

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

Is There any Justice?

(selected passages from Ecclesiastes)

Study #4

Introduction: How sweet! Poetic justice...

Sometimes, it seems that there is no justice in life. At other times, a bit of light seems to shine through.

Consider the following story, taken from the book, Remarkable Occurrences, by John Train.

“Having just learned that her husband had been unfaithful and had lied to her for years, Vera Czermak jumped out of the third story window of her home in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The newspaper *Vicerni Praha* reported that Mrs. Czermak was doing fine, and recovering nicely in the hospital after landing on her husband, who was killed.”

Now, you should know that I’ve yet to find real convincing evidence that this story is true. But, assuming it really happened, while we may shrink from the story’s violence, we’re generally OK with the storyline because it resonates with our desire for justice. Even poetic justice.

We’re wired to want justice. Sadly, all our stories don’t end with justice.

We have become used to hearing children say, “*That’s not fair!*” Many of us who are no longer children spend a good bit of our lives internally screaming, “*That’s not fair.*”

This morning, I would like for us to explore - with wise old King Solomon - the reality that our world abounds with injustices.

Solomon was an astute observer of life. He was searching for the meaning of life, wanted to see if there was any way to make sense of it all.

Among other things, he wondered, “*Is the world being watched over and guided by a benevolent God who cares, or not?*”

That’s a question that serious-minded people have asked in quiet, reflective moments for ages. The questions continue: “*Why do the innocent suffer?*” and “*Why do the guilty get off scott free?*” and “*Why doesn’t God do something about the injustices of life?*”¹

Let’s wrestle, ourselves, with these questions, with Solomon, for a few minutes. We’ll begin by exploring the seemingly uncalled for and inexplicable sufferings of people who don’t deserve the injustice they get.

The Inequities Of Life

Innocent People Suffer Unjustly

“Legal” injustices

In our own criminal justice system, it is a sad “given” that innocent people are sometimes punished. In other settings, not so formal and not necessarily legal, it also happens that the innocent suffer.

The same sorts of things happened in the days of King Solomon. He writes,

[8:14a] There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked...

There is at least one biblical illustration of this brand of injustice. We find it in a story tucked away in 1 Kings (chapter 21). It’s the story of a man named Naboth.

¹ We could ask the equally troubling question, “Why do good things happen to bad people?” - but nobody seems to want to dwell on that one quite as much...

Naboth was doing nothing wrong, just minding his own business, when the king - wicked King Ahab - decided that he wanted a vineyard owned by Naboth.

In Israel, the king was to be the source of justice for the land and the final tribunal for all who needed equitable treatment. Despite this, because Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard, he set up a mock court, called in false witnesses, found Naboth guilty of cursing God, and killed Naboth to get the vineyard.

What a horrible injustice! And you and I could tell stories from our own day of people we know and love who have suffered injustices.

There are family members who have suffered at the hands of employers; school buddies who have suffered unjustly in school settings; friends who have suffered unjustly in their marriage, in the courts, in the economy.

In another place in Ecclesiastes, Solomon laments the fact that often, innocent people suffer. Bad things happen to people who have done nothing to deserve the suffering they endure.

Unjust/unfair happenstance

Innocent people do get hurt. It happens frequently. Solomon gives some "for instances" that get our own minds racing.

[10:8] He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. [9] He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them.

Imagine. You're deep in the forest and have dug a pit to catch an animal for your family's supper. You've got the pit nice and deep, dug with steep sides, so that once the animal falls in, it can't climb out. Then, YOU fall in to the pit. (Within minutes, you look up and see animals gathering around, looking down at you...)

Or, you're heroically leading a military charge and are the first one to break through a wall to claim victory. As you reach through the wall, you're bit by a rattlesnake!

Or you're working in a limestone quarry, carving out great stones for a magnificent building. The stone is cut and is being lifted out of place when the cable breaks - and falls on your head. You're crushed by the very rock you quarried!

Or, you're a lumberjack, sawing down a tree for a fine home and are killed by the very tree you're cutting!

Or you've come upon a traffic accident on 1604. You decide you've got to try and help, so you stop behind the wreck, put on your emergency flashers, get out of the car and are hit by somebody who plows into you from behind.

Where is the justice in all this? The suffering is so random. How do we make sense out of senseless accidents like these?

We know enough about war to know the term *collateral damage*. This is the damage suffered by non-combatants. They are in the way when a bomb is dropped on a strategic target. Sorry about that.

Again, where's the justice?

Where's the justice for the six million Jews killed by Hitler's Third Reich, the thirty million Russians killed from 1917 forward, the millions killed in China following the takeover by Mao and the Communists. Obviously, the list could go on and on.

A nagging "What?" hangs over us, as in, "What's with all this suffering for people who have done nothing to bring it on themselves?"

In response to this injustice, some people have decided that they don't want anything to do with a God who would allow evil and injustice to exist in the world..

You may have heard the reasoning:

- If God is all good, we **would** do away with injustice.
- If God is all powerful, we **could** do away with injustice.
- Injustice abounds in our world.
- Therefore, there is no all good, all powerful God.

Seems like air-tight logic - and we'll examine that logic in a bit. But, the suffering of innocent people is only half of the problem of injustice in our world. There is the equally troublesome problem of bad guys getting off scott free.

Separate from the people who don't deserve the injustice they get, there are also those who don't get the justice they so richly deserve!

Solomon had the intellectual and intestinal fortitude to confront this problem head-on, too.

Guilty People Get Off Scott Free

You've seen it as well as I have. People who do wickedness don't get what's coming to them. They don't come to an untimely end. Generally speaking, the life span of the wicked equals the lifespan of the good.

[7:15] I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.

The prophet Jeremiah lived a few hundred years after Solomon and noticed the same thing. He spoke to God about it.

[Jeremiah 12:1] Righteous are You, O Lord, that I would plead my case with You;

Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You:

Why has the way of the wicked prospered?

Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?

In Solomon's day, the legal system - over which he himself presided!- couldn't guarantee a just outcome to a trial.

Sadly, the same is true in our own courts. And this is a problem. It's a problem on three counts.

First, truly guilty criminals sometimes don't get caught.

Criminals sometimes don't get caught

We might like to think that every drug lord, every serial rapist, every thief, every murderer gets what is coming to him. But we know that's not what happens.

It is estimated that out of every one hundred crimes committed, only half are ever even reported to the police. Then, for a variety of reasons, the police are only able to respond to an average of thirty seven of these fifty. Moving further forward in the process, roughly twenty percent of those suspected of committing a crime are ever even arrested.

Second, caught criminals sometimes don't get convicted.

Caught criminals sometimes don't get convicted

As reported in [Crime and Its Victims](#), Daniel Van Ness, estimates that of the twenty percent of criminals who are arrested, only five or six will actually have charges filed against them. And of these, only two will be given an actual sentence to serve.²

Third, sometimes even convicted criminals don't get punished.

Convicted criminals sometimes don't get punished.

Solomon laments, ***[Ecclesiastes 8:11] Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.***

In our legal system, justifiably cautious about convicting someone who is not guilty, appeals can result in justice being delayed. And, as someone has observed, "*Justice delayed is justice denied.*"

Sometimes, though, justice prevails. When it does, it brings a sense of closure, relief, satisfaction - and more.

Following World War II, a series of trials were held to bring to justice the major German war criminals. These trials lasted from 1945-49 at the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg, Germany.

² These statistics taken from [Crime and Its Victims](#), Daniel W. Van Ness, p. 36.

These trials brought in the worst of the Gestapo and the SS officers and the architects of Hitler's war machine.

Frequently, as the atrocities these men had committed were brought to light, an interesting thing happened. The defendant would clasp his head in his hands, and refuse to make any defense, and from then on would ask no more concessions of the court.

He would say that the presentation of his crimes, revived and once again confronting him, had so filled him with revulsion that he no longer wanted to live.

That is the ultimate height a trial can attain: when evil is so utterly exposed that even the criminal is revolted by it. Sadly, neither in Solomon's day nor in our own do we see such a result very often.

There is a final aspect of injustice that Solomon wants us to face. It is ugly - but real. It is the fact of oppression of the weak of the world by the strong.

Solomon addresses the subject of oppression in Ecclesiastes 4:1.

A Special Case: The Injustice of Oppression

The universality of oppression (4:1)

[4:1] Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun.³

Some of the oppressors Solomon observed might have been heads of households, others employers or government officials. He saw that it was happening all the time.

After a long life of seeing this oppression, he gives us some sage advice.

³ Now, you might note that Solomon was one who did more than his share of oppressing.

[5:8] If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, DO NOT BE SHOCKED AT THE SIGHT (emphasis added)

It's enough to make you want to cry. And if you and I, as observers, don't cry, the tears of the oppressed certainly flow.

The plight of the oppressed

[4:1]... And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them

You only have to be a very casual student of history to know that oppression has been a main theme of that history.

Oppression was used to construct the pyramids of Egypt and the Great Wall of China as well as the empires of Alexander and Napoleon.

Throughout human history, there have been people just like you and just like me who have been forced to give up their property, their wives and children, and their very lives to satisfy someone's thirst for power and expansion.

You could find examples of that in the annals of the history of the United States of America,⁴ Great Britain, Saudi Arabia or Burma/Myanmar.

Solomon had seen a lot of oppression. He speaks with authority when he says, **[7:7] Oppression makes a wise man mad.**⁵

Before leaving the subject, we're caught off guard by one final comment Solomon makes about oppression. He makes the point that the oppressors themselves don't have it all that great, either.

⁴ I'm no Rev. Jeremiah Wright, but it would be foolish to ignore the atrocities committed against people of color in our nation's history. That's not to ignore the tremendous amount of good that has been accomplished by this country. But America is and has always been made up of sinful people, just like every other nation that has ever existed.

⁵ And this is not angry mad, this is the madness of insanity.

Finally finishing up Ecclesiastes 4:1, we find this -

The plight of the oppressors

[4:1]... and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.

If relationship is what the human heart really longs for - and I believe it is - then the oppressor, by his oppression of others, has cut himself off from the possibility of enjoying a meaningful life.

Being an oppressor brutalizes and dehumanizes the man or the woman who practices it. Oppression turns out to be the prison of the oppressor as well as the prison of the oppressed.

Alexander Solzhenitzyn (the courageous Soviet dissident) wrote a book that marked me for life with its brutality and honesty. The Gulag Archipelago records Solzhenitzyn's experiences and those of others who were oppressed under the Soviet regime.

As a foot soldier in the Soviet army, he himself was brutalized. Then, when he became an officer himself, he inflicted the same cruelties and horrors on the soldiers under him that he had received. His only justification was that this was how he had been treated!⁶

After his experiences as an officer, though, Solzhenitzyn was sent to the Gulag - the system of prisons and camps that was set up throughout the Soviet Union. There, Solzhenitzyn himself was horribly oppressed.

He eventually came to thank God for that experience, because it helped him become again, a compassionate, whole human being. Listen to what he says:

"We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers....we are ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

Summary:

So, so far today we've seen that innocent people suffer unjustly, not deserving what they get. We've also seen that bad things happen to people who have done nothing to deserve the suffering they have to endure.

We've further seen that some people who do evil don't get what they so richly deserve. And, we've seen that oppression damages both the oppressor and the oppressed, hurting the oppressed and dehumanizing the oppressor.

Looking honestly at the injustice of life may make us want to turn away. But, we can't! We're following Solomon, a brutally honest observer of life, as it is, not as we wish it would be.

If the truth is that justice is only an illusion - then, we might as well see it now.

Honesty is the Best Most Painful Policy

Ask yourself if you have ever spoken words such as these:

"It will all come out all right in the end"

"Everything will turn out all right"

"Things always work out for the best"

If you have, let me ask you now. Are they true?

Based on what we've seen this morning, can't we see that these comments are NOT uniformly true and are often nothing but happy nonsense?

Now, I'll grant you that this is looking at life **"under the sun."** (That is, life without regard for God.)

And at a certain point, Solomon interrupted his **"under the sun"** doom and gloom to give us an assessment of life NOT just **"under the sun."** He tells us what is REALLY true, REALLY valid, the way things REALLY are.

⁶ GA, pp. 162-163

[8:12-13] Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. [13] But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

Nevertheless, while God is just, life is often neither fair nor just. And Solomon responds to that reality with some of the most jarring statements we find anywhere in the Bible.

How To Respond To The Inequities Of Life?

First, Total Revulsion

[4:2-3] So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. [3] But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

Wow! It would be better to have never existed, because then you would never have to see all of life's injustices and oppressions.⁷ Ever felt that way?

Ever looked out at the innocent victims of drive-by shootings along with the possible one hundred thousand dead and one million left homeless from Myanmar's cyclone along with the other injustices that happen every day in our world and just want to throw your hands up in despair?

If so, you're in good company. Solomon felt the same way. When he looked at life "*under the sun*" two things appeared to be true:

- One, there is no hope for a resolution to life's injustices.
- Two, if there is a God, He appears to be either too weak or too uncaring to do anything about life's injustices.

But there is a response we can give to these apparent conclusions.

⁷ Job, in the third chapter of his book, comes to much the same conclusion - desiring that he had never been born. This is certainly among the saddest statements in the book.

First, to the charge that there is no hope for a resolution of injustice Solomon has something important to say to us. And he saves it until the very end of the book.

Second, Embrace the Idea that the Tapestry of Life is not Complete...

A final resolution: JUSTICE!

The last verse of Ecclesiastes is this:

[Eccles. 12:14] For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.⁸

Solomon looks forward and sees a day when God will right all wrongs, when people who have suffered unjustly will be comforted, when evildoers will be recompensed according to their deeds, and when justice will reign.

Christians see the same thing. We read in our New Testaments about Jesus coming to the earth to usher in a just kingdom, where righteousness will reign and where evil will be punished. We see a New Heavens and a New Earth where there will be no sin, no injustice, no oppression.

Do you remember that series of "If...then" statements I suggested earlier?

- If God is all good, we **would** do away with injustice.
- If God is all powerful, we **could** do away with injustice.
- Injustice abounds in our world.
- Therefore, there is no all good, all powerful God.

The Bible's message is that we can alter those lines to read a bit differently.

- God is all powerful.
- God is all good.
- Therefore, God will **one day** do away with injustice.

⁸ The issue is "theodicy." Theodicy is the idea that God rules His world justly. If there is no final resolution to injustice, no final judgment, theodicy is a myth.

He just hasn't done it yet. Our posture in the midst of a world racked with evil is to be that of patient trust in the goodness of God. There will be a final resolution to the problem of evil and injustice. We are still waiting.

The other charge - that God is too weak or uncaring to do anything about the problems we see all around us - is, of course, much more serious.

Does He care? If He does, is He powerful enough to do something about evil? Why does it appear that He's just sitting on the sidelines, doing nothing?

While the whole Bible answers this charge, to respond really well requires a distinctively Christian answer, a thoroughly New Testament perspective.

A final resolution: JESUS!

There are dozens Bible references that assure us that God is vitally concerned about justice issues and about the presence of evil.

In the Old Testament, the prophets (Major and Minor) fairly ooze with compassion for the needy and with rebuke for evil. The Law (first five books of the Bible) and the Psalms echo that theme.

God is concerned!

But it doesn't do a lot of good to picture a hand-wringing God in Heaven who is all broken-up over the sufferings of His creatures, yet is either unable or unwilling to **ACT** on their behalf.

And this is where the New Testament offers something uniquely helpful, shouting that God is neither impotent nor uncaring. He has done something: **HE SENT JESUS.**

Through Jesus, God knows

While He walked the earth, Jesus showed intense compassion for those suffering injustice. And then at the end, He Himself suffered unjustly, dying as an innocent man at the hands of oppressors.

Examine the New Testament record of Jesus' arrest, His "trials" (total sham!), His scourging, and His crucifixion. Examine them in the light of His courageous, exemplary, perfectly righteous life.

The point? Jesus' suffering, in a painfully real way, brought suffering home to God. Of all the results of Jesus' life and death, one of them is that God - GOD! - can now be said to know, experientially, what it is to suffer as an innocent at the hands of unjust men.

So, God knows. At the most primal and personal level, God knows injustice. He suffered it.

And what a message for a broken world. What a message for broken people! If you have suffered some injustice, or if you are suffering because someone you love has suffered innocently, God knows. He understands and He's waiting to pour out His compassion on you.

But, God not only offers **comfort** through Jesus. Through Jesus, God also offers **hope**.

Through Jesus, God offers hope NOW

Many have asked the question, "*Why did God allow evil in all its forms to come into the world in the first place?*"

Well, to have not allowed evil would have been to create a world where there was no choice. If there is no choice, then we can't talk meaningfully of love and relationship.

God made the world in the only way a sovereign God could make it who wanted relationship with the people He created. He made people with the capacity to choose to love Him, to obey Him, to worship Him - or not.

So, God allowed choice. And the verdict is in. Each of us has chosen rebellion, and Jesus paid the penalty for the evil we have each chosen.

Now God chooses to NOT do away with evil (although He will do so one day!), so that each and every one of us will have more and more opportunity to turn to Him in faith, to receive the pardon and forgiveness for the evil, injustice and oppression we have each committed.