

The Fog of Life and the Plan of God

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

For the last several weeks we have been on a journey through the book of Ecclesiastes, following the Preacher (probably Solomon) as he takes an honest and penetrating look at what he calls life “under the sun”—life as you and I see and experience it day to day. In other words, he is exploring whether there is any lasting gain and significance in what we can see, know, and experience strictly in the human realm, under the sun, under heaven, setting aside for the moment any difference that heaven and God might make in the equation. And the reason he’s doing this is to show us the fleeing and fruitless reality of all that we see and do day to day—that if you remove God from the picture, all you have left is vapor, smoke, what our Bibles translate as “vanity” or “meaningless” throughout the book.

And so the first half of the book consists in several research projects to genuinely test whether lasting gain can be found. We’ve watched him explore human activity and achievement, along with human wisdom in chs. 1-2. And last week we ventured into his second research project in ch. 3—time and eternity. And if you were here (or if you’ve gone back to listen to it on the website), you’ll remember that as we looked at the famous poem there (‘a time for this, a time for that’), contrary to what we might have expected, we didn’t find the same ominous and even depressing tone that we found in much of the first research project, but rather a confident affirmation that God is working out his sovereign purposes in our lives in a beautiful yet mysterious way. All of time and history have been carefully orchestrated by God, and though we can’t see the full extent of what he’s doing, we can see enough to know that his plan is beautiful. So even though we reminded that we’re not in control, that we don’t call the shots in life, we can fear and respect and trust the God who is, and therefore rejoice in the work of our hands during whatever time he gives us here, knowing that he’s working out his good and beautiful purposes. God has made everything *beautiful, fitting, appropriate* in its time.

But, as the study continues and we get into vv. 16-22, we run into something that does not look very beautiful in its time—the harsh reality of injustice and wickedness in the earth. How do time, eternity, and God’s sovereign plan play into that? That’s the question our passage raises this morning. What we’re going to see is that though life is clouded by injustice and death, we can trust God our Judge to make all things right.

The desire for justice is a relatively basic feature of humanity. And by “justice” we mean doing what is right, and making right what is wrong. Every nation crafts some sort system of order and law in order to maintain justice—whether it’s justice as defined by a dictator or despot, by a king, or by the people at large—*somebody’s* definition of justice is at play. Every major world religion has a concern for keeping justice, and often rules to guide. But we don’t need a political

or religious system to tell us that we should desire and expect justice; just step into the nursery downstairs. Inevitably you will hear out of some child's mouth the words, "that's not fair." We were born with a longing for justice.

One author describes, "We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently, where we not only know what we ought to do but actually do it. And then we wake up and come back to reality."¹ In our dream, the sky was clear, the sun was shining, life was as it should be. We open our eyes and look down the road and see that a dense fog has settled in—the kind that, when you turn your headlights on, instead of cutting through it, it only makes the fog look fuller and thicker. We're looking for justice, but instead we share the Preacher's observation in v. 16: "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."

The fog of life is daunting. I remembering traveling to visit family in Indiana one time, and having to inch our way down the highway at 30mph because the fog was so thick. We couldn't see taillights in front of us, headlights behind us. To make matters worse, it was deer season; we were just waiting to slam into Bambi. It's nerve wracking. And after a while, it's frustrating and discouraging. And that's when the path is clearly marked out. Life isn't always so obvious as the highway. We don't always find the road signs or mile markers we're looking for. But the fog can be just as thick. We flip on the high beams for a closer look and are startled by the impenetrable reality of what we see: a world that doesn't work the way it should, "a world in pain, a world out of joint, a world where things occur which we seem powerless to make right."²

We look for justice, but see the innocent convicted while the guilty go free. We see the powerful take advantage of others while the masses praise them. Those with enough money buy their way out of trouble, while the single mom works three jobs and comes within a few hundred dollars of paying off her car, only to have it repossessed. Nations languish in poverty and sickness while their governments feast in corruption. The student who cheated off your exams and assignments gets a scholarship to a state university, while you're hoping to save enough to afford community college.

And if we take this observation in light of the earlier parts of ch. 3 that we looked at last week, how all of this is somehow supposed to be part of God's plan, things become even cloudier. What do we do with the injustice we see? Is there anyway to peer through the fog and glimpse God's plan, and if so, what difference would it make?

Well what does Solomon tell us to do? Take a look at v. 22, his conclusion to this subject: "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?" We've heard that instruction before in this book—to rejoice in our work.

- We heard it at the end of ch. 2, vv. 24-25: "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

¹ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 3.

² Wright, 5.

- We heard it last week in 3:12-13: “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil- this is God's gift to man.”

And lest we're tempted to think that Solomon is talking about putting a good face on our misery, or living it up since we're going to die soon anyway, we need to recognize the *source* of the joy he's commending to us—it comes from God himself. It's “from the hand of God,” “God's gift to man,” our “lot” or “portion.” This is real and lasting joy. The Preacher commends us to take joy in our work, even amid the fog of injustice. How can he say that? How do we make sense of this? How does one get from v. 16 and the pain of living in a broken world to v. 22 and rejoicing in the work of our hands, while still living in a broken world?

Some of us have stared into the fog so long that we're quite convinced that any attempt to move forward or beyond it is just silly. “This is just how life is; get used to, keep the status quo, turn a blind eye to wrongs, find a way to cope, and it will all be over before we know it.” Others share that sense of hopelessness, but their hearts give way to despair, frustration, and anger, which is especially easy when you're the victim of the injustice committed by someone else.

But then there are those who press forward into the fog in effort to dispel it. They are not content to watch the AIDS virus continue to cripple African countries, to stand back while immigrants are paid unfairly, to be silent in the face of the worst human trafficking epidemic this world has ever known. According to one study, 90% of young people born in the U.S. between 1980 and 2000, believe “it is their responsibility to make a difference in the world.”³

This spirit is to be commended. I'm excited to see what might happen with a generation of people who are not content to watch human suffering continue. In fact, in the last twenty years the Church has seen a huge reemphasis on not just proclaiming the *message* of the gospel, but getting involved in the tangible needs of a hurting humanity, what we sometimes refer to as “social *justice*.” This is exciting. It's *biblical*—the Bible calls it “loving your neighbor.” But whereas Ecclesiastes by no means speak against this, it does offer a serious qualification: if this is all we have, if we're left merely to our own resolve, ingenuity, and effort to fight injustice, then we will find ourselves frustrated and defeated at the end of the day. And injustice will continue to win.

So what is it that takes us from v. 16 to v. 22? Solomon does not tell us to give up, nor to reach down deep inside of yourself in the face of injustice. Instead he tells us to *look up*, *look down*, and *look ahead*, in order to press forward.

First Solomon tells us to look up, and see God our judge, who will be faithful to establish justice and make all things right in the end. This is his first reflection, v. 17: “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.” We need to remember that injustice is not just a horizontal phenomenon—humans hurting one another. This is God's creation, we are God's creatures, and so our actions affect our relationship with him as well. Any offense against finite humans is at the same time an offense against an infinite God, and therefore it's an infinitely wicked offense. God will not allow that to stand. He

³ Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 36-37.

cannot; his righteous character bids him to act. God must judge sin; otherwise he is an unjust God. He will be faithful to deal with injustice by condemning the wicked and vindicating the righteous or innocent.

And notice how the last part of that verse echoes v. 1: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” So if we were to add a line to the famous poem, it might read, “a time for injustice, and a time for God to call the wicked to account.” Rather than seeing a disconnect between God’s sovereign plan and the rampant injustice of this world (as we’re tempted to see), it’s God’s sovereign plan to judge wickedness that makes justice possible, and thus enables Solomon to enjoy his work amid the corruption of this world—knowing that God will make all things right.

So first, we need to look up to see God our Judge, who will be faithful to judge injustice and acquit the innocent in his time. But that raises an obvious question: who are the innocent? According to Ecclesiastes 7:20, no one: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” And so after we look up to God, we must also look down into the grave and realize our own mortality, which is a result of human rebellion.

Solomon’s second reflection comes in vv. 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

There are several things we need to understand from these verses. First he’s offering at least one explanation for why God, amid his sovereign plan, allows injustice to happen: to remind us that *we are not God*. We are not the Creator. We are creatures, right along side the animals, and therefore we need him. We are *humans*, made in God’s image, unlike the animals in many ways. But when it comes to our ability to deal with injustice, to do what is right and make right what is wrong in this world, we find ourselves insufficient, because we are not God, and we bear the same limitation as the beasts: *death*.

That’s his second point, not merely that we’re creatures, but that we are creatures living under a death sentence. And our looming death makes us little different from mere animals. Note the comparison in vv. 19-21: Our lives conclude the same way as beasts, in death. We have the same dependence upon breath, the same fleeting existence (vapor or vanity)—there is no advantage or *gain* for humans in this regard. We have the same physical destination—dust. And listen to the echo here of Genesis 3:19, reminding us of the message of that chapter, that it is human sin and rebellion against God that stands behind our impending death: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; *for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” We’re not just incapable of establishing justice; we are part of the problem. And finally, v. 21, like the animals our spirit or life is ultimately mysterious to us.

Now several English translations make this verse far more confusing than it is. The Hebrew does not read, “who knows *whether* the spirit of man goes upward . . .” The word “whether” is not there. The New King James captures this better: “Who knows the spirit of the sons of men,

which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?” The question here is not about the direction or destination of human and animal spirits. Solomon says clearly of humans in Ecclesiastes 12:7, “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” The question is rather “Who has intimate knowledge of those spirits?” and the answer is “Not you, but God.”

So to press forward through the fog of injustice and brokenness in this world, we need to look up to see God our Judge, and look down to see our own humanness and mortality before him. But where does that leave us? That’s not a very joyful prospect. So we also need to look ahead to the cross.

God is a holy judge, and therefore he must punish sin and rebellion. As we’ve seen, if he doesn’t do it, justice will never come. But he does so in one of two ways—either in the end, pouring his anger on all who continue to rebel against his rightful rule and reject him as king, or in the cross, where he poured his holy anger against our sin on his Son, Jesus, who willingly and graciously took it in the place of all who believe.

We need more than justice to put this world back together. We need mercy. We need both. And the only way that sinful, rebellious, unjust humans like you and me and everyone else can have both, is through the cross of Christ. This, again, was the centerpiece of God’s plan for all time and history.

In the cross, God’s justice was upheld as sin was punished in his Son—not his, but ours. From the cross, mercy flowed to rebellious humans, whom he declares righteous, innocent, not guilty, through faith in Jesus Christ, who took their sin in their place. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and by his Spirit, God forgives our sin, adopts us into his family, takes us as our own, if we believe and surrender our lives to him. True justice, lasting justice, for a world that needs both justice and mercy, is only available through the cross. As Tom Wright says, “The Christian faith endorses the passion for justice which every human being knows, the longing to see things put to rights. And it claims that in Jesus, God himself has shared this passion and put it into effect, so that in the end all tears may be dried and the world may be filled with justice and joy.”⁴

The way forward is not to give up, nor to look deep down inside yourself, but to look up to God our Judge, to look down at our own sin and mortality, and to look ahead (or from our vantage point today, backward) to the cross of Christ. That’s what frees us to press forward into the fog of injustice and life in a fallen world and serve God joyfully with hope. And we do so by preaching the gospel of Jesus and loving our neighbors, while entrusting the results to his sovereign plan.

Part of our limitation as human sinners is that we can’t see what will come of our effort. That’s what the end of v. 22 is talking about: “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?*” Apart from God and the gospel, our efforts to resist and address injustice are vapor—fleeting and fruitless. And sometimes, even when we are trusting God, nothing seems to happen. But recognizing that our work may not accomplish much and that justice is ultimately in God’s hands, doesn’t mean that we don’t work hard to give our lives away, or that there is never a time

⁴ Wright, 12.

to pursue justice. It just means that we can't depend on ourselves to make a difference. We have to depend on God, which means preaching the gospel, loving our neighbors, and entrusting the results to his sovereign plan.

Apart from the saving work of Christ there can be no *lasting* transformation, no *eternal* good done. We must preach the gospel—the message of Christ. Duane Litfin writes, “as water is relevant to thirst, as food is relevant to hunger, as medicine is relevant to sickness, so this verbal message—the truth that in Christ ‘God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them’ (2 Cor. 5:19)—is relevant to the deepest and most profound need of every human heart. May we never lose heart in giving word to it.”⁵ So we must preach the gospel. But this very gospel reminds us that we are ambassadors of God's new creation, and so we must also live in the hope of that coming peace and justice, and lovingly serve our neighbors as representatives of King Jesus, fighting against poverty, defending the defenseless, standing in the gap for widows, orphans, for the unborn, working against the discrimination of ethnic minorities, and so on.

Tom Wright gives a compelling illustration:

When the slave trade was at its height, with many people justifying it on the grounds that slaves are mentioned in the Bible, it was a group of devout Christians, led by the unforgettable William Wilberforce in Britain and John Woolman in America, who got together and made it their life's business to stop it. When, with slavery long dead and buried, racial prejudice still haunted the United States, it was the Christian vision of Martin Luther King Jr. that drove him to peaceful, but highly effective, protest. Wilberforce was grasped by a passion for God's justice on behalf of the slaves, a passion which cost him what might otherwise have been a dazzling political career. Martin Luther King's passion for justice for African Americans cost him his life. Their tireless campaigning grew directly and explicitly out of their loyalty to Jesus.⁶

Think about the gravity of what God did through Wilberforce and King. What might he do today, through us, through our young people and their passion for justice, if we take the gospel of Jesus seriously? And whatever he does now, in part, by his grace, he will be faithful to accomplish in whole when Christ returns in the end, when the fog lifts once and for all, and morning dawns in the light of God's glorious presence.

Though life is clouded by injustice and death, we can trust God our Judge to make all things right in the end. And so in the meantime we can serve God joyfully in all we do, working to see some things made right here and now by preaching the gospel and loving our neighbors.

⁵ Duane Litfin, “Works and Words: Why You Can't Preach the Gospel with Deeds,” *Christianity Today*, May 30, 2012. Available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/may/litfin-gospel-deeds.html>.

⁶ Wright, 13-14.