

## Week 5 - The Great Tug of War - Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

### Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 1:12-2:3

#### Introduction

Do you ever look around at the state of the world and wonder if you understand anything about how God works?

Have you ever wrestled with some aspect of God's Word and what it tells us and finally reached some clarity about what it says and how everything fits together, only to almost immediately lose your grip on it and have it slip away?

If so, you'll understand and appreciate Qoheleth's about-face in our passage this morning.

After a brief interlude of insight and a breath of fresh perspective in the opening verses of Chapter 3 this week, we find Qoheleth back to looking at the world through cynical eyes.

Qoheleth changed his perspective from "under the sun" to "under heaven," and he caught a glimpse of God's hand in the timing of the events of our lives.

Ultimately, he concluded that God has made "everything beautiful in its time" and that what God does is complete and enduring.

But when he looked around at life "under the sun" again, he discovered how at least some of life's harsh realities appeared to contradict his suppositions about order in the world and God's place in it.

That's a tension we often face when we make faith claims.

We see what God's Word says and want to believe it, but what we see going on all around us makes us wonder if we have it right.

There are things we witness in this world that make it difficult to see the beauty and coherence in God's design and plans for us.

And those realities of life can cause us to question how we can rightly assert that God exercises moral governance over the universe.

It's difficult to reconcile how God can be sovereign and in control and still be good, loving, and just in the face of the apparent discrepancies all around us.

We struggle to find an explanation for such things because they defy our sense of how things should be.

Unbelievers also notice the apparent discrepancy between what we say about God's goodness and his moral order in the universe and what their own eyes show them is happening all around them.

They ask, "How can a loving God allow such and such?" and decide, "I don't want anything to do with a God like that."

It's a problem we must overcome if we are going to reach them for the Lord, so we need to be able to answer their concerns.

And to do that, we first need to see things from their perspective.

So, let's turn our attention to what Qoheleth's exploration reveals to us today from **Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3**.

Let's read through the passage together and get a feel for it:

*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. 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. 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. 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. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes*

*upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? 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? 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. 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.*

Straight away, we see Qoheleth return to looking at life “under the sun,” and the futility and meaninglessness of life lived without regard for God.

And as he shifts his gaze back earthward, the first thing he sees is that wickedness in the form of injustice prevails.

## **I. Injustice prevails**

Specifically, what Qoheleth seems to have in mind here is the public administration of justice, which would have been administered by the leading men at the city gates in his day.

Archeology has revealed that justice has been a universal concern since ancient times and that its administration was codified in the laws of all civilized people.

Of particular interest seems to have been the fair treatment of the weak and the poor, and taking advantage of them or oppressing them was widely considered a great evil.

As we read the Bible, we quickly discover that God also has much to say about justice - and he’s hardly a neutral party in the dispute.

Justice is a major theme in the Bible, and in its pages, we find many calls for justice and commands for God’s people to exercise justice.

A good place to begin is **Deuteronomy 32:4**, which tells us that all of God’s ways are justice and that he is just and upright.

Then, we see in **Psalms 89:14** that God’s throne is founded on justice and righteousness, and **Psalms 19:9** tells us that the rules of the Lord are entirely true and righteous.

Those passages and many others like them lay the foundation for God’s commands for his people to do justice in this world.

Commands such as we find in **Isaiah 1:17**, which says:

*Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.*

We could spend all day looking up all the passages concerning justice, but we’ll look at just one more as we see the command to exercise justice in the courts.

**Leviticus 19:15** says:

*You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.*

That passage gets to the heart of what was troubling Qoheleth as he saw that even “the place of justice” was unjust. The very place where one should be able to turn to receive justice turned out to be a place of unfairness, as even the court system was corrupt.

Some of what Qoheleth has experienced up to this point, we can chalk up to bewilderment over how things are or how they appear.

But this goes beyond that - this is evil.

When the halls of justice become corridors of wickedness, where can righteousness be found?

And Qoheleth’s frustration wasn’t simply that injustice was being done but that it was going unpunished.

Unfortunately, we haven't progressed at all since the days of Qoheleth.

We regularly see injustice in our courts as innocent people are wrongly convicted or locked up for months or even years awaiting a trial.

At the same time, we see those who are wealthy or powerful and well-connected enough get away scot-free without justice even glancing in their direction.

Rather than being a system of justice for all, we seem to have a system where we have some who aren't simply too big to fail but also too big to be held accountable.

We live in a day when terms like "jury nullification," where evidence is ignored for partisan reasons, and judges who operate from a position of partisanship rather than on the basis of law, have become the expectation rather than the exception.

And it chafes us because we have that innate sense of justice that rebels against such atrocities.

And our hopelessness and frustration are only made worse when we see the injustice that's perpetrated daily going uncorrected.

Justice is supposed to be blind but not selectively so, and we can't help but wonder, along with Qoheleth, what to make of the situation.

But then, in verse 17, Qoheleth remembers that God has a season for everything under heaven and that a season of injustice must surely point to a future season of justice.

After all, *"there is a time for every matter and for every work."*

Qoheleth does what all good preachers should do as he applies his sermon to himself.

He determines, based on the principle of the beauty of the various seasons of life, that there must be something to be gained from the season of injustice.

Then, he has an epiphany in verse 18 as he discerns that God sends such frustrations to remind us of who we are.

As creatures, we may not always have the power, authority, wisdom, or ability to resolve every situation, but we know the Creator does.

Therefore, our confidence doesn't reside in the justice system but in one who *is* justice and will ultimately see to it that justice is done.

But Qoheleth wouldn't be Qoheleth if his recognition that we are beasts didn't also lead him down another trail that's far less positive.

At first glance, Qoheleth's assertion that we are beasts seems unbiblical.

It's something we would expect an evolutionary biologist to claim.

Scripture tells us that God created us in his image and put the animals under our dominion and that we're just a little below angels.

We may bear similarities to animals, but aren't we distinguished from them?

The short answer is "yes," but Qoheleth isn't talking about our biology or nature; he's talking about our destiny.

He's making a very specific and narrow comparison here as he recognizes that men, like animals, die, and death appears to be the end.

Let's look at verses 19-21 again [**Ecclesiastes 3:19-21**]:

*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. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?*

## **II. Death looks final**

Remember, Qoheleth is looking around and seeing things as they appear when one doesn't take God's special revelation into account.

And what he sees is that men and animals inevitably die.

Despite our significant differences, we have one thing in common: whether man or beast, we meet the same fate, at least physically.

The animals we see all around us are also living creatures who have been given life and breath by their Creator, and the day will come when they all breathe their last - just like us.

In that regard, we aren't special, as the psalmist points out in **Psalm 49:12**, where he writes:

*Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish.*

Whether that was always the fate of animals or not is a debate for another time.

However, the death of man is part of God's curse against Adam's sin, as he ordained in **Genesis 3:19** -

*"You are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

Scholars are divided on the question of how much people in the Old Testament period understood about life after death.

However, when we read the Old Testament, we gather they had at least a general belief in it, even if their understanding was fragmented and underdeveloped.

Still, we have to recognize that any view of life after death doesn't come about through observation of the natural world - and that's where Qoheleth is limiting himself.

So Qoheleth asks the perfectly natural question, "Who knows whether the spirit of a man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"

It's a question many people still ask today.

It's a fundamental question whose answer would inform us significantly concerning how to live.

And I believe Qoheleth was asking it genuinely as he wrestled with the uncertainties of life.

But, once again, observation and experience don't provide an answer to the question.

All we can see when we examine the matter "under the sun" is that men and animals both die and return to dust.

Seeing no certain future for man beyond the grave, Qoheleth returns to a sentiment we've seen him express before [**Ecclesiastes 3:22**] as he says, perhaps the best thing we can do now is to be productive.

It's hard to tell if Qoheleth is being cynical here or not.

But the question he asks at the end of verse 22 seems to have a hopeful note to it.

It seems he's saying that perhaps our actions here and now may have a positive impact when we are dead and gone.

And if that isn't his meaning, at least he's saying that doing our best gives us the temporal satisfaction of a job well done.

Perhaps he's looking back to his pronouncement of 3:12 and seeing the work we do as a gift from God that we can accept with thanksgiving and do joyfully as an offering to him, even if only while we're here.

Even the person who's skeptical about life after death would benefit in this life from such a mindset.

But without the assurance of eternal life, finding joy in our work will never bring us lasting satisfaction.

Qoheleth made that perfectly clear in Chapter 2.

And as Chapter 4 begins we see Qoheleth return to the subject he broached in 3:16 - oppression.

### **III. Oppression reigns**

He writes [**Ecclesiastes 4:1**] –

*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.*

What a dismal verse!

The three-fold repetition of “oppressions,” “oppressed,” and “oppressors” presses down on us, and the twice repeated “no one to comfort them” emphasizes the hopelessness and cruelty of the situation.

Nothing calls the moral governance of the universe into question quite like oppression.

Oppression is the powerful picking on the weak, and we know it’s wrong, but still, it goes on all around us all the time.

Perversely, it seems those who gain power can’t help themselves.

As an example, I once knew a young boy who had a physical characteristic that caused him to be the butt of a lot of teasing.

Then, he returned to school one fall after having the matter surgically corrected, and the teasing stopped.

But here’s the amazing thing: another boy started at the school that same fall that had the same condition as the first, and guess who was at the head of the pack when the teasing started on this new victim.

The power had shifted, and he forgot all about what it felt like to be the oppressed as he joyfully became an oppressor.

Power corrupts, and those who attain a position where they can finally do something to set things right become the ones who ultimately wind up doing the oppressing.

We see this all the time in our modern political system as one hard-charging idealist after another promising reform, gets elected to power only to turn around and become as bad if not worse than those he once railed against.

It’s no coincidence that power is found on the side of the oppressor because it’s power that breeds oppression and makes it possible.

And it’s that same power that limits the possibility of reform because we are all prone to tyranny, and when we achieve power, we are all too ready to wield it.

So we see an endless cycle of politicians, judges, businessmen, and others with power oppressing those who are weaker than them, and there is no one to stand up for the powerless.

Interestingly, Qoheleth isn’t railing about oppression from a position of weakness.

He isn’t one of the oppressed.

He’s sitting on the pinnacle of Power Mountain - he’s the king, after all - and when he sees all the injustice done to the weak by the strong, it makes him mad.

Since he was king, we might wonder why he didn’t do something about the oppression.

It seems that, as king, he could have done a great deal to ease the pain of the oppressed and move toward justice.

And he certainly could have, but Qoheleth realizes that not even a king can do enough to end oppression.

He understands that while we should work to help the oppressed and might see some success in eliminating oppression in a particular area, it will simply pop up elsewhere or later, and the problem will persist in spite of all our efforts.

Seeing that reality causes Qoheleth to declare in verses 2-3 [**Ecclesiastes 4:2-3**] that it would be better to be dead or, better still, to have never been born in the first place.

Qoheleth isn't alone in feeling that way.

Elijah asked God to take his life after his encounter with the priests of Baal, and both Jeremiah and Job lamented the fact that they had ever been born.

While I don't believe that Qoheleth was contemplating suicide because it was considered to be such a heinous sin in the Jewish mind, many people today do look at taking their own life as the only way out of misery.

Again, we face the dilemma of people who have no hope and can't help but wonder how they cope.

For far too many, the only solution they can see is that they would be better off dead.

## **Conclusion**

Qoheleth wasn't into gaslighting.

He believed that one's worldview should be based on the way things are and not the way we wish they were.

He looked around and saw that how things are doesn't always match the way they should be, and he said so.

On the one hand, he claims that God designed the world so that everything is appropriate in its time.

But, at the same time, he sees that life doesn't always seem to work in such a tidy fashion.

He declares that God will judge between the righteous and the wicked.

But he also observes injustice and oppression continuing unabated.

Like Job [**Job 21:7**], he sees the wicked attaining a ripe old age, growing mighty in power [**Job 21:13**], and dying with a smile on their face, which troubles him greatly as he searches for how to square faith's assertions with real life.

We're fortunate today to have the New Testament that increases our understanding beyond that of Qoheleth, so we have answers to some of his questions.

For instance, Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension show us the reality of eternal life after this life is over.

Still, even Christ-followers who accept God's special revelation in the Bible as true often face tensions between what we read there and life's experiences.

We live in the interim between promise and fulfillment, where there's dissonance between what ought to be and what actually is.

What we see with our eyes sometimes differs from what we hear from God's Word, creating tension in our hearts and minds.

People outside the church have the same problem when they weigh our faith claims against what they see.

We can't simply brush off their concerns or give them pat answers - unsupported optimism won't suffice.

In a sense, we're asking them whether they are going to believe us or their lying eyes.

People won't be convinced by trite or easy answers to their serious concerns.

They need someone who they sense has wrestled with the same issues and found the solution to their questions.

They need a guide who has been there not someone who simply quotes the "company line."

We need to accept that what we see is sometimes different from what we read in Scripture.

And we should welcome the struggle as we work in our own hearts and minds to relieve the tension between what should be and what is because it strengthens and prepares us to face those issues and lead others through them.

Qoheleth caught a glimpse of the answer to this dilemma when he saw that God was behind and in control of the events of life - but then he lost the thread when he considered all the injustice and oppression in the world.

We must begin where Qoheleth started to go and search out and thoroughly understand the bedrock principles of who God is and what he reveals in his Word about how he works in this world.

We need to thoroughly understand who God is - who he has revealed himself to be in his written Word and the incarnate Word of his Son.

Then we need to begin to look at every issue in light of those facts.

Only by knowing what God has revealed about himself are we prepared to consider how he works in the world and gain a clearer picture when it comes to the apparent dissonance of the world.

The struggle is real - even for Christ-followers.

It might be even *more* real for Christ-followers because we have come to have certain expectations.

But when we face the issues, wrestle with them, and use the struggle to equip ourselves, we begin to see that there is a path through the dissonance that makes sense of the world and become better prepared for our mission in the world.

Let's pray.