

“Give Me Justice!” (Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3)

On June 17, 1966, two men strode into the Lafayette Grill in Paterson, NJ and shot three people to death. Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter, a celebrated boxer, and an acquaintance, were falsely charged and wrongly convicted of the murders in a highly publicized and racially charged trial. The fiercely outspoken boxer maintained his claim of innocence and became his own jailhouse lawyer. After serving nineteen years, Carter was released. Nevertheless, Carter lost the most productive years of his life, between the ages of twenty-nine and fifty. He was deprived of his career, his wife, and seeing his children grow up.¹

This real-life account makes me angry. I hate injustice. I hate knowing that innocent men and women will go to prison. I hate knowing that 85% of convicted murderers will be released. I hate knowing that children are being forced into prostitution and slavery. I hate abortion. I hate knowing that women are being physically and verbally abused. I hate racism. I hate age discrimination. I hate death. Yet, tragically, our world is full of those things that you and I hate. Therefore, we need to talk about the unpopular topics of death, injustice, hopelessness, and judgment because they stare us in the face every day of our lives.

In Eccl 3:16-4:3,² Solomon cries out for justice, yet his cry seems to fall on deaf ears. Therefore, he concludes *life is harsh and then you die*. Now you may be thinking, “Oh, great, another encouraging sermon from Pastor Bah Humbug! Maybe I should stop reading before I collapse in depression and pessimism.” I freely acknowledge that no pastor in his right mind would choose to preach this text. Yet, in this passage I actually find meaning and motivation to live life. In these ten verses, Solomon shares two important observations (cf. 1:3) with us that will help us to cope with injustice and oppression.

1. Injustice should move us to humility (3:16-22). In these seven verses, Solomon tells us that life’s injustices should break us and then shape us so that we are humble before God and others.³ In 3:16 he writes, **“Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.”** The word “furthermore” connects this passage with 3:1-15, where Solomon stated that God’s timing is everything. “Furthermore” also marks a change in emphasis, for now Solomon is going to air a few grievances. Solomon’s observations are rather discouraging. He declares that life “under the sun” is filled with “wickedness.” The “place of justice” refers to the law courts.⁴ However, there Solomon sees injustice and oppression where the rights of the poor ought to be protected. Instead, the innocent are declared guilty and the guilty innocent. This is an application of Murphy’s Law: Although we may long for justice and righteousness, we inevitably end up with wickedness instead.

This hard truth is important for us to come to grips with. Sometimes bad guys win and good guys suffer. Johnny Christian doesn’t always score the touchdown and Paul Pagan doesn’t always fumble the ball. That’s a fact. Do you have a problem with that? Would you rather have a “perfect” universe? Wouldn’t it be great if, after a driver ran you off the road, his car would break down five minutes later? Or if someone cheated you in business, he would go bankrupt the next month? Or if someone got angry and yelled at you, her teeth would fall out that night? Wouldn’t that be wonderful? It certainly would be from a fleshly perspective, but unfortunately you’d have to live in that same “perfect” universe. So if you gossiped about someone, your tongue would turn green. Every time you lusted after another person, more of your hair would fall out. Every time you spent money on something you didn’t need to, the food in your refrigerator would rot overnight. Would you want to live in a world like that? None of us want that kind of instant justice from God. Yet, God’s patience with sin is an incredible blessing. If God was not so patient all of us would come under His immediate judgment.⁵ We would be wiped out in the blink of an eye. Fortunately, God grants us His mercy and grace. This should lead us to want to be more merciful and gracious with others, to have compassion for those who are in the grips of sin and under the influence of the curse. If these reminders don’t work, then remind yourself that *life is harsh and then you die*.

While wickedness seems to have run the score up on righteousness 105-0, ultimately, God gets His due because He is in control of the affairs of men. In 3:17 Solomon writes, **“I said to myself, ‘God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,’ for a time for every matter and for every deed is there”** (The word “there” is shorthand for God’s eternal judgment.⁶) Solomon informs us that God will judge. Sometimes He judges people in this life; sometimes He does not. But payday is coming someday! Wrong will not go unpunished, and right will not go unrewarded, forever. In the end, Jesus Christ will judge all people. Psalm 37:12-13 tells us, “The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He knows their day is coming” (NIV). God gets the last laugh. While we may not see it in time, justice will be carried out in eternity.

Unfortunately, that is not always very satisfying. We hate it when someone “gets away with it.” Solomon tells us that in truth, nobody gets away with it. Paul Harvey illustrated this point when he told about a man named Gary Tindle who was charged with robbery. While standing in the California courtroom of Judge Armando Rodriguez, Tindle asked permission to go to the bathroom. He was escorted upstairs to the bathroom and the door was guarded while he was inside. But Tindle, determined to escape, climbed up the plumbing, opened a panel on the ceiling, and started slithering through the crawl space, heading south. He had traveled some thirty feet when the ceiling panels broke under him, and he dropped to the floor—right back in Judge Rodriguez’s courtroom! When the guilty seem to have escaped judgment, it’s only for a short moment and a short crawl. They will find themselves before the Judge once again in time. Sooner or later, the wheels of God righteousness will right every wrong, balance every scale, and correct every injustice in the world.⁷

Turning his eyes back toward earth, Solomon imparts a principle: Injustice reminds us that we are mortal. In 3:18-20 he writes, **“I said to myself concerning the sons of men, ‘God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.’ For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust.”** As you can imagine, these verses have been used to support the evolutionary theory. While some of us may think, look, and act like monkeys, that is not the point of these verses. Solomon is not making a blanket comparison between humans and animals. He is merely saying that we both die.⁸ A better translation of the word “tested” is “make clear.”⁹ The point is that God allows human injustice to exist in the world in order to make it clear to us that we are just like animals in the sense that we are going to die. *Life is harsh and then you die.*

When I was growing up, I had a soft spot for animals. My whole family has always loved animals. In fact, the year I was born, my dad was voted the best amateur nature photographer in the world.¹⁰ Consequently, I could never get myself to hunt and kill any animal. Now, don’t get me wrong or call me late for dinner; I am glad to eat the meat of hunters, I just don’t want to be the one to pull the trigger. Believe it or not, while I was growing up I also had a soft spot for insects. I found it hard to kill bugs with my bare hands and feet, so I just sucked them up with our vacuum cleaner. I recognize that I am walking contradiction: I am particularly fond of football, boxing, and mixed marital arts, yet I don’t want to kill any insects. Go figure! But I will tell you this: Today, whenever I accidentally squish an insect, I can’t help but think that my life is every bit as fragile. *Life is harsh and then you die.*

In 3:21 Solomon postulates, **“Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?”** Solomon here considers this question empirically, with only his senses and his three-pound brain to guide him. And with the brute facts before him and us, we can’t prove a thing. At best, it is a guess. If we are only to consider what we can see, taste, touch, hear, and smell, your guess is as good as mine. From Solomon’s perspective, maybe all dogs do go to heaven and all people go to be meat on a shishkabob. Who knows? Everyone has their own guess when left to their own finite brains.¹¹

The point of 3:21 is this: Most of us behave as though we had endless time and close our eyes to the fact of death. God wants us to face that fact (3:18). Even in our Christian service of God there may be the underlying idea that there is still plenty of time tomorrow, and what we fail to do here can be made up in our service in paradise. So Solomon challenges those who live as though they are immortal and are never to be accountable to God (3:16-17).¹²

So “who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?” Who can know the truth about the resurrection? The answer is “No one can!” No one can “under heaven” or “under the sun.” So who knows? GOD KNOWS...So the question then becomes: do you know the one who knows? Today, the God of heaven and earth offers you a relationship with Himself through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. If you desire such a relationship, trust in Christ as your Savior from sin.

Just to summarize: You may be successful, powerful, wealthy, talented, and personable, and when all is said and done, you’re going to die just like Bootsie the dog or Gilbert the hamster—whatever pet your kids talked you into that you currently regret. Okay, so who cares what you do, because in the end there’s no difference between you and the animal. You both die. Remember, *life is harsh and then you die*.

Fortunately, in the closing verse of chapter 3, Solomon encourages us to enjoy life in spite of the world’s injustice. He observes, **“I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him [his death]?”** (3:22) I love this verse. I’ve checked the Hebrew word “happy” in several lexicons. I’ve considered its Aramaic cognate and I’ve discovered that “happy” literally means “happy.” God wants us to be happy in the midst of this miserable life. The word “lot” or “portion” conveys the sense of the limitations of life. The portion is like an inherited plot of land that one has to work. Toil is inevitable, it is part of the heritage of your portion, but from that very same lot you may find enjoyment.¹³ Your lot in life may be a small family, a small-fry job, and a small-time neighborhood, yet when you are gone there is no portion to enjoy. So you need to enjoy your life NOW, despite its injustices and trials.

In 2004, *The Nation* magazine profiled an Alabama woman who works as a nursing assistant at a nursing home for \$700 a month. She works the night shift, emptying bedpans, tending the bedridden, mopping floors, and doing other tasks beyond her job description because the place is understaffed. She can’t afford a car, so she pays someone else to drive her thirteen miles to work. If that person doesn’t show up, she walks. Better to walk than to call in sick and probably lose her job, she says. She lives alone with her three children in a shack. There is no phone. The toilet is in the floor. The heater is broken. But she likes her work. She likes to make the residents smile.¹⁴

This story convicts me. It breaks me and humbles me to dust! It motivates me to ensure that I enjoy my life. After all, I have nothing to complain about.

- What is your unjust disadvantage? Don’t answer with a list of petty irritations, but think in terms of major handicaps in your life that you feel have been inflicted upon you unfairly.
- When do you plan to replace passive self-pity with active courage? If you have not already begun to turn from a destructive, woe-is-me attitude, to a constructive, enjoy-life now posture, then start today. The Lord will give you the power to make the change, but you must avail yourself of it through prayer and action.
- Have you ever considered the impact your distinctive message could have on the world around you? The Lord can use your disadvantage—be it physical, emotional, mental, financial, or anything else—to positively impact the lives of others. The only thing that stands in the way is your attitude. Will you change it today?¹⁵

[Solomon has informed us that injustice should move us to humility. Now, in 4:1-3, he gives us another one of his favorite buckets of cold water...oppression.]

2. Oppression should move us to action (4:1-3). Men and women are oppressed in every area of life: business, marriage, family, relationships, and church. Wherever there is power, there is the potential and likelihood that it will be abused. In 4:1-3 Solomon observes, **“Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.”** These three verses are depressing. Nevertheless, we must recognize that Solomon is using hyperbole (i.e., a deliberate exaggeration) to shake us to the core of our being. He uses forms of the word “oppressed” three times in three verses. He is deeply grieved by what he observes. This is the reason for his extreme language. These verses are not a call to suicide or abortion. They are simply the journal of a man expressing pain and devastation over all of the oppression in the world. *Life is harsh and then you die.* These words reverberate through my mind and soul.

Many of us as Americans have no idea of what it really means to be oppressed. We can be sure though, that in other parts of the world many know all too well what Solomon is talking about. Nowhere is heartbreaking oppression more evident than in the communist nation of North Korea. An estimated 100,000 Christians are being imprisoned and tortured at the hands of the ruthless Kim Jung II.¹⁶ There are 400,000 Christians in North Korea and one out of four are in prison camps. This is brutal!

This past Monday, we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Lori and I spent some time explaining to our kids who Dr. King was and why he was murdered. After sharing his life with our children, I was filled with frustration over the unrighteousness of mankind. To think that Americans have oppressed people over skin color is one of the most asinine things I have ever heard. It is an atrocity! What is worse is that many Christians were and are guilty of prejudicial behavior. In the late 1960s, some Bible colleges and seminaries would not allow African-Americans to attend their schools. Today, various African-Americans are some of the greatest preachers on this planet.

Not only is there persecution and racism, there is also poverty. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* catalogs six categories of the poor in the Old Testament and counts the number of references for each:

- Peasant farmers, mentioned forty-eight times
- Beggars, mentioned sixty-one times
- The “lazy poor,” cited thirteen times, mostly in the book of Proverbs
- Low-income laborers, mentioned twenty-two times
- The politically exploited and oppressed, mentioned eighty times, the most in the Old Testament.¹⁷

In our country, 35% of individuals make less than \$25,000. This is also true for 28% of households.¹⁸ Many people work for a low wage and no benefits. And many of these people aren't lazy. They are just working jobs that do not pay well. They may also have recovered from some difficult circumstances along the way. There are many recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, prisoners, abuse victims, etc. Many of these people are trying to start over; however, it is not an easy road.

The above realities can prove to be overwhelming. Our temptation is to say, “Where do we even start?” It seems like we can't make a dent into these oppressive problems. Indeed, it certainly does seem that way, doesn't it? Even so, we are not responsible to do away with all the oppression of the world—only God can do that. We are merely responsible to do our little part.

One of my favorite cartoons shows two turtles in the midst of a conversation. One says, “Sometimes I’d like to ask God why He allows poverty, famine, and injustice when He could do something about it.” The other turtle says, “I’m afraid God might ask me the same question.”¹⁹

Ten years ago, a friend of mine and a former Green Beret gave me his beret pin, which in Latin reads: *De Oppresso Liber*. This phrase means, “To free the oppressed.” Since he gave me this pin, I have kept it in my office to the left of my computer. I want to be reminded of the responsibility I bear.

Yes, we live in a world of injustice and oppression. Maybe you have been a victim of some form of abuse. Perhaps you were raped, molested, or fired from your job. Some of the greatest movements have come from those who were cheated or treated unfairly. Candy Lightner founded *MADD* in 1980 after her daughter, Cari, was killed by a repeat drunk driving offender. Cindy Lamb whose daughter, Laura, became the nation’s youngest quadriplegic at the hands of a drunk driver soon joined Candy in her crusade to save lives. Consequently, thousands of lives have been saved.²⁰ John Walsh and his wife, Revé, suffered the most horrendous loss that any parents could endure: the abduction and murder of their beautiful six-year-old son, Adam. Since that day in 1981, the founder of *Americas Most Wanted* has dedicated himself to fighting on behalf of children and all crime victims. As a result, thousands of victims have found justice, and dozens of abducted children have been safely brought home.²¹

You can make a difference in at least one person’s life. You can have a testimony, a ministry, an influence, and an impact. One of our church’s mission strategies is to “lead the world.” We do that by loving one lost person at a time toward Christ. Will you allow the injustices of this world to move you to action? Will you say, “Enough is enough! I want to make a difference in one person’s life?”

In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the young child anointed as the last emperor of China lives a life of luxury with 1,000 servants at his command. “What happens when you do wrong?” his brother asks. “When I do wrong, someone else is punished,” the boy emperor replies. To demonstrate, he breaks a jar, and one of the servants is beaten. In Christianity, Jesus reversed that ancient pattern: when the servants erred, the King was punished.²²

Do you realize that the most oppressed and unjustly persecuted person that has ever lived is Jesus Christ? Yet, through His death, He has provided for us eternal life. It is a free gift and it is yours for the taking. Believe in Christ today as your only way to heaven. He was oppressed for you; He suffered unjustly for you. Do not let His death be in vain for you.

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Scripture References

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

Genesis 23

Exodus 23:1-9

Obadiah 10-15

John 5:19-30

Hebrews 11:13-16

Revelation 7:9-17

Study Questions

1. When have I most recently seen a travesty of justice (3:16)? How did I deal with this observation or experience? When others face injustice how do I provide comfort? When I have been asked to explain the reasons for injustice, how do I respond?
2. What role(s) does God's judgment play in injustice and wickedness (3:17)? Read 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:11-15. How does God's judgment comfort or encourage me?
3. How do the injustices of life remind me of my own human limitations and frailties (3:18-21)? What effect does this have on my present life?
4. How have I sought to be continually "happy" in my various activities (3:22)? What is my attitude regarding my marriage, family, job, and church? How does my attitude affect my contentment and enjoyment of life?
5. When have I been oppressed (4:1-3)? How have I observed others being oppressed, either directly or indirectly? How have I responded when I have seen others oppressed?

Notes

- ¹ James S. Hirsch, *Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 310.
- ² This precise passage breakdown is adopted by R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 222-223.
- ³ Solomon returns to the theme of injustice in Eccl 5:8f.; 8:10-15; 9:13-16; 10:5-7; 10:16f.
- ⁴ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 125.
- ⁵ Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 61.
- ⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1993). See also the NET: "I thought to myself, 'God will judge both the righteous and the wicked; for there is an appropriate time for every activity, and there is a time of judgment for every deed.'" See also Ps 14:5; Zeph 1:14.
- ⁷ David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 76.
- ⁸ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 127.
- ⁹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament; Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 85-86. See also the NET: "I also thought to myself, 'It is for the sake of people, so God can clearly show them that they are like animals.'"
- ¹⁰ The PSA (Photographic Society of America) awarded my dad, Richard Krell, for having the most pictures accepted for exhibition in international nature exhibitions throughout the world.
- ¹¹ David Fairchild, "Justice Departed" (Eccl 3:16-4:3).
- ¹² J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *Psalms-Song of Songs* vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), Electronic ed.
- ¹³ Choon Leon Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 176.
- ¹⁴ Ray Waddle, *Against The Grain: Unconventional Wisdom From Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2005). 65.
- ¹⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality*, Bible Study Guide (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1986), 35.
- ¹⁶ Open Doors, "North Korean Christians Being Tortured by the Thousands," 24 January 2008.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Waddle, *Against The Grain*, 64.
- ¹⁸ "Household Income in the United States": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Household_income_in_the_United_States.
- ¹⁹ Peter John Kreeft quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 50.
- ²⁰ "The History of MADD": <http://www.madd.org/About-us/About-us/History.aspx>.
- ²¹ "About John Walsh": http://www.amw.com/about_amw/john_walsh.cfm.
- ²² Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997),