

# Injustice Fatigue

Ecclesiastes 3:15-4:3 August 21, 2024

Do you consider yourself a good, law-abiding person? What if I told you that you are *part* of the injustice around us? Research shows that you commit about three felonies every day?<sup>1</sup>

We may not worry too much about the technicalities of the crimes we commit, but usually we worry about the crimes of others. We're concerned because of what that means for our society, for our family's safety, how it impacts our lives.

The Teacher was also concerned about injustice. Actually, he was despondent about it. Remember: he dedicated himself to finding satisfaction and purpose and meaning in life. He'd spent *decades* in his pursuit - sparing no expense - going to lengths none of us could ever dream.

After a long process, he came to a tentative conclusion: The best thing you can do is accept life as it is and enjoy your days, because this is God's gift to you. Be willing to receive whatever He's written for you and try to keep the less desirable aspects of life in perspective, knowing God has a master plan. It seems that the Teacher has *finally* discovered the solution to this incredibly complex and important equation and so for the first time in decades, he's able to sleep peacefully.

But in the middle of the night he jolts awake. He realizes a flaw in his solution. There is *still* sand in the gears: *Injustice*. If God is sovereign and if He has a plan for our lives, then why oh why would He allow humans to rebel against Him and carry out wicked injustice against innocent people?

The Teacher's pursuit has again derailed. Though he has acknowledged God, he still does so from afar. But his distance from God leaves the Teacher in the wasteland of the secular human experience. Looking around, he is frustrated by what he sees. Death. Injustice. Oppression.

The final part of verse 15 is transitional, introducing the rest of the verses we're looking at tonight.<sup>2</sup>

## **Ecclesiastes 3:15b - However, God seeks justice for the persecuted.**

Your version may have much different rendering of that sentence. The New King James says, "God requires an account of what is past." The ESV says, "God seeks what has been driven away." The NLT says, "God makes the same things happen over and over."

Scholars are open with the fact that the words are very hard to translate. The idea the Teacher is trying to get across is that over all that follows there is a transcendent truth: that God is watching, accounting, advocating, and overruling. It's important that we keep that in the back of our minds, particularly as we face the shocking statements made later on in our text.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Silverglate *Three Felonies A Day*

<sup>2</sup> Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

This overarching truth reminds us that your life is *not* just about your enjoyment or your personal satisfaction or you making a mark on history. There is an eternal standard set by God Himself and *He* is keeping track of whether you meet *His* standard or not.

The problem is: None of us meet that standard. None of us are righteous. There's injustice all over the place, even in the *halls of justice!*

**Ecclesiastes 3:16 - <sup>16</sup>I also observed under the sun: there is wickedness at the place of judgment and there is wickedness at the place of righteousness.**

In our last passage, for a brief moment the Teacher widened his scope to include a glimpse of heaven. But now we're back under the sun. He is speaking from a purely human perspective of life on earth from the mind of a person trying to live apart from God.

But he has a point. How long do we wait for certain rulings to be overturned? How often do we hear people talking about how the justice department being weaponized? Right now, only 25% of Americans say they have confidence in the Supreme Court.<sup>3</sup>

Human wickedness is a big problem because it impacts every aspect of our society. Sometimes it's not even just the outright, purposeful evil. On top of that, sin has so debased our minds and systems that we get things wrong even when we don't mean to.

For example: In 1906, the government passed the Meat Inspection Act. From 1906 until the 1990's, the government mandated what was known as poke-and-sniff inspection. They would have all these hunks of meat, assembly line style, and they had metal skewers. They would pass the raw meat to an inspector, he would jab the meat, then sniff it. If it smelled fine, the meat must be fine. They would do that over and over. The problem? They didn't wash the skewers! Infected meat would often pass inspection because it wasn't smelly *enough* and then countless portions of *clean* meat became contaminated.<sup>4</sup> The authority that was *supposed* to bring safety instead brought death because humans systems have been corrupted by sin. Wickedness prevails.

**Ecclesiastes 3:17 - <sup>17</sup>I said to myself, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every activity and every work."**

God is a Judge and He will overrule the wicked. Unfortunately, that might not happen until the end of time. That can be a frustrating answer. It can feel like a cop out. But it isn't. God *will* repay.

Maybe a financial illustration can give us some perspective: We understand the benefit of short-term savings and long-term savings. In the short term, we have some cash to work with right now, which is great. But it's the long-term savings that grows and grows into a much larger return.

<sup>3</sup> <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/declining-confidence-in-the-judiciary/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://fee.org/articles/when-government-spreads-disease-the-1906-meat-inspection-act/>

The problem of pain, of injustice, is one of the biggest obstacles in many people's minds to trusting God. The truth is that He is *not* slack concerning His promises. He won't forget to judge. There is no statute of limitations in God's courtroom. The wicked won't walk free just because it happened a long time ago. He keeps a record and the debt will come due.

Before we leave verse 17, it would be a mistake if we didn't stop and ask, "What is the difference between the righteous and the wicked?" That seems to be a very important question. In chapter 7 the Teacher will say (and the Apostle Paul agrees) that there is *no one* on earth who is righteous and never sins.<sup>5</sup> So we've got ourselves a serious problem in heaven's court. Judgment is coming.

What are you going to do about that problem? As I said, all of us *technically* commit about 3 felonies a day. What if you knew that at the end of the week you were going to be hauled into court? How would you prepare? What attorney would you hire? What would your defense be?

**Ecclesiastes 3:18 - <sup>18</sup> I said to myself, "This happens so that God may test the children of Adam and they may see for themselves that they are like animals."**

In these next verses, the Teacher is going to say some shocking things. But we need to remember the scope of his experiments. He's talking about *under the sun*. He's talking from the perspective of a person who is trying to use his own know-how, his own ability, human wisdom, to find meaning in life. He's speaking as someone who thinks he can solve the problems himself.

This is the natural state of the human heart ever since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Humans turned their backs on God, they did not think it was worthwhile to acknowledge God.<sup>6</sup> Instead, humans appeal to *humanity* for salvation. That's what the Tower of Babel was all about. That's what every human religion is about. We want to find our own way out of death and guilt.

Now, God *could* put a stop to our rebellion. In some cases, He does. Babel. Nebuchadnezzar. Herod Agrippa. But generally God *allows* humans to rebel. Here the Teacher tells us why: God allows it so that the fallen nature of humanity can be exposed for what it is.<sup>7</sup> It's *bestly*.

In some ways humans are *worse* than animals. The level of squalor we're willing to live in.<sup>8</sup> The way we destroy ourselves with addictions and stubbornness and evil desires.

God allows humans to go their own way so that the difference between our way and *His* way is clear and so we can have an informed choice of which way we want to go. It's Romans 1! The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God, man's systems reveal the "righteousness" of humanity.

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<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20

<sup>6</sup> Romans 1:28

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance: The Message Of Ecclesiastes*

<sup>8</sup> Kidner

In fact, some scholars translate this verse this way, "God is making it clear to them...that...by themselves they are animals."<sup>9</sup> We are *not* gods. We are *not* heroes. We aren't going to build our way out of death. On this level, we're just like the animals.

**Ecclesiastes 3:19-20** - <sup>19</sup>For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. <sup>20</sup>All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust.

Did your eyebrows go up? The Teacher is *not* saying humans don't have an immortal soul. He'll say specifically that our spirits return to God after death in chapter 12.<sup>10</sup> The word he uses for breath here isn't the one that refers to the soul.<sup>11</sup> He's talking about breath in the way that humans and animals are alive in contrast to, say, plants. We have *breath* - we have an animated life.

The paradox is that humans *long* for eternal things but we die just like dogs. Ray Stedman said, "From a human standpoint, a dead man and a dead dog look as if the same thing happened to both of them."<sup>12</sup> But humans don't think like dogs and dogs don't think like humans. Humans want to come out of the grave. God put eternity in our hearts. So what are we to do about death?

The Old Testament lays out plainly that the *only* way to escape Sheol - the only way out of the grave - is if you are redeemed.<sup>13</sup> But Who will save us? We cannot buy ourselves out. We cannot buy our loved ones out. All the believers of the Old Testament died *waiting* for the Redeemer to arrive.

As New Testament Christians who have the *rest* of God's revelation, we know the answer. The Redeemer came. He paid the price. He came out of the grave. Now He offers to buy us back.

This is one reason why the reliability of the Scriptures is so important, by the way. We're talking about how to get out of the grave - the most important issue imaginable. Islam offers a way. Hinduism offers a way. Joseph Smith offers a way. The Bible offers a way. Which book is reliable? Which book is proven? Which book is full of words that are *actually* from God the Creator?

**Ecclesiastes 3:21** - <sup>21</sup>Who knows if the spirits of the children of Adam go upward and the spirits of animals go downward to the earth?

The Teacher *didn't* know - not for sure. Because you can't know this answer by observation. Or at least you *couldn't* know it...until Christ came out of the grave! Now we *know*. Now it's proven.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:7

<sup>11</sup> Dan Liroy *The Divine Sabotage: An Exegetical And Theological Study Of Ecclesiastes 3*

<sup>12</sup> Ray Stedman *Is This All There Is To Life?*

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 49:14-15

Did you know that in every sermon in the book of Acts the resurrection is mentioned?<sup>14</sup> The resurrection is our hope. It's the answer. It is the ultimate proof that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer.

There are a *lot* of beliefs about the afterlife. Which ones are true? The ones found in the Word of God which has been proven through the centuries and sealed with the indisputable stamp of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Now we know. The question is, will you *believe* and *trust*?

**Ecclesiastes 3:22 - <sup>22</sup> I have seen that there is nothing better than for a person to enjoy his activities because that is his reward. For who can enable him to see what will happen after he dies?**

The Teacher drives home this point again: We *can't* know on our own, through observation or interviews or study. The truth of what happens after we die *must* be revealed to us. And it *has* been revealed by a loving and merciful God Who *wants* us to know the truth.

The reliability of the Bible matters. It matters because it tells us Who God is and who we are and what happens next. We can't surrender when it comes to the reliability of the Bible, the infallibility of Scripture, inerrancy. Through God's word we are enabled to see.

**Ecclesiastes 4:1 - Again, I observed all the acts of oppression being done under the sun. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed; they have no one to comfort them. Power is with those who oppress them; they have no one to comfort them.**

As the Teacher kept investigating, he realized this wasn't just a problem with a couple of random, corrupt judges. Oppression and injustice are the rule under the sun, not the exception. This leads him into a dark depression. One commentator calls this the saddest part of the whole book.<sup>15</sup>

He's heartbroken not only because of the suffering of the weak, but because there's no one to comfort them. He mentions it *twice*. It begs the question: Why didn't *he* comfort them? After all, he was rich, powerful, and wise.

But what was his life about? For all these years, his life had been about *his* enjoyment. His satisfaction. His greatness. His renown. In chapter 2 he admitted that *he* had gathered servants and slaves and concubines for his own use. *He* had done a lot of oppressing!

We think of "oppression" as something dictators do. But in the Bible, oppression involves "cheating your neighbor of something...defrauding him...abuse of power" of any kind.<sup>16</sup> Humans are out for self and so we can't help but wrong others. That is the nature of our human nature.

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<sup>14</sup> Adrian Warnock *What Did The Resurrection Do for Us? The Sermons Of Acts*

<sup>15</sup> Kidner

<sup>16</sup> Iain Provan *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

One application we can make from this verse is very simple, but so hard for us to hold onto: Don't put your hope in the powers that be. Don't trust *human* authorities to solve life's problems. At worst they'll be tyrants who crush you. At best, they give you poke-and-sniff.

More importantly: Solomon told us to look at the tears of those who are oppressed. Often there's nothing we can do to ease the suffering of the others, especially today when we're able to hear about every tragedy taking place all around the world. We look on, helplessly.

What does *God* do with tears? He counts them. He puts them in His bottle. He plants them so that those who sowed with their tears will reap joy.<sup>17</sup> He wipes them from our faces, making everything sad untrue. Removing every disgrace. One day doing away with sorrow and pain forever.

But the Teacher doesn't have close communion with this loving God. So, here's his conclusion:

**Ecclesiastes 4:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>So I commended the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive. <sup>3</sup>But better than either of them is the one who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.**

Without a relationship with the God of the Bible, without His perspective on life and justice and the ultimate reconciliation of all things, then hopelessness is the only alternative. The Teacher says it would be better to never live at all. The same point is made in Herodotus, Sophocles, Cicero, Buddhism and other world philosophies, by the way.<sup>18</sup>

John Mayer says it in a less despondent but no less hopeless way:

*I'm so scared of getting older, I'm only good at being young...  
One generation's length away from fighting life out on my own...  
Stop this train, I wanna get off and go home again...  
I know I can't but honestly won't someone stop this train?*

This is the hopelessness of life without Jesus.

Now, as believers, it's not that we pretend there isn't sorrow and suffering in life. But we're the ones who have *real* life, *true* meaning, eternal peace.

Asaph, the great Psalmist, saw the same oppression that the Teacher had seen. Asaph was broken hearted about it - frustrated about the way things are. He said, "I'm afflicted all day long." Here's how *his* investigation ended:

**Psalm 73:16-17, 22-28 - <sup>16</sup>When I tried to understand all this, it seemed hopeless <sup>17</sup>until I entered God's sanctuary. Then I understood their destiny... <sup>22</sup>I was stupid and didn't**

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 126:5

<sup>18</sup> Eaton

**understand; I was an unthinking animal toward you. <sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me up in glory. <sup>25</sup> Who do I have in heaven but you? And I desire nothing on earth but you. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever. <sup>27</sup> Those far from you will certainly perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup> But as for me, God's presence is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge, so I can tell about all you do.**

Whose perspective do you want to have? The Teacher's or Asaph's? Remember the end of verse 15. God is overruling. He is watching and advocating. He is just. He is tender and kind. He is calling to us, trying to show us the way to life. Are you on the way?