him we do not simply proclaim the gospel of Christ we begin to enjoy the gospel of Christ we begin to see the reality of this good and just rule take root in our lives in our family in our neighborhoods in our city in our country in this world but it starts at home it starts with me it starts with you the prophet Micah some 500 years before Jesus comes to be born in [37 : 17] Bethlehem says this he has told you a man what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God the voice of the Lord cries to the city and it is sound wisdom to fear your name hear of the rod and of him who appointed it Jesus echoes these words in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 verse 6 and verse 10 of Matthew and he says this blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs there is no better way to live than to put our faith and hope and trust in the only just and true and righteous and comforting God and the result is that we will walk this reality out and then what Jesus says in verse 6 we will be satisfied and as we walk it out what does he say in verse 10 ours is the kingdom of God so I'll close with this let us not find our satisfaction in our own attempts to glorify ourselves and solve our own problems and fix our own mistakes and to captain our own ship let us not try to build our own kingdoms here on earth claiming we have a piece of heaven when we don't instead let us put our faith in Jesus and trust that he will satisfy us and that we will enjoy him in his presence in heaven forever let us pray father we thank you for your word we thank you that you are through the sage helping us ruminate on the realities of life wrestling with truth asking difficult questions coming up with more questions than answers feeling the frustration of what it is to live as human beings under the sun lord draw us to yourself open our eyes to our frailty open our eyes to the times we act like beasts to those around us to our friends and family to our husband to our wife to our children to our mom our dad our brothers our sisters our co-workers and lord help us to repent and go to you and see that this is an act of your mercy and kindness that our eyes would be open so that we would then lean into your son who has shown us the perfect example of what it means to live as an image bearer of you and then lord by your strength by your spirit help us to do the same we pray this in christ's name amen you