

THE REWARD OF THE RIGHTEOUS AND WICKED UNDER THE SUN

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

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Since the beginning of this quarter, the church has been studying the book of Ecclesiastes. In the first two chapters, the Preacher was searching for purpose in wisdom, pleasure, and possessions. He concluded with a call for man to enjoy life.

In chapter three, the Preacher has described the various seasons of life, highlighting that God is sovereign over all. After acknowledging God's superiority to man in the previous passage (3:14-15), the Preacher begins comparing man with the beasts, finding a very important similarity. But, once again, we will see that he comes to the same conclusion regarding joy.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 ESV

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. 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?

Outline

1. The Corruption of Power (16-17)
2. Death Is Common (18-21)
3. Find Joy in Your Work (22)

1. The Corruption of Power (16-17)

The Preacher considers the overwhelming nature of wickedness.

Ecclesiastes 3:16 ESV

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.

Wickedness exists everywhere, including where justice and righteousness are supposed to rule. The Preacher specifically had in mind

the judicial system. Even in America, where the scales of justice are supposed to be impartial, there is corruption and mismanagement of cases. Let me not talk of Nigeria.

We have problems in this world that casts dark shadows under the sun. In a world without regard to God, His ways, or gratitude for what He has given us, we can easily see that injustice and wickedness has invaded and impacted even places of justice and righteousness. Places which should serve as refuges of justice and righteousness have been corrupted and defiled. We see abuse, brokenness, and even wickedness in churches, in families, in government, in our role models, and heroes.

When we see brokenness, we want it fixed; we see wickedness we want justice. Where can we appeal for justice? Oh, certainly in the courts and our judicial system we will see justice served. We have an ideal that justice is a blindfolded lady holding out balanced scales, but ideals are not reality.



Every human court is made up of people all “*under the sun*” using man’s wisdom (or lack thereof) to render their judgements. Moreover, they are prone to be blatantly corrupt and regularly render head scratching verdicts. We are looking to man-made

institutions to try to find righteousness, and cure injustice. When we do; we find them failing and we wonder why and become despondent with apparent totality of injustice.

According to Martin Luther, The Preacher is, “*Not complaining because there is wickedness in the place of justice but because the wickedness in the place of justice cannot be corrected.*” We are told early and often “*Life isn’t Fair!*” Yet “*It’s not FAIR*” is our cry from playroom to the court room! **Isaiah 5:20,23** *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, 23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!*

While we are often blindly self-focused; there are moments of clarity when a holy frustration at our inability to confront and correct the injustices in the world burst into our view. The preacher has seen the wickedness “*under the sun*” and now he wants answer for it.

Enter Verse 17, “*I said, but God will Judge!!*” There is a day of supreme judgement. Earlier it is said God makes everything beautiful in its time. These verses do not exist in vacuums but are part of the same stream of thought. We can easily forget when we see injustice and wickedness that God sees it too. He is not blind or unaware. If Chapter 3 says there is a time for everything, then here we see there is a specific time for justice.

The problem is we have a completely perverted view of what is wicked and

what is right. We think we are righteous and that we are the judge of the world, yet that is not true, God is. There is ONE Supreme Court and Judge, and it is not us. **Genesis 18:25** - *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*

If there is a time for everything and God makes everything beautiful in its time, then there must be a time for justice. God's judgement is a comprehensive judgement. We hate movies and stories that end with the evil and wicked not getting a form of justice. It is not enough for the good guy to win in order for there to be true justice, but the bad guy needs to lose. When we are quick to cry out for justice, it is because we think we have balanced the scales on the side of righteousness. We cannot read this and think that we are the ones who are righteous. But we forget we are the wicked and we not only want mercy we need it! **Romans 3:10** *"None is righteous, no, not one!*

We are completely unaccountable people. We like the ideal of accountability; until it calls us on something we do not like. We do not think or dwell on our wickedness for even a moment. Some of us are incapable of forgiving ourselves while some of us are shameless to our sins. Who are you when no one is watching? The truth is God is always watching. We do not like that part. We like to think that God only sees us on Sunday or when things are going well. He sees it ALL!!!! Let that sink in for a second!! **2 Corinthians 5:10** - *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may*

receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

God is NOT indifferent to injustice; He cares deeply about it, even the injustice and wickedness of our own sin. God is just, God is patient, and He has His purposes. God will judge in God's own time! Thank God, He does not judge us in our time frame. We also have to be patient to wait out God's timing, this requires faith that God is good, God is just. In Revelation 6 we see martyrs cry out for justice *"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*

2. **Death Is Common** (*Verses 18-21*)

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... Verse 18

Why does God delay justice!? We get into an interesting section that declares God is testing humanity to show us something. Let us be clear on the "testing" God already knows who we are. He is not like *"Hey, I wonder how they will handle this?!"* The testing is not a revelation for God but intended to be a revelation for us. We get a display of our own ignorance, nature, and destiny apart from Him. The verdict is NOT good.

We are like beasts in that we are all created by God. He gives us, and them, breath and life. We live, they live. We eat, they eat. We reproduce, they reproduce. We have no real advantage

over animals because we will die as well. *"Under the sun"* we have the same fate. They die, we die. We come from the earth and go back into it. We are fragile and finite, they are fragile and finite. Our life and death are both vanity.

The world *"under the sun"* does not believe we are created. It believes we were animals but through our species evolutionary striving and natural selection we have become men and women. We are just winners of evolutionary lottery.

Beasts have no concept of right or wrong, no morality, no sense of justice. Our history is littered with gross injustice. Why not kill each other to establish dominance, why not compete for food and resources. Why not eat our young. I think late Fela called it Animal kingdom, because in our behaviour we are not different from them. Why not oppress the weak? If this is all there is, then get as much of it as you can and forget the consequences to yourself or others. When you are told your entire life you are nothing more than a beast we should not be surprised when people act beastly.

Ideas have consequences; you cannot claim there is a unique dignity or value to human life when you equate us to merely animals. Is dignity of human life something you contemplate? Is compassion a word you would use to describe our culture or our own hearts?

God's word says the opposite: It says we are created, like beast but set apart

by God. There are some great similarities to beasts, but we have to remember where our identity, value, and dignity is found.

Genesis 1:27-28 - *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*

We are called to be fruitful and multiply and animals multiply. But we are given an additional charge that sets us apart and above the beasts. God has blessed us and called to have dominion (not domination). There is a difference: Rather than cultivate, teach, train, and give directional intent or protect, promote, and empower the potential — domination is subversion, control, abuse, violence, intimidation, manipulation, and insidious pleasure of pain. Because of our rejection of God's call on our lives and sin we are less like God and more like the beasts who have forgotten they are created - ***Genesis 3:19***.

Psalms 49:12, 15 - *Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. 15 But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.* So, we see here, it is our pride that makes us a beast which has no ability to worship anyone but ourselves. In our pride, we think we are gods when the reality is we die

like animals. What is your response to the certainty of your mortality?

When it comes to our ultimate fate in this *"life under the sun,"* humans are just like animals. All dies. Death is the great equalizer because no one can escape it. No one can cheat death. Everyone will face judgment. Even the most significant differences between man and beast are hard to determine:

Ecclesiastes 3:21 ESV

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

Who knows the destination of the spirit of man or beast? This seems to contradict what we read of the upright whose souls are ransomed by God (***Psalms 49:13-15***). The grave does not hold them. We see the same thing in ***Proverb 15:24***. We find references to the final resurrection in ***Isaiah 26:19*** and ***Daniel 12:2-3***.

Why are these not the Preacher's conclusions? The life of one without God is the cause of this confusion. The preacher sees that a life without God is not different from that of a beast. They both go to the grave.

Later, he does note the difference in the destination for the spirit of man... ***Ecclesiastes 12:7*** ESV and *the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

3. Find Joy in Your Work (vs 22)

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? Verse 22 (ESV)

"Lot" can also be translated "reward" as in ***2:10***. The term does not necessarily have negative connotations. Remember Nebuchadnezzar became like a beast – ***Daniel 4:32***. It was God's way of humbling him so that he might acknowledge God's sovereignty over all kingdoms. That is the point the Preacher is making to all who might question God's authority in light of the injustices we see in the world. Those who respond to God's sovereign authority in humble surrender will learn to enjoy their work. Since the outcome is the same for all God's creatures, namely death, *"man should rejoice in his work."* If we are just like animals, it is best that we simply enjoy our lot in life. Learn to appreciate what we have right now.

So, once again, we can say that the main idea is this:

Enjoy your work despite pervasive wickedness and your impending death. Since none of us are immortal we should consider the value of learning a few lessons.

1. We are not defined by what we have (possessions) or what we do (accomplishments), but we should learn to appreciate both.
2. Since this life is a vapour/breath in light of eternity (as the Preacher has mentioned several times) we should learn to identify ourselves with the risen Christ (***1 Corinthians 15:12-19***).

Conclusion

However, because of the resurrection of Jesus, we have hope in a life beyond the grave. This same Jesus who rose from the dead taught us;

*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment – **John 5:28,29** (ESV). (Cf **John 14:1-3, 1 Corinthians 15:19**)*

References

Christopher Rich (October 18, 2015) – It's Not Fair – Ecclesiastes 3:16-17. Damarcus Road Church - [Mercy Fellowship: Marysville, WA > It's Not Fair / Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 \(mrcy.life\)](#)

Brad Mills (October 15, 2017) - Working Among the Wicked – Ecclesiastes 3:16-17. Grace Presbyterian Church - [Working Among the Wicked \(Ecclesiastes 3:16-22\) - Grace Presbyterian Church \(PCA\) \(gracefresno.com\)](#)