

Living a Meaningful Life

Trusting God in an Unjust World

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

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Scripture

We like stories with happy endings. Whether the story is in a book or movie or even in real life, we like stories with happy endings.

Sometimes, however, stories don't have happy endings. Sometimes stories have sad endings. And although we prefer stories with happy endings to stories with sad endings, we understand that life and its stories don't always have happy endings.

But sometimes stories have unjust endings. Those are the stories that we don't like—especially if we are the recipient of the injustice. We don't like living in a world of injustice, but because we live in a fallen world, we know that some stories have unjust endings.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3:

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. 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. 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. 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? 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?

⁴ 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. ² And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3)

Introduction

In 1947, Simon Wiesenthal formed a volunteer organization to help find and prosecute Nazi war criminals. During the next forty years, Wiesenthal's organization helped track down more than one thousand war criminals, including Franz Stangl, the former commandant of the Treblinka death camp.

What was Wiesenthal's motivation? He had plenty of good reasons. During World War II, he spent the last three years of the war in a series of labor and concentration camps. The Nazis killed 89 members of his and his wife's Jewish families during the war. But when asked the reason for his work, he pointed to one concrete experience that happened in a World War II death camp.

One day two Nazi officers rode to the site where the prisoners were excavating rock. One of them grabbed a Jewish man and made him stand back to back with another Jewish man. He had a guard bind the two men together with a rope. Then, just as calmly as if he were swatting a fly, he pulled out his gun and shot through the first man's head into the head of the man behind him, killing both men with one bullet. He turned to the other officer and said to him, "See, I told we've been wasting 50 percent of our bullets."

Simon Wiesenthal's responded to this atrocious act by saying, "God was on leave."¹ He wondered where God was when the world was filled with injustice.

I doubt that any one of you has ever gone through anything as appalling as what Wiesenthal went through. However, you may

¹ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 59-60.

have experienced injustice in your life. For example, you may have been involved in an accident that wasn't your fault, and yet someone testified falsely that the accident was in fact your fault, and you have to pay the damages. Or perhaps you turned in a test, and the teacher accused you of cheating because your answers were exactly the same as another student's answers. Or perhaps you gave a large sum of money to someone to invest with the assurance of a significant return on your investment, only to discover that you have been defrauded of your life's savings. Or perhaps your coworker made unwanted sexual advances towards you, and when you told your superiors, you—and not your coworker—got fired.

I think it is probably fair to say that everyone of us has experienced some form of injustice in this life. To be sure, some of the injustice we experience is relatively minor and the consequences are also relatively minor. But, some of the injustice we experience is significant and even horrific, and the consequences are devastating and life altering.

At those times we ask, “How can I trust God when the world is filled with injustice?”

That is the question that the Preacher grapples with in our text for today. The Preacher wants to know how to live a meaningful life. And in his quest to find the answer to living a meaningful life, he also asks the question, “How can I trust God when the world is filled with injustice?”

Review

The Preacher opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11).

His theme is simple: *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”² It

² James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher's theme is that everything in life is meaningless. However, the Preacher does give a corrective. He says that everything in life is meaningless *apart from God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don't live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

The Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless apart from God. He explored wisdom (1:12-18), pleasure (2:1-11), wise living (2:12-17), and toil (2:18-26). And in each of these areas he discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything.

In his continuing quest to find out how to live a meaningful life, the Preacher turned his attention to time (3:1-15). He learned that God is sovereign over every area of life.

But in saying that, it is possible that someone might wonder about life's injustices. Someone may wonder, "How can I trust God when the world is filled with injustice?"

Lesson

In today's lesson we learn that we can trust God even though the world is filled with injustice. Today we will examine two forms of injustice.

I. The First Form of Injustice Is Wickedness (3:16-22)

The first form of injustice is wickedness.

A. *Observation of Wickedness (3:16)*

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:16: **"Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wick-**

edness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.”

The Preacher observed **wickedness**. Sometimes the bad guys win and the good guys lose. Chris Christian doesn't always score the touchdown, and Paul Pagan doesn't always fumble the football. That is just how life is.

Now doesn't that bother you? Wouldn't you like to live in a “perfect” world? Wouldn't you like to live in a world where there is perfect justice and righteousness all the time?

Pastor Tommy Nelson explores this idea a little. He says:

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 next month? Or if someone got angry and yelled at you, her teeth would fall out that night? Wouldn't that be wonderful?

We smile when we hear that, but because we ourselves are sinful, Tommy Nelson wisely continues:

But unfortunately you'd have to live in the same universe. So if you gossiped about someone, your tongue would turn green. Every time you lusted or envied another person, more of your hair would fall out. Every time you spent money on something you didn't need, the food in your refrigerator would rot overnight.³

So, would you want to live in a world like that?
Probably not. But we do want justice, don't we?

B. Declaration of Judgment (3:17)

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:17: **“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.”**

³ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 61.

Clearly God does not judge instantaneously. But there will be **a time** when God will judge wickedness. God will set all things right in the future.

The question is not, “Why does God not punish evil?” but, “Why does God not punish evil *now*?”

I remember listening to a sermon by Pastor Al Martin many years ago in which he addressed this question. The Bible is clear that there will be a final judgment at the end of time. But, there is a prior judgment at the point of a person’s death. When a person dies, there is a judgment. Basically, at that judgment people are judged as to whether or not they have saving faith. If a person has saving faith, he is judged to be a Christian and goes to heaven. If a person does not have saving faith, he is judged not to be a Christian and goes to hell. And that is where all deceased people stay until the Lord Jesus returns for the final judgment. At that judgment all people are judged. Believers will be judged and given the degree of their rewards. Unbelievers will be judged and given the degree of their punishments. Now, the reason God waits until all history is wrapped up in order to meet out rewards and punishments is because the consequences of our actions follow long after us—even after our death.

I can still remember Al Martin using Adolph Hitler as an example. Adolph Hitler committed unspeakable acts of atrocity during World War II. And of course he will be severely punished for his wickedness. However, the consequences of his wicked actions continued long after his death—and Adolph Hitler bears some responsibility for those as well. I will never forget visiting the Holocaust Museum in Israel in 1983, thirty-eight years after the end of World War II. When I finished my tour of the museum I was struck by the people who were in tears. As I talked to a few of them, I learned that they had lost loved ones during the Holocaust. Some of them were still extremely bitter towards Hitler. And so God will one day bring Hitler to the final judgment where he will have to answer for all his actions—as well as the consequences of his actions that have continued long after his death.

So, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. And that time of judgment will be the final judgment.

C. Reflections on Judgment (3:18-21)

At this point the Preacher offered some further reflections on judgment.

The first reflection is that death is God's sure sign that people are different than God. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:18: **"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."** God wants us to know that we are mortal creatures. We are like **"beasts"** in that we die, whereas God does not die.

The second reflection is that the fate of people and animals is the same. This is true at least with respect to our physical natures. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:19-20: **"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."** People and animals die. Their breath leaves them, they die, and their bodies decay and become dust.

The third reflection is the Preacher's uncertainty about life after death. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:21: **"Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"** The Preacher simply did not know what happened after a person (or an animal) died. Was there life after death? Of course, we know the answer. There is life after death. But, the reason we know that is because we have the full and complete revelation of God. In the Old Testament there was not a very clear understanding of life after death. It is only when we get to Jesus in the New Testament that we get a full and clear picture of life after death, heaven, hell, and so on.

D. *Conclusion (3:22)*

And so the Preacher concludes that the best thing to do is to throw himself into his work. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:22: **“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?”**

The Preacher is really reiterating what he has said earlier: enjoy your life today. Of course, if you do not have a right relationship with God, you don't understand fully what life is all about. But, if you do know God, you understand that God is in sovereign control of all things, and you can trust him even though there is wickedness in the world. You can learn to rejoice in your work.

Tommy Nelson tells the story of a friend whose father worked all of his life to retire at age fifty-five. He worked like a dog, denying himself all kinds of pleasure so that he could retire at fifty-years of age. He finally made it.

At his retirement party, everyone celebrated and ate Italian food. At the end he stood up and said, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” Then he suddenly got woozy and passed out. His fainting was due to a brain tumor. Within six months, he was dead.⁴

We live in a world filled with wickedness. If you can change it, change it. But, if you cannot change it, believe that God is still in sovereign control of everything. And learn to enjoy life as it comes to you.

II. **The Second Form of Injustice Is Oppression (4:1-3)**

The second form of injustice is oppression. The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 4:1-3: **“Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed,**

⁴ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 63.

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.”

I don't like it that we live in a world that is filled with oppression. We should work as hard as we can for justice. But the reality is that even though men like Hitler and Stalin are gone, we still have oppression taking place all around the globe. For example, approximately 60 nations (out of about 220 nations) have some form of oppression against Christians. We call Christians living in those countries “persecuted Christians.” And although it is very difficult to get accurate statistics on how widespread the oppression is against Christians, the *Voice of the Martyrs* says this on their website:

According to the World Evangelical Alliance, over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are denied fundamental human rights solely because of their faith. David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing in their 2009 report in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Vol. 33, No. 1: 32) estimate that approximately 176,000 Christians will have been martyred from mid-2008 to mid-2009. This, according to the authors, compares to 160,000 martyrs in mid-2000 and 34,400 at the beginning of the 20th century. If current trends continue, Barrett, Johnson and Crossing estimate that by 2025, an average of 210,000 Christians will be martyred annually.⁵

In those countries the oppressors have power, and the oppressed have none. In many instances, they don't even have someone to comfort them.

“Lana” was a nineteen-year-old Egyptian girl who was raised in a devout Muslim home. Lana had always been taught to despise Christianity, but one day a friend from school invited Lana to listen to a radio program on which she heard the gospel. Lana began to wonder whether Jesus Christ was truly God or whether he was merely a messenger from God as she had always been told. As she

⁵ See <http://www.persecution.net/faq-stats.htm>.

read the Bible she came to a clear conviction that Jesus was indeed God the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

Sadly, when Lana trusted in Christ, she was attacked by her own family. Her father beat her. Her mother would not allow her to sit with the family at meals. Eventually they declared that Lana was as good as dead to them. But even after they threw her out of the house, they continued to persecute her. She was kidnapped and beaten until she was broken and unconscious.⁶

How can this be? How can oppression continue to occur just after the Preacher has emphasized that God is in sovereign control of time and eternity and of all actions and events in between?

The Preacher reaches a radical solution in Ecclesiastes 4:2-3: **“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.”**

The Preacher notes that those who are dead or who have not yet been born are better off than those who suffer oppression.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a follow-up to the story of Lana. When Lana was disowned by her family, what kept her from despair was her faith in the resurrection power of God, in life after death with Jesus. “I’m in real danger,” she testified, “but I trust God because he is alive. My comfort is that it is only a short time I’m spending here on earth, but there will be a long time that I’ll spend with him. . . We know there will come a time when there will be no more sorrow or suffering. This is our hope in the Lord Jesus.”⁷

Yes, like Lana, we can trust God even though the world is filled with injustice. Amen.

⁶ Lana’s story is recounted by Gary Lane, a reporter for CBN, in *The Voice of the Martyrs* (April 2008), 4-5.

⁷ *The Voice of the Martyrs*, 4-5.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

You are in sovereign control of all the times. There is nothing that happens apart from your purpose and will. And even though this world is filled with injustice, you are still in sovereign control of all things.

Help us to trust you even though the world is filled with injustice.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.