

Observations of Injustice

📖 Ecclesiastes 3:14-22

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Ecclesiastes is the book I read most of this summer while I was away on Sabbatical. This book really spoke to me, and I'm glad we picked it up to study because it is the most helpful book I've studied so far in terms of how to distinguish when you are walking by the flesh vs when you are walking by the Spirit. It's real cut and dry in this book, because if you are thinking like Solomon on an issue, then that's a very good sign that you are walking by the flesh. If you're day by day life goes something like this, "What is the point?" "Why do I have to keep doing the same things over and over?" "Why can't we ever seem to get anywhere?" "What difference does my life make?" and "Who cares?" then you are getting a very clear signal that you are walking by the flesh. You're not thinking correctly and you need to make an adjustment in your thinking because life doesn't have to be lived that way. That's life under the sun. But there's a way to live life beyond the sun and that's what Solomon is teaching us. I think he's at the end of his life and he's repented of this way of thinking and he's saying, don't live this way because it won't work, you won't find any meaning or purpose in your life. In this sense, he's our "Teacher. So a lot of it is negative and wrong, or at least short-sighted. So we are having to add NT correctives to what he taught, so that we can see what life looks like when lived beyond the sun, with God at the center of life.

Last time we looked at the very popular section of Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. Verses 2-8 are commonly quoted at funerals and yet some of it, is quite frankly, a little strange, so we wanted to understand it. One of the difficulties is deciding whether Solomon is writing this from the human view point or the divine view point. Most serious Bible students conclude that it's from the divine view point, but the end of verse 1 says this is viewed from the standpoint of "under heaven," and so it's from the human view point. But what's interesting is that Solomon detected something from the human view point about life that is true. Verse 1 is what he detected; everything in human life seems to happen at the right time. The reason that's interesting is because he wasn't walking with God when he had this thought, he was walking by the flesh, and yet he had a correct observation. Unbelievers can observe the truth. They're not completely blind to the truth. They detect that everything that happens in life seems to happen at the proper time. They can't explain how, but they do observe this. And that's what Solomon is all about in this section, making observations, just sitting back and reflecting as a humanist and writing down his reflections. Verse 2 is the beginning of fourteen reflections, all of them written in poetic form. "A time to give

birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted." Everyone of these is an opposite, that's what we call a merism. It's a figure of speech where two polar opposites are placed against each other. Each of these seem right at the time, but they cancel one another out. He observed this. Verse 3, "a time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up." Life is full of things that seem right at the time but are contradictions, in hindsight. Verse 4, "A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance." A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;" perhaps relating to the casting of seed or the collection of seed, referring to the right time to have a baby and the right time to not have a baby. "A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing." Verse 6, "A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away." Verse 7, "A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak." Verse 8, "A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace." And it was Solomon's observation that all these things that seem to happen at the right time, but they cancel each other out. So his conclusion in verse 9 is, "What profit or ultimate gain is there to the worker from that in which he toils?" The question demands a negative answer. There is no ultimate gain because one day I'm planting and another day I'm uprooting; one day I'm building a house and another day I'm tearing it down; and so on and so forth. And he says in verse 10, this is a grievous task God has given the sons of Adam to be occupied with. Why did God make us, the sons of Adam, with this insatiable appetite to try to make sense out of our lives? Animals don't have that. It's just the sons of Adam. We are the only ones who are concerned about that. And yet, it can't be figured out, says Solomon, so it's grievous, it's tiring. And then he says in verse 11, "He has made everything appropriate or beautifully fitting in its time." In other words, there's an organization to the way things take place in our lives. And then he adds, "He has also set eternity" or "ignorance" or "knowledge," there's a lot of disagreement over the root meaning of the word, but whatever it is He has set this in our hearts, "so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning of our lives even to the end." He's talking about the meaning of our lives and how we can't figure it out. God gave us a special sense that there is a meaning and we want to find it out, but we can't find it out. It seems within reach, but we grasp the air. So he concludes in vv 12-13 with a simple conclusion; "I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime, moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God." It's that simple conclusion that he came to before in 2:24-26, that we should just eat and drink and get some enjoyment out of the work they've done.

Tonight we come to Eccl 3:14-22 and this is a continuation of these observations. Solomon said "I know" in vv 12-13 and here in verse 14 he says "I know" something else. **I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.** Some of this is difficult to follow because the translation is unclear, but we can work that out. In verse 12 the Teacher states **that everything God does will remain forever.** That is simply to say that God's providential work in history with respect to the timing of events in our lives will come to pass. God has

planned the circumstances of our lives and we are responsible to respond appropriately to those circumstances. We can't control the circumstances, but we can respond correctly or incorrectly to those circumstances. He goes on to say, **there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it**, that is, **there is nothing to add to the circumstances** God has placed us in **and there is nothing to take away from** those circumstances. They are properly timed and demand a response from us. It's not true that things are happening circumstantially, by accident or by chance. The circumstances are the work of God and they have a purpose. That purpose is stated next; **for God has so worked that men should fear Him**. The purpose of our circumstances is that we would **fear Him**. By **fear Him** is not just to be in awe of Him or reverential respect, as is so often stated as the meaning of the word. To **fear Him** is to live as if you are always in His presence, to live as if He is the main audience of your life, to live as if your life is on display before Him at all times, as if He is organizing the circumstances in your life. And what He is interested in is seeing if you will respond to Him by living like He is watching. Now, Prov 1:7 says that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," and so the beginning of having true knowledge and understanding God's plan for your life is based on responding properly to the circumstances of your life. And the way you do that is recognize that He designed the circumstances and He's interested in seeing how you'll respond. What other people think is only secondary; see, the primary audience and the one who sees your whole life is God and that is the number one reason why you find yourself in the circumstances you find yourself today. They were orchestrated by God and you have a decision to make; you can humble yourself and live before Him with praise and thanksgiving, or you can be arrogant and live before Him with antagonism and anger for putting you in the circumstances. The believer who is walking by the Spirit does the former, he humbles himself before God and thanks Him for his circumstances, no matter what they are, whether good or bad. The believer who is walking by the flesh and the unbeliever do the latter, they become arrogant and angry at God for the circumstances, questioning why God would allow this to come into their life.

In 3:15 Solomon adds something about our circumstances, **That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by**. In other words, people find themselves in the same circumstances as other people. Many of those circumstances were listed in 3:2-8; "a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build up." Etc...etc...God puts all people in the same kinds of circumstances because He is trying to illicit the same response; the fear of God. It is strange that we all experience the same basic set of circumstances throughout life? There is really no set of circumstances that you have experienced that nobody else experiences. **That which is has been already and that which will be has already been**. You're not going to have some circumstances unique to you. Your circumstances are the same circumstances people in the human race already had and the circumstances future people will have in the future are the same circumstances people are having now. The reason is because **God seeks what has passed by**, or literally in the Hebrew, "God seeks what has been driven away." The meaning is that God repeats the past over and over in the lives of people, and this demonstrates that there is one and the same person behind all the circumstances in our life. He's the

one true God and He has ordered all the circumstances in every person's life. And there is a proper response to that. Every one of us is to fear Him and start living our lives as if He is the main audience before whom we live.

Now Solomon anticipated an objection his students might make to viewing life as if God was the author of all our circumstances. The objection is the injustice in the world. Is God the author of injustice? This possible objection did not escape Solomon's notice. So in 3:16 he says, **Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.** Solomon noticed that from the perspective of **under the sun**, that is, from the earthly perspective, **that in the place of justice there is wickedness.** What is the **place of justice**? The **place of justice** is the courts. That is the one place you would think that you could get **justice**. But what he found **there** was **wickedness**, corruption, bribery, and not justice. The last phrase in the verse is repetitious, **and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.** The reason for the repetition is because he was very surprised by this and it made him angry, it raised his consternation. Why would I find no justice in the place of justice? Especially if God has organized the circumstances.

Well, verse 17 answers that these are not the circumstances that God ordered, but men's wrong response to the circumstances. The circumstances He ordered are law and order, the justice system, which flows from His character, and the correct response is to fear Him and judge as if He were their main audience in the court. But instead they arrogantly violate law and order, judging in favor of the wicked rather than the righteous. Paul explained in Romans 1 why men do this. He said men do this because they do the same wickedness and so to pass judgment on the wicked would be to pass judgment on themselves. That's why you can't get a just decision in a court of law. If they condemn the criminal they have to condemn themselves.

This is terrible and so Solomon had to come up with a way for there to be justice. He says, **I said to myself, this was his thought, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.** Now, in your mind you're probably thinking that Solomon is talking about God judging in the afterlife. But in the wisdom writings of the OT, the belief was that judgment for injustice would come in this life in the form of a shortened life. Turn to Prov 22:22-23 for an example of this. "Do not rob the poor because he is poor, Or crush the afflicted at the gate; For the LORD will plead their case And take the life of those who rob them." The idea is that if one committed injustice against another, the LORD would hold a court case on behalf of the oppressed and the judgment would be premature death of the one who committed the injustice. So you weren't getting away with things. Solomon was right. Or take the example of Job 27:13-23, "This is the portion of a wicked man from God, And the inheritance *which* tyrants receive from the Almighty. ¹⁴"Though his sons are many, they are destined for the sword; And his descendants will not be satisfied with bread. ¹⁵"His survivors will be buried because of the plague, And their widows will not be able to weep. ¹⁶"Though he piles up silver like dust And prepares garments as *plentiful as* the clay, ¹⁷He may prepare *it*, but the just will wear *it* And the innocent will divide the silver." The passage goes on with more examples, but you can see that the penalty

for the crime would be meted out by God in time, and so, in Solomon's mind, when he thought of injustice in the courts he reasoned that God must judge and that this judgment would be in time. The person would pay in this life. That's what Solomon is saying in Eccl 3:17, **I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man."** He viewed the judgment within time.

Now verse 18 seems to be disconnected with what's come before because now he compares men and beasts, but there's a connection between the injustice of men and this connection is often missed. What Solomon is saying is that there are reasons God has permitted injustice into His wise plan, even though it seems like an incongruity. In verse 18, Solomon said, **I said to myself**, so he was thinking in his soul about why injustice might be permitted in God's plan and he concluded that it is **concerning**, or literally, "for the sake of" **the sons of Adam**. In other words, He permitted it so that the sons of Adam would learn something about themselves. He says it this way, **"God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts."** So He's given them a **test**. What's the **test**? The test is whenever a case comes before men to decide. God has designed the circumstances of the case and now that the case is presented to the court, those hearing the case have to decide how to respond. Are they going to decide the case based on the fact that they are doing this in the sight of God, with Him as their primary audience? Or are they going to do secret things, hidden things, dark things? Well, they're going to do dark things. They are going to do wickedness. That's what Solomon observed in verse 16. But why does God permit this in His plan. **For them to see that they are but beasts**. To show them clearly, that in this respect, they are animals. Well, what do animals do? They prey on the weak, the sick and the young. And what do the judges in the courts do? They prey on the poor, the downtrodden and the weak. But when they do this it shows them that they are beasts. They are not rising above the plane of animal brutality. Wiersbe said, "...when man leaves God out of his life, he becomes like an animal."¹ So verse 18 is Solomon's thought about why God allows them to commit injustice, and his answer is to demonstrate that they are sinners.

In verse 19 Solomon points out another similarity between men and beasts. **For the fate of the sons of Adam and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity**. We must be careful not to misinterpret these verses to be saying that there are no differences between men and beasts. He is only pointing out two things they share in common; when men are unjust they are like beasts and both men and beasts die. Constable said, "We behave as beasts and die like them (vv. 18–20)."² This cannot be disputed.

As far as death is concerned, **man** really does not have an **advantage** over **beast**. Both die. **As one dies so dies the other**. In fact, they even **have the same breath** that leaves them at death. When Solomon mentions **the same breath**, he is not talking about the personal spirit, but the air that we all breathe. Man and animal share the same air. There is no difference in the air we breathe that supports our physical life. And so when it comes to death that same breath leaves both man and beast and this means **there is no advantage for man over beast**.

He concludes then, that, in this respect, all **is vanity**. By **vanity** Solomon means “transitory,” all life on earth is transitory. Man does not have an advantage over beast when it comes to death, all is transitory.

In 3:20 he says, **All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. By the same place** Solomon is referring to the grave, not to heaven or hell. Both man and beast go to the grave. He is reasoning from the fact that **all came from the dust** and therefore **all return to the dust**. And God did say to Adam after the Fall in Gen 3:19, “For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.” Physical death is something man and beast both face.

In 3:21 he asks, **Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?** In other words, who knows from observation, whether when a man or animal dies, that **the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth**. Now, He seems here to mean something else by **breath**, and not simply air, but the spirit of the man and the spirit of the beast. And who knows where the spirit goes when the man and beast die? No one can know from observation because what happens is beyond human observation. Left to ourselves, with only human observation, what happens to a man and a beast at death is unknown. Scientists say that when we die we return to dust. That much is correct. But when they go on to say there is nothing else, they are no longer speaking as scientists but as philosophers. They don’t know and should admit they don’t know. Donald Glenn said, “No living person can *observe* or *demonstrate* a difference between people and animals by watching them as they die.”³

With this limited point of view in mind, Solomon recommends in 3:22, **I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?** Solomon ended in despair. Human observation could not give him any information beyond time. He reasoned that in time it appeared that everything in our lives has a proper time (3:1-8) and that all men observe this and yet they cannot figure out the purpose of their lives (3:11). Furthermore, he concluded that God has done this so that men would fear Him (3:14). And yet men did not fear Him, as evidenced by the injustice that prevails (3:16). He reasoned that God would judge in time those who commit injustice by limiting their lifespan (3:17). Their injustice would demonstrate that they are but beasts (3:18). And yet, ultimately, man has no advantage over beasts. They both share the same breath and they both go to death. All is transitory (3:19). From dust they all came and to dust they all return. And on a purely human observation level, who knows that the spirit of man ascends upward and the spirit of the beast descends downward (3:20-21). No one can know because it is beyond observation! So then he ended in utter despair, and he just concludes in verse 22, you might as well **be happy in** your activities, because **that is your lot**. Because there is no one **who will** help you **see what will occur** afterwards. There is no one who can help you see into the future, so you might as well enjoy the present. That is Solomon’s conclusion.

Now obviously there are some correctives we must make, although, from a merely human perspective, Solomon’s observations are basically correct. This is the way that life looks for the lost man and it ought to give

you a heart for him as he toils through life. This is also the way life looks for the believing man who is walking by the flesh. It is not fun to be a believer living by the flesh. The only one who does not look at life this way is the believing man who is walking by the Spirit. For the man who is walking by the Spirit is the spiritual man and he examines things from a spiritual point of view. That means he looks at life through the lens of Scripture. So let's make some corrections. The first corrective is in 3:17. Solomon said "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man." He was expecting some judgment in time, a shortening of life, and that may be true in the Dispensation of the Mosaic Law. But we know from other passages that there is a judgment outside of time, in the afterlife, that is a judgment of works and eternal in perspective. Believers will go to the judgment seat of Christ, which is an evaluation of the believer's works, and whether they were done by means of the flesh or by means of the Spirit. The things done by the flesh will not be rewarded, the things done by means of the Spirit will be rewarded. These rewards will last for eternity. Unbelievers will go to the great white throne judgment because they do not have the righteousness of Christ. There they will be evaluated on the basis of their own works and when these are shown to fall short of the glory of God they will be cast into the lake of fire to undergo some degree of eternal punishment based on their works. So the first corrective is that Solomon only viewed divine justice in time, but there is divine justice beyond time for both believers and unbelievers. The second corrective is with respect to the man-animal distinction. Solomon said in 3:21, "who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?" He did not give a judgment on this matter. However, the word of God does give a judgment on this matter. The breath of a man ascends upward to God to face judgment, whereas the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth. There is an afterlife for man but there is not an afterlife for animals. This is based on the differences between man and animals. First, God made man in His own image but He did not make animals in His own image. The two Hebrew words for image and likeness mean reflection, as in a mirror, and shadow. Man is the reflection of God and the shadow of God. Animals are neither. Second, part of this image and likeness is the ability to speak propositional language. Man has propositional speech for the express purpose of communicating with God in complex sentences and receiving communication from God in complex sentences. Animals do not have propositional speech or language and cannot understand complex sentences. They have something less, the ability to communicate through sounds, behaviors and habits. This makes them different from man. Third, God made a plan of salvation for man that involved incarnating Himself in the likeness of man, though without sin. God did not make a plan of salvation for animals. That would involve incarnating Himself in the likeness of the beasts of the earth. But this is obviously lacking in Scripture. In the same vein of thought, there is no plan of salvation for angels. God has other purposes for animals and angels. Fourth, many passages speak of the resurrection of man, both believers and unbelievers, but there is not one passage that speaks of the resurrection of animals. This is obviously because there is no plan of salvation for animals. However, this does not mean that there will not be animals in the kingdom of God. There most certainly will be animals in the millennial phase of the kingdom. That's when the wolf will lie down with the lamb. But whether they will be in the eternal state of the kingdom is unclear. In Rev 21:5 God says, "Behold, I am making all things new." If the "all things" include animals then

animals will be re-created in the eternal state of the kingdom. These animals would not be the same animals from this world, but fresh creations. A fourth corrective is with respect to how we should live. Solomon said in 3:22 that “nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot.” But God says there is something better. We should not just be happy. Life is not about happiness. It is about serving and loving others. As far as service is concerned, Paul said in Phil 2:3, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” This was the attitude of Christ Jesus who, though God, condescended to take the form of a man, to give His life for us. We should serve one another. As far as love, John said in 1 John 4:19, “We love because He first loved us.” Our love for others must stem from the fact that He loved us first as demonstrated in Christ. As Paul said in Rom 5:8, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” The only true motivation for love is His love for us. We are to be conduits of His love and pass that on to others. Life is far more than Solomon’s conclusion, just be happy, it is about serving and loving others. This brings glory to God. The fifth corrective to Solomon’s outlook is with respect to the future. Solomon said in 3:22, “Who will bring him to see what will occur after him?” The answer is divine revelation in Scripture. The unbeliever and the believer walking by the flesh are not paying attention to divine revelation in Scripture. The Scripture tells us what will occur after us. It tells us the plan of God and what is to come and how we can prepare now for that future reality. If we neglect this it will be to our own harm. For He will call into account all that we have done in the body, both good and bad. A simple truth that we can take away from the immediate context of Solomon’s instruction in 3:15-22, is to do justice. Solomon saw much injustice, especially in the courts. But we should do justice whenever we arbitrate between men or children. In unsure situations we should seek justice but err on the side of mercy rather than condemnation. As James said in 2:12-13, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judge by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” An extension of mercy is far superior to judgment, especially in an unsure situation. It is never safe to proceed to judgment without certainty. The reason for the superiority of mercy is two-fold. On one hand, mercy will go further in reprimanding the unrighteous who have by this time already condemned themselves. It has affected their conscience, and this is most important. And on the other hand, judgment of someone who is innocent will only create bitterness and frustration. Therefore, we can prepare for the future judgment by showing justice and erring on the side of mercy when in unsure situations.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 50.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 3:16.

³ Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 985–986.