



LESSON 4 | THE GREAT DILEMMA (3:16–4:3)

As humans, we long for justice. When we are sinned against, all of us hunger and thirst for right judgement. When we see another human being mistreated in our community or on the news, we feel outraged and inwardly agitated. In Ecclesiastes, however, the Teacher reminds us that life is not always fair, like we might hope for it to be. Those who do what is right don't always come out on top, and helpless people and those on the margins often get pressed down and mistreated.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that we live in a world that is filled with injustice. Our text addresses this issue and the frustration of not knowing whether or when it will be punished. It also revisits the problem of death. As a believer, the Teacher knows that life is good and to be affirmed, but here he picks up on another of his struggles that contradict the affirmation of life and a meaningful existence, namely that of injustice and oppression in the world.

The Teacher is frustrated by the things he has observed: (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice; (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people; and (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort. He is trying to make sense of the injustice, pain, and oppression he has seen. He acknowledges the brokenness of life “under the sun” and admits that sometimes there are no easy answers.

We must hear the Teacher's observation of the world as it is, and we also must respond to Jesus' example of a better way. The truth is, we live a world of injustice, but we have a choice in how we respond to it. We can live in resignation, much like the Teacher, and say, “Life's not fair—get used to it.” Or we can say along with Jesus and the prophets, “Life's not fair. And let's do everything we can to change that.”

The Problem of Injustice and Death¹

Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-22. This is not altogether a change of subject from what was said in 3:1-15, but the problem of injustice is too poignant to be left as a mere illustration of that theme.

Time and place are the two great coordinates of created life, and in v. 16 the focus moves from time to place. One would expect the law courts to be the *place* where justice finds its appropriate *time*, but the Teacher observes the opposite. And if there is no time for judgment, then the apparent order of creation is called into question. This problem is intensified by the issue of death, already discussed by the Teacher in 2:12–17. If death is just the end, then humans are no better than animals, and there never will be a time for judgment. The idea of God having a “time” for judgment (v. 17) indicates why the Teacher finds God's order for creation so problematic. The contrast of different responses continues in this section, which can be outlined as follows:

¹ Excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (176-78)

1. Statement of the problem (v. 16)
2. Confessional response—God has a time for judgment (v. 17)
3. Puzzling response to the problem (vv. 18–19)
4. Ignorance of what happens to humans after death (vv. 20–21)
5. “There is nothing better than” saying and a rhetorical question (v. 22)

Statement of the Problem: In v. 16, the Teacher introduces a problem he has observed that makes nonsense out of God’s order for creation. In Israel, the place of judgment was the administration of justice practiced by the elders in the city gates. The parallel term to “justice,” namely “righteousness,” intensifies the Teacher’s observation by reminding the reader what justice is all about: it is to punish evil and reward good and so maintain righteousness among God’s people. But the Teacher observes terrible corruption; instead of righteousness he finds injustice.

Confessional Response: Verse 17 picks up on the theme of time in 3:1–8 in a positive way and confesses that there will be a time for judgment that will resolve the problem of injustice.

Puzzling Response to the Problem: In short order, however, verses 18–19 are contrasted with v. 17 in a contradictory way. Both of these responses to injustice are what the Teacher meditated on in his heart, but they represent radically opposed responses to the problem. From his observation of life, the Teacher concludes that all is meaningless and God’s purpose in the injustice is to remind humans that they are only animals. Genesis 1-2 clearly teach that humans are different from animals in that they are made in the image of God. But for the Teacher, the common observable fate of both animals and humans raises the question as to whether there is any difference between them: they all have the same spirit, and its destination is the same.

Ignorance of what happens to humans after death: The reality of death is brought into the Teacher’s reflection on injustice: humans die just like animals. All creatures—animals and the righteous and the wicked—go to the same place, and no one knows what happens after death, whether the spirits of humans ascend upward to God or not (v. 21). The problem for the Teacher is that, on the basis of observation (i.e., in the light of the Teacher’s limited knowledge) it is impossible to know what happens after death.

The Teacher shows that in the absence of hope, death gives way to despair. **Thankfully, however, Jesus has opened for us a better way. Jesus is God’s response to living east of Eden. Resurrection is God’s answer to death.** God does not intend for the creation to disappear into nothingness, including our bodies. God will raise our bodies from the dead that they might live in the renewed creation, the new heaven and new earth.

“There is nothing better than” and a rhetorical question: The Teacher’s awareness of human limitations leads to a (familiar) positive framing of the human task in creation, a recognition of the task that God has assigned humans. But this does not resolve the tension caused by the presence of injustice. How is the worker to enjoy life as his portion while being dragged unjustly into the corrupt courts of justice?

There are obvious gaps in the Teacher’s thinking, and the gaps are not filled at this point. The uncertainty with which the reader is left is enhanced by the rhetorical question. As with most of the rhetorical questions in Ecclesiastes, this one can be answered in two ways. Like vv. 20–21 it could enhance the sense of futility observed by the Teacher. Alternatively, it could imply that even this mystery is under God’s control.

The Problem of Oppression

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. The Teacher turns to another aspect of life that he observes, namely oppression. His observation of oppression extends his social critique of injustice in 3:16–22.

By the Teacher’s reasoning, there are two kinds of people in the world: the oppressed and their oppressors. And, of course, the oppressors have all the advantages. The power is all on their side, leaving their victims with nothing but tears. **We must understand that this is a conflict in which God takes sides.** God is not for injustice, but stands against it with all his power.

Oppression is a theme found throughout the OT, from the oppression of the Israelites under the Egyptians, to the prophetic voices critiquing oppression, to Israel’s experience of oppression in the exile. We see this again and again in the biblical prophets. Amos preached against people who ‘oppress the poor’ and ‘crush the needy’ (Amos 4:1). Ezekiel warned about the mistreatment of foreigners. Zechariah advocated for the protection of widows, orphans, travelers and the poor (Zech. 7:9-10).

Then as now, injustice and oppression were rampant, and here the Teacher merely describes the horror of what he has seen and moves to his conclusion. It is certain that the sort of phenomenon described by the Teacher is the abuse of economic and political power leading to terrible oppression of those on the margins. His reference to “all the acts of oppression” indicates that oppression was pervasive in the society of his time.

The world is a difficult place for many people — people who live without anyone to comfort them with the real prospect of change in their circumstances (see Psalm 23:4; 86:17, for the understanding of “comfort” not simply as empty words, but as carrying with it the promise of help and protection, and thus real comfort). They have been deprived even of the most modest means out of which to live their lives. In such a situation, the Teacher suggests, the dead are more fortunate than the living. More fortunate than both the dead and the living, however, are those who have never seen what the Teacher has seen because they have not yet been born. It is a miserable sight. They are blessed who have not yet looked on it.

REFLECTIONS & CONNECTIONS TO JESUS²

If the Teacher’s gloom strikes us as excessive at this point, we may need to ask whether our more cheerful outlook springs from hope and not complacency. While we, as Christians, see further ahead than he allowed himself to look, it is no reason to spare ourselves the realities of the present. We have to give the Teacher his due. He acknowledges the brokenness of life “under the sun” and admits that sometimes there are no easy answers. We must sit with him – and it would do us good to sit with him for a season rather than move on too quickly. We must hear his questions and consider them in the light of Christ.

What is Jesus’ response to the problem of injustice and oppression?

The central element of Jesus’ preaching and ministry is the “kingdom of God,” language that envisions a reordering of the world according to the justice and peace of God. In his inaugural sermon, Jesus identifies himself with the poor, imprisoned, and forgotten members of society and announces that his ministry will be especially directed to them. He will “bring good news to the poor,” “freedom to captives,” “recovery of sight to the blind,” and release to prisoners (Luke 4:18).

² Excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (186-88)

Jesus brings the kingdom of God to life through his table fellowship with those who have no place in the community. By taking his place at the table with the sinners and the sick, the lawbreakers and the poor, the wayward and the needy, Jesus shows that the kingdom of God begins when justice is shown to these neglected and forgotten ones. Those who will enter the kingdom of God are the ones who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the imprisoned, and comforted the ill (Matthew 25:31-46).

Certainly Jesus gives us wisdom in terms of knowing how to respond to oppression. It has been well stated that the Beatitudes in Matt. 5 are a picture of Christ, the king of the kingdom. He cultivates his character in his followers so that we too become those who hunger and thirst after righteousness—personal and social and global. We are to manifest a deep hunger for justice. Even as we share the good news of Christ, we need to give expression to it by doing what we can to undermine oppression.

As followers of Christ, how must we respond to injustice and oppression?

Disciples continue the ministry of Jesus. As instruments of the kingdom, they are a means by which God reigns in the world for peace, healing, and reconciliation. Disciples participate in the mission of Jesus to reverse the curse as the kingdom of God grows and fills the earth.

With this in mind—and remembering that Jesus himself taught us that our neighbor is whoever is in need of our help, even if it is our enemy (e.g., Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 10:25–37) — we must respond to the Teacher's graphic description of the world as it is, and to Jesus' advocacy of a different way, with some serious commitments.

1. **First, Scripture makes it clear that we begin by looking within ourselves to see what changes might need to be made.** Paul writes, *“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.”* (2 Cor 13:5). It's tempting to look around see everything wrong that everyone else is doing and point fingers and make accusations. But the first step for us must always be to look into our own lives, to look into our own hearts, and to make any changes that need to be made.

We must root out from our hearts all the destructive and sinful thoughts that lead us to pursue a selfish and individualistic path through life. Jesus specifically tells us not to set out on this road but to aim at servanthood (e.g., Mark 10:35–45). Another sin to root out of our hearts is the refusal to accept that all other human beings do indeed have a stake in the world, which leads to the turning of a blind eye to the reality that we have much more than others do — and that many of these “others” have indeed been deprived even of the most basic means to live their lives.

2. **Second, to become comforters, we must acknowledge the reality of oppression, seek to understand “the tears of the oppressed,” and weep with those who are weeping.** We must listen to their lament rather than judge or critique it. Comforters need a strong sense of inadequacy, humility and powerlessness. Comforters cannot fix it. They can only sit in it with the sufferer. They have no magic words, interpretations or explanations. We must listen and lament with them.

Lament, grief, and protest have their rightful place in hearts filled with the Spirit of God. Jesus himself lamented upon the cross, wept at the grave of a friend, and protested the unjust of economics at the temple. The presence of the Spirit gives us voice in such laments, griefs, and protests. It is because we are

filled with the Spirit and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit in our lives that we weep over oppression and injustice. We weep over the violence that fills the earth, including our schools and homes. It is because we are filled with the Spirit and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit in our lives that we protest the injustice in the world. We protest against evil in all its forms, including racial, economic, and gender injustice. We raise our voices in complaint, and we ask God to do something about the injustices that surround us.

3. **Finally, we must ask ourselves, “What do the oppressed lack?” and then do what we can to comfort them.** Comforters are the very thing the Teacher could not find. It’s not enough for us to say that we don’t do anything wrong. We must begin to say, ‘What can we do to make things right?’ There must come a commitment to do as much as we can to contribute to community and to alleviate the suffering of the world.

It is impossible to be a follower of Jesus and simply observe “the tears of the oppressed” who “have no comforter” (Eccl. 4:1), nor is it acceptable simply to offer empty words. There must also naturally be practical comfort in loving actions—such as caring for the widows and orphans, the immigrants and the poor—of which the whole Bible speaks. We must recognize the reality of oppression and sin in the world around us, and we should embody the good news of resurrection, reconciliation, and redemption.

Through the Incarnation of Christ, we were given an imperative not only to live as people of hope but to be active agents in bringing about that which is hoped for. This means that we must do all that we can to hasten the coming of new creation, resurrection, reconciliation, and redemption each time we find ourselves in the midst of oppression, brokenness, and sin.

DISCUSSION

1. Describe a time when you experienced or observed the absence of justice? How did you deal with this observation or experience? What did you learn from it?
2. When the Teacher says he saw “the tears of the oppressed,” who do we think he is referring to? Who might they be in our world? Who are their oppressors?
3. We might be able to call Jesus’s words in Luke 4:18 a “mission statement.” If we look at each of the elements of that statement (“good news to the poor,” “release to the captives,” etc.) what impression do we get of this mission? That is, what does Jesus seem to be saying he will do or is doing?
 - ➔ Who do we think fits into these categories of people (that is, “the poor,” “captives,” etc.) these days? What would “good news,” “release,” etc. mean for these people these days?
4. What sort of a community do we think the church is meant to be? Is it often indistinguishable from the world because it is silently indifferent to the prevailing culture of injustice and indifference? Is it difficult to see “the tears of the oppressed”? To listen and understand? To become a comforter and take action?
 - ➔ How is Jesus’s mission related to the mission of the church today? Is the church intended to penetrate the world like salt and light, and so to change it? If so, what does this mean in terms of both our identity and our actions? What makes us say this?
 - ➔ Overall, we should consider what it means to us that Jesus fulfills the prophetic text of Isaiah 61:1-2, what it means for Christians that Jesus articulated this as his mission, and what this mission might look like concretely in our own time.