

Behold the Tears of the Oppressed
Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3
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Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

Emmett Till was born in Chicago in 1941 and grew up in a thriving middle-class neighborhood on the South Side. In August 1955, his great uncle, Moses, came up from Mississippi to visit the family and offered to take Emmett back with him to spend time with his cousins. His mom was initially reluctant, nervous at how different the deep south was from Chicago for black people as well as that her son was only 14 years old, but she relented. Three days into his trip, Emmett was at the grocery store with some of his cousins, and the white female cashier, Carolyn Bryant, claimed that he whistled and flirted with her. Four days later, late at night, Carolyn's husband, Roy, and his half-brother, J.W., kidnapped Emmett from Uncle Moses' house, took him to a barn where they beat him, shot him, tied him to a large metal fan, and shoved his body into the water. His body surfaced a few days later and was shipped back to Chicago, where his mother had an open-casket funeral to show the world what had happened.

His killers were tried before an all-white, all-male jury, who returned a verdict of not guilty despite the overwhelming evidence against them. Months later, the two men admitted to *Look* magazine that they had kidnapped and killed Emmett Till, but they were protected by "double jeopardy" laws, since they had already been tried and acquitted for that crime. Emmett's accuser, Carolyn, admitted in a 2007 interview that she lied about his making advances toward her.¹ No one connected with this gruesome murder has ever been convicted.

Earthly justice works sometimes but many times it does not. Lady Justice is depicted as blindfolded holding balanced scales and a sword that represents her impartial justice, but far too often the system does not work. How do you feel if you hear that a lawyer suppressed evidence, a witness lied, a juror was bribed, or a judge rendered an unjust verdict? Something inside of us rises up in indignation that justice has not been done and we can even question the goodness of life and of God. We have an internal sense of justice because we are made in the image of God, and He is perfectly just, the source of all justice in the universe. In our passage today, Solomon wrestles with the fact that when wicked oppressors continue in power and the oppressed have only tears and scars to show, life under the sun can seem dreadful. But never be fooled by circumstances: ultimate justice awaits and will be done because the ultimate Judge will make all things right in the end.

The first two verses of our text wrestle with the times

I. When Places of Truth are Corrupted (3:16-17)

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.*

¹ <https://www.biography.com/crime-figure/emmett-till>

Verse 16 says that there was wickedness in the place of justice and in the place of righteousness. Many of the commentators I read think “the place of justice” refer to the courts or the government and “the place of righteousness” refers to the church, which makes sense. Two places where truth and goodness should prevail sometimes are corrupted by wickedness, by injustice.² Every society in every age has had to deal with imperfect leadership and corrupt justice systems. Isaiah 5 acknowledges that even Israel, God’s chosen people living under His laws, had a problem with justice, that the guilty were acquitted with a bribe. Our own day seems to witness scandals of politicians and religious leaders in equal measure. Maybe the most distressing is when churches don’t protect their most vulnerable and brush aside accusations or cases of assault or abuse; that is true wickedness in the place of righteousness. Not wanting to just pick on Catholics, because there are certainly plenty of problems in the Protestant world and churches, but I was just struck by a headline from 2 weeks ago: “Catholic Priests in France Have Abused 216,000 Children, Report Alleges.” The article claimed the abuse took place over many decades and explained that “until the early 2000s, the Catholic Church had showed a profound and even cruel indifference towards the victims,” and that “convictions are not expected as most cases assessed by the panel could have their legal limitation exceeded under French law.”³ That is so profoundly tragic, so sad that there is a generation or two of children who grew up expecting the church to be a safe place to learn about God (a place of righteousness) but instead their innocence was stolen and corrupted. Solomon saw that phenomenon in his day and we still see it in our day.

We’re going to skip verse 17 for now and come back to it. Solomon’s thoughts on justice and wickedness lead him to contemplate what happens to us when we die,

II. When Death Comes for All Creatures (3:18-22)

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?

I knew a family that used to talk about theology over the dinner table, and one night the idea of dogs going to heaven came up. They had a dog who was getting old, so this was not simply an intellectual discussion, there were some emotions attached to it. The dad didn’t really believe that dogs got redeemed and taken to heaven, but he didn’t want to come out and say that and depress his kids. And then someone brought up the movie “All Dogs Go to Heaven,” but the family wasn’t so sure of it. Finally, the oldest sister spoke up and put an end to the matter: “I don’t know if dogs go to heaven, but the one thing I do know for sure is that they don’t go to hell.” That seemed like the best theological answer they could come up with that gave them hope and didn’t bend the Scriptures.

Here in these verses Solomon says that humans and beasts have the same end: they all die and their bodies go into the ground. A bit more unsure is whether the spirit of a human goes up and the spirit of an animal goes down. But the eternal fate of animals is not really the point of this passage, right? Animals/beasts are being used as contrasts to humans. They have some similarities, but it’s doubtful that their eternal destinies are the same. Solomon is just saying, “Who knows what happens after death? No one has been there to see it and returned to tell us.”

² Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 83.

³ <https://bnn-news.com/catholic-priests-in-france-have-abused-216-000-children-report-alleges-228739>

But are human and animals that similar? Here's one of those places where we argue with Solomon when he says (in verse 19) that, "*man has no advantage over the beasts.*" Two sermons ago we read the original creation mandate given to Adam by God to have dominion over the animals. And Psalm 8:4-8a says, "*What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea.*" God placed us above the animals, we are to exercise dominion and care over them. Jesus declared in Matthew 6:26: "*Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*" Clearly we are more important to God, more privileged over the animals. They are not made in the image of God, we are. They don't have eternal souls, we do.

I think what Solomon is getting at is that even if you don't know for sure about heaven and how much better we have it than animals, you still need to live your life, attend to your work, and seek fulfillment in life. And yet, in the very next chapter, he seems to take that sentiment away and embrace the phrase "better off dead." The last three verses return to the injustice theme to discuss

III. When Death Seems Favorable to Oppression (4:1-3)

¹Again 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. ²And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. ³But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Solomon's conclusion is that you'd be better off already dead or not yet born rather than experience all of this oppression and evil. This is not the only time we see this idea in the Scriptures: Job said, "*Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me*" (Job 10:18). Jonah, Elijah, and Jeremiah said similar things. Is this condoning either suicide or abortion? Absolutely not! Let's not twist this all up and go to either of those extremes. This is a naturally bleak assessment of what the world is like, and the recognition that it's completely natural to think, "It'd be better to not even exist than to have to live in an oppressive, abusive situation like some people have to experience."

Gary Haugen, the founder of the International Justice Mission, tells the true story of a rice mill in Southeast Asia where the owners of the mill held over twenty people as bonded slaves working the mill. They beat them, sexually assaulted the women, and prevented them from ever leaving. Gary's organization, IJM, found out about this injustice and were able to mobilize a police raid and get the workers before a magistrate to tell their story. The slaves, however, were unable to testify out of their extreme fear of the men who had enslaved them. But then a little 12-year-old girl named Sandana began to speak, and in a child's innocence and honesty, told the magistrate how her daddy couldn't tell the truth because he was too scared of the owner who beat him. One-by-one, the other former slaves started to speak up and confirm the story. The magistrate ordered emancipation proceedings for the group of freed slaves, sent police to find the rest of the slaves at the mill, and sentenced their captors to many years in prison.⁴ Justice comes at times, but what about when no one speaks up? By IJM's own estimates, there are over 27 million slaves in the world today, and many of them will never see earthly justice. Many are in that situation that Solomon describes in verse 1 – "*On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.*"

⁴ Gary Haugen, *Just Courage: God's Great Expedition for the Restless Christian* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), pp. 55-56.

Conclusion

Imagine this scenario: you've worked really, really hard on a school project and you were excited to turn it in and get a high grade on it. You know for a fact that other students didn't work hard, some of them didn't even do the project. But then you find out that something has happened to your teacher and since the end of the semester is coming and the school needs to enter in grades, you are told that every student in the class got the same grade for their work. How indignant do you feel? How angry are you that you spent all that time pouring energy and hard work into your project, only to have it receive the same grade as the students who didn't lift a finger on theirs? That is what life would be like without God's judgment. Don't press this analogy too far, I'm not saying that we are going to get a grade for our lives in the same way that we get graded in school, or that our lives are one big work project. I'm saying that we often think of God's judgment as negative, when really it is what gives our lives weight and meaning. If nothing we did here on earth meant anything good or bad, it is an empty, meaningless existence.

I told you that we would come back to verse 17: *"I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked."* There is one place, one Person that will never be corrupted with wickedness – the Maker of all things whose holiness cannot abide the presence of evil. The best hope that we have if we have been wronged here on earth is that God will judge all things in His perfect justice. Exodus 34:6-7 is God's description of Himself and how He is both perfect love and perfect justice – *"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."* In an age that only wants to define God as loving and tolerant and forgiving, we need to always remember that God is both perfect love and perfect justice. He is not one or the other, He is both in perfect balance. And don't make the mistake of saying, "That's just the God of the Old Testament." Because the New Testament reaffirms that: Acts 17:30-31 says, *"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

Most people don't like the idea of a God who holds people accountable for sin and punishes them when they die with sin on their account. In a sermon called "The Dark Garden," Tim Keller said this: "If you get rid of the idea of Hell and wrath, you have a less loving God... If you get rid of a God who has wrath and hell, you've got a god who loves us in general, but that's not as loving as the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, who loves us with a costly love. Look what it cost. Look what He did. Look what He was taking. You get rid of wrath and hell... what you've done is you've just turned his incredible act of love into just something... very small... it trivializes what He's done."⁵

Do you know what God's ultimate justice does to us? It frees us up to not seek justice for ourselves. If God does not make all things right in the end, if we can't leave justice in His hands, then when we are wronged, we will seek out vengeance for ourselves. One author, Thor Ramsey, talks about how after his dad died his mom married a guy who was a drunk and physically abused her. He wrestled with wanting to hurt the guy, even kill him, but realized that God's justice gave him hope:

"When my heart is captured by God's sense of love and justice, I realize that it's not ultimately my place to take my mother's mean-drunk ex-husband out to coffee and shoot him. I'm instructed to love my neighbor, turn the other cheek, and pray for my enemy... because my

⁵ Tim Keller's sermon "The Dark Garden" preached April 2, 2000, <https://str.typepad.com/weblog/2013/04/page/3/>

anger does not and will not produce the righteousness of God. So, I can withhold my own wrath, but only because I know my God won't let mean-drunk husbands get away with evil forever. (I'm not suggesting we should ever sit on the sidelines while someone is abused.) The mean-drunk husband will either be convicted by the grossness of his sin, repent, ask God for forgiveness, ask my mother for forgiveness... or the wrath of God remains on him. In any case, he will ultimately receive justice, and as difficult as it is for me to withhold my inferior... form of justice, I can trust God with the outcome."⁶

Now, the problem is that we want justice for others but we always want mercy for ourselves. If someone flies by me on the highway going 90, I look for a cop to pull him over. But when I'm speeding, I rationalize it as just keeping up with the flow of traffic. If someone breaks into our house or hurts someone we love, we want them to be punished. But if we are caught in some sin, we would like to be given the benefit of the doubt and not be punished. But if God is going to punish sin, He is going to have to punish all sin, not just the sin of notorious sinners like Hitler and Bin Laden. Romans 3:23 tells us bluntly that, "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**" and Romans 6:23 adds that, "*the wages of sin is death.*" We are part of that "all" who have sinned and deserve the punishment of death. But the wrath of God that is due to us for our sins is absorbed in the cross of Christ, in Jesus' sacrificial and atoning death. You can either be punished for your own sin or have Jesus take your punishment for you; either way God's wrath will punish your sin.

At the end of His life, Jesus was judged unjustly. Mark 14:55-56 records His trial – "*Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.*" His case should have been thrown out! But the only perfect person who ever lived was a victim of injustice and was falsely convicted of crimes He did not commit and sentenced to death. But the irony is that on the cross where He died, the perfect love and perfect justice of God met. It was perfect love because God sent Jesus to the cross because He loved us so much that He would die for us ("*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son*" John 3:16a). And it was perfect justice because God took out His wrath for our sins on the body of His Son.

God will not let the guilty go unpunished, but for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, their punishment was taken out on Him and we are forgiven and redeemed. By His wounds we are healed, we are justified in His sight, adopted into His family, and given eternal life. And all those who are grateful for God's perfect justice and His perfect love said, "Amen."

Benediction

Romans 15:13 - "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*"

⁶ Thor Ramsey, *The Most Encouraging Book on Hell Ever* (Adelphi, MD: CruciformPress, 2014), p. 28.