

Remember three weeks ago when I began by asking, “Why is life the way it is?”

I still wonder. There are times I really struggle.

The passage we are in today begins and ends with a similar struggle.

What about oppression and injustice?

Solomon has been exploring the vanity (Hebrew: *hebel*) that is life.

The word means breath, mist, a vapor, here for a moment then gone. This is what life is like.

This ancient King in Jerusalem is trying to answer the great questions of life by exploration and investigation.

He has found that success, wisdom, and hard work all fall short of answering the question, “Why bother?”

And so, right before the passage we are in today, he writes **Ecclesiastes 3:9-15**.

Life and everything are a gift from God.

There is something about people, something eternal, significant; but what?

God is in absolute control over everything. People are not in control. God is.

I. “God will judge the righteous and the wicked.”

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17

In verse 16, Solomon looks out into the world, “under the sun,” and he sees something.

He sees something that you have probably seen. I certainly have.

And when he sees it and says it, you can see it and cannot unsee it. It is a fact.

What does he see? Wickedness in this world, “under the sun.”

There is wickedness in the place where justice should be. Have you seen this?

Judges, government officials, those who ought to be bring justice to society, and doing evil.

They are padding their pockets, punishing their enemies, paying their friends.

When one hears about all the fraud involving the COVID funds, 9.2 billion in Minnesota.

It is disturbing. That money was supposed to help hurting people. Now stolen.

Tens of billions of dollars in this country. And they don't know where it went.

How does that happen?

And he sees wickedness in the place where righteousness ought to be.

People who are supposed to be models of goodness sometimes turn out to be evil.

I know of a former youth pastor. Everyone thought he was a great guy. Kids trusted him.

He turned out to be wicked, abusing the very young people he was supposed to help.

A number of years ago, I was part of discovering that a father was abusing his own daughters.

This should not happen. It breaks one's heart.

Next, in verse 17, Solomon speaks to himself. He preaches to himself.

Have you ever done this? You need to. You need to learn to preach to yourself.

Sure, you can listen to me on Sundays. You can read my devotions.

You can read books. You can listen to podcasts and Biblical sermons. I think this is all important.

But you must learn to preach to yourself as Solomon does.

How does this work? How do you do it?

Well, consider what Solomon does.

He is struggling, trying to figure out all the wickedness in places where it should not be. It is disturbing.

He could despair and decide that there are no answers, and tell everyone how messed up the world is.

He could just wallow in depression because of how bad things seem to be, unfair, unjust.

He could decide that if he can't beat 'em he'll just join 'em. You know, take advantage of the injustice.

But no. He says in his heart, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked.”

“There is a time for every matter and every work.” Now he is talking about a time for judgment.

Where does he get this?

He gets it from the Bible. He says this because God says this. Every act will be brought to justice.

You see, in his struggle and confusion, he reminds himself of the truth of God's Word.

Solomon's heart is troubled. He preaches God's truth to his heart. Exactly what he needs to hear.

This is what you need to do on so many subjects.

Maybe you need to preach to yourself on this subject so that you don't get discouraged and despair.

Maybe you need a message on God's love for you and how much He cares about you.

Maybe you need a message on your need to persevere and keep walking with Jesus amid difficulty.

I just talked with someone this week who is constantly telling herself that she needs to restrain her anger.

She preaches to herself James 1:20, "The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."

This is why you need to be in the Bible on the issues that you know you need.

So that you can preach to yourself.

Fill your mind with the Bible and when you are struggling you tell yourself what you need to hear.

The Holy Spirit will use this, and God will speak to you.

It is better than a pastor's sermons because you know you get what you need!

Solomon needed to be reassured that God is going to bring every act to justice, eventually.

But what is going on in this world? What is God doing?

Why does He not dispense immediate justice? He certainly could.

Why does He allow so much wickedness, everywhere?

Solomon sees what must be a part of this life under the sun.

God is testing us. He is testing us to see if we will learn an important lesson.

II. "All are from the dust and to dust all return."

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21

Four times in these four verses we read the word, "beasts."

What is it about the beasts that we, "the children of man," share?

Of course, we are unlike beasts in so many ways.

Earlier in Ecclesiastes 3, verse 11, Solomon has just noticed that God has "set eternity in our hearts."

We are made in God's image and made to know Him forever.

We have intellect, wisdom, hands to do creative work, a soul... so much that sets us apart.

But, we read in these verses that we share this with the beasts.

We are made from dust, and to dust we will return.

I preach this at every burial that I officiate. It is absolutely true. There can be no debate.

We die and return to the dust just like every cat and dog, cow and pig.

Have you ever thought about this?

From a certain point of view, it is unnerving.

You and I are made out of the same stuff as the rabbit in the backyard, the trees, and the dirt.

And this body will someday return to the dust.

This is central to the theme of Ecclesiastes. Our lives are *hebel*, a breath,

And it happens to everyone. There are no exceptions.

The movie "Barry Lyndon" is an historical drama portraying the moral vacancy of 18th century England.

It is directed by Stanley Kubrick. After the drama the epilogue reads as follows:

*It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid personages lived and quarreled;
good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now.*

I have described singers as the poets of our day, reflecting the struggles, passions, and aspirations of our culture. Many have seen the *hebel* under the sun.

I have spoken recently of Elton John, Pink Floyd, the Byrds, now another.

In 1977, the group Kansas recorded "Dust in the Wind." Kerry Livgren, who wrote many of the group's songs, wrote the song amid his personal search for meaning. There can be little doubt that he was influenced by the book of Ecclesiastes. Later in his life Livgren would become a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. It is right to see this song as part of his journey to Jesus.

King Solomon could have written the song. It was a hit in the late 70's.

The song is musically amazing. I often listened to it as a teenager.

*I close my eyes
Only for a moment and the moment's gone
All my dreams
Pass before my eyes, a curiosity
Dust in the wind
All they are is dust in the wind
Same old song
Just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do
Crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind
Now, don't hang on
Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky
It slips away
And all your money won't another minute buy
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind
Dust in the wind
Everything is dust in the wind*

In verse 21, Solomon follows these observations with a question, “Who knows?”

Is it a rhetorical question? Maybe. Maybe Solomon is really asking, “Who knows?”

I don't know where the spirit goes when we die. How could I? I have never died. Not yet.

And no one has ever come back from the grave to tell us about it. No one, except one.

“Who knows?” Indeed. Who does know where the spirit goes?

God knows. Jesus, the Son of God sent by God to die and rise again. He knows.

This is why the Christian message is so important, the gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

He knows, and He has the answer to the question.

No one else in all of history has the answer. No one else knows about life and death and life after death.

People guess. He knows. So maybe we ought to listen to Jesus.

He says, “I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by Me.” He knows.

Well, Solomon doesn't know this yet. He continues, making his best effort.

III. Rejoice in your work.

Ecclesiastes 3:22

You cannot solve the injustices. You do not know what comes after you die.

But you do know this. God has given you a moment, some 20-80 years, more or less.

A breath, a whiff, dust in the wind, yes.

But it is a gift, an opportunity. What are you going to do with it?

So, Solomon gives us a bit of advice again, some solid ground amid the wondering.

“There is nothing better for you than to rejoice in your work.”

You have work to do. Not your job, though that may be part of it.

God has given you work:

Being a kid, growing up, listening to your parents, learning, serving. So learn!

Going to school, learning a trade, making friends, blessing others around you.

Maybe being a husband or wife, a father or a mother. High callings indeed!

Being part of a church, God's people on earth, serving in His kingdom.

Suffering through illness and difficulties, loving people well, aging and the end of life.

What work has God called you to do? Well, do it and be joyful.

Don't waste your brief life by doing it and being grumpy or whiny. Rejoice in your work.

Ephesians 5:15-16

Philippians 4:4-9

Next, Solomon gets back to his initial struggle, now with an even darker thought.

This is an example of how discouraging things can get if you don't think about God's words.

IV. Is it better to be dead than alive?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

I find Ecclesiastes 4:1 fascinating.

It is important to read it carefully and not go whizzing by. Notice what Solomon is saying.

And note that "under the sun" is his shorthand for describing this world we live in.

For me it paints the picture of a laborer out in the field, sweating as he works.

He looks up in the heat of the day and wonders, "What is this place, this world?"

Now Solomon is looking at the oppressions done under the sun. And there are many, all over the world.

Today, we might see even more than Solomon did.

People mistreated, children, slaves, women in the Muslim world, Christians in China and India.

Even here, kids in rough homes, employers taking advantage of workers, Pine Ridge.

Solomon sees the tears of the oppressed who have no one to comfort them.

Then he looks at the oppressors and their power, but what does he say?

"And there was no one to comfort them." What?? How can he say that? Do they need comfort?

Could it be that the oppressors are as miserable as those they oppress?

This is certainly a different view of things.

Solomon does not see the world as miserable oppressed people and happy oppressors.

They are all miserable. This is what sin does to people "under the sun."

For everyone, the oppressed and the oppressors in this world, under the sun, there is no comfort.

Therefore, Solomon wonders about life and even the value of living.

Is it better to be dead or alive? Realize that later in Ecclesiastes he will answer the question.

Yes, life is better than death. (Ecclesiastes 9:4-6)

But here he despairs of living because of all the misery in the world.

Why? Because there seems to be no comfort to anyone.

Again, the gospel of Jesus Christ will bring an ultimate solution for this problem "under the sun."

So, I'll close with some hope after this hopeless bit of Ecclesiastes.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

There is hope and comfort for the one who lives in the love of Jesus Christ.

The person who knows Jesus Christ can live with the joy of the Lord in his heart.

Even though we are made of dust...

The person saved by Jesus Christ is destined for salvation and glory forever,