

1. “There Is a Time” – the Judgment of God (3:16-22)

a. Men and Beasts All Die – God Wants You to See That You Are a Beast (v16-21)

¹⁶ *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.*

Notice the structure of verses 16-22:

there is an observation in verse 16 (“I saw under the sun”)

followed by two reflections in verse 17 and verses 18-21 (“I said in my heart”),

and concluded with an observation (“I saw that there is nothing better...”)

The first observation focuses on what you can see:

“in the place of justice, there was wickedness...” (v16)

while the concluding observation includes the lessons from his theological reflections.

The Preacher starts with the problem that “in the place of justice, there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” (v16)

Righteousness and justice often function as exact synonyms –
except when they are used together!

When they are used together, *righteousness* refers to the *standard* of communal practice,
while *justice* refers to the execution of that standard.

You could easily imagine a situation where *righteous* laws are applied *unjustly*.

If the community is organized according to the right standard,
then you can easily correct the problem of injustice.

But if the community is organized in a fundamentally unjust way,
then you have a problem “in the place of righteousness” –
not just in the place of justice.

Think about this in the context of race relations in Missouri.

From the reports we’ve heard, it is obvious that there has been a systemic problem.

It’s not just a case of wickedness in the place of justice –
an occasional failure to do the right thing;

it’s pretty clearly a case of wickedness in the place of righteousness –
the communal standards in Ferguson are *not* what they should be.

I think it’s safe to say that any time a city looks like a war zone in a time of peace
that is evidence that communal standards are not what they should be!

This happens all the time – all over the world –
and has ever since the days of the Preacher.

But how should we think about it?

This is why the Preacher provides his two theological reflections in verses 17-21.

First,

¹⁷ *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.*

At first blush, this may look like he's taking a "quietist" approach – namely, "God will judge, so it's none of my business."

But remember that "the Preacher" identifies himself as 'king in Jerusalem,' so it *certainly* is his business!

And more importantly, Ecclesiastes was written for the elites of Jerusalem. (later, we'll hear recommendations for how to conduct yourself in the presence of the king).

And even in verse 17, there is a *strong* statement that this *is* your business: "God will judge the righteous and the wicked."

If you are contributing to wickedness in the place of righteousness, then God will judge *you* as wicked.

How are you contributing to the communal standards of your community? Are you promoting righteousness? Or wickedness?

God will judge – for there is a time for every matter and every work.

And why is God doing this?

Why does God allow wickedness in the place of justice and righteousness?

That's where the Preacher goes in his second theological reflection:

¹⁸ *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.*

In verse 16, he said "I saw that" –

now he says that God is testing the sons of man so that *they may see*.

God wants you to see that you are a beast.

It is true, as we saw last time, that God has put eternity in our hearts – we are *more* than beasts.

But we are not *less* than beasts.

Why does he say this?

There are three reasons given in verses 19-20:

- 1) both the sons of Adam and the beasts die;
- 2) both the sons of Adam and the beasts have the same breath;
- 3) both the sons of Adam and the beasts are from the dust, and return to the dust.

¹⁹ 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.^[b] ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

If you go back to Genesis 1:30, God said,
“And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens
and to everything that creeps on the earth,
everything that has the breath of life,
I have given every green plant for food.”
So, the same *breath* [the same *ruach*] is in both man and beast.

Likewise, God formed “the man of dust” from the ground in Gen. 2:7,
and after the fall, God said to Adam,
“you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Gen 3:19)

So the Preacher is simply reflecting on Genesis 1-3,
and is applying Genesis 1-3 to the problem of death.

God wants you to understand that you are a beast.
You are *more* than a beast!
But not less!

We share a common breath – the “breath of life” (as God said in Genesis 1:30).
And

²¹ *Who knows whether the spirit [or breath] of man goes upward and the spirit [or breath] of the beast goes down into the earth?*

The Preacher is neither affirming nor denying the afterlife.
His point is to say that as we consider life “under the sun” (remember v16),
we do not know.

There are *lots of things* – indeed, *lots of important things!* –
that we do not know!

What do you need to know?

How do you live in a world where God is testing you so that you might see that you are a beast?

b. So There Is Nothing Better Than to Rejoice in Your Work! (v22)

²² *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?*

Rejoice in your work.

You might say, “But Pastor, I don’t like my work!”

The Preacher says nothing about “liking” your work.

He says that there is nothing better than that a man should *rejoice* in his work.

Your work is your *lot* – your portion – what God has given you to do.

When you think about “your work” –

don't just think about "your job."
Your work includes everything that God has called you to do in life.
Weeding the garden, cleaning the bathroom, rearing your children,
paying your bills, loving your wife, sitting on the front porch –
and what you get paid to do!
All of this is "your work."

So there is nothing better than to rejoice in your work.
It is true that sometimes your work will be a *cross* to bear!
But you can rejoice in your work even when your work is a cross,
because you know that these afflictions are designed
to conform you to the likeness of Christ.
"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,
for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.
And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete,
lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

Chapter 4 then applies this theme of "what is better" to other situations "under the sun."
I've identified them as "the perils of power and oppression" (v1-3),
"the perils of competition and laziness" (v4-6),
and "the perils of greed and isolation" (v7-12)

2. Life Under the Sun: What Is Better? (4:1-16)

a. Better Is He Who Has Not Yet Been – the Perils of Power and Oppression (v1-3)

4 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.

On one side there is power.
On the other side there are tears – and no one to comfort them.

We've often seen that in the Bible, "the poor" are identified *not* by how much stuff they have,
but by how much access they have to power.
If you have nothing, but you are friends with the powerful,
then you are not really poor – because you have access to *comfort*.

The *oppressed* are those who have no comfort – no recourse to anyone who can protect them.
They may have all sorts of material goods,
but not for long!
If you have no one to protect you,
then you will soon be destroyed.

And so the Preacher reflects on the plight of the oppressed:

² *And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.*
³ *But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.*

When you think about the brutality of war in the Middle East,
or when you think about the perennial fear of living with an abusive spouse,
perhaps you can understand the Preacher's comment.

Those who have already died are *done* with suffering –
so they are better off than those who are still alive.

But of course, those who have already died endured a life of suffering –
and so better than both is the one who has not yet been!
because he has not suffered anything!

We talk about the “innocence” of children –
even though we believe that they share in Adam's corruption and guilt.
Sure, it's easy to see how selfish children are from their birth!
But they *are* innocent – in the sense that they do not yet *understand* wickedness.
They have not yet seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Verses 4-6 then turn to competition and laziness.

b. Better Is a Handful of Quietness – the Perils of Competition and Laziness (v4-6)

⁴ *Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.*

The Preacher certainly has a cynical side!
Why do people get good at what they do?
It's because of envy and greed!
I want to run faster than him...
I want to have the sorts of things that he has – so I'll work harder than him...

Oh, that's a beautiful dress – I'll bet I could make a better one!

Notice that in all these examples, the result is what we might call 'good.'
I can do better.
I can work harder.
I can run faster.

But the Preacher challenges us to consider the source.
Why do you want to do better, work harder, run faster?
Isn't it because of *envy*?

I want you to think about this!

It's possible to imagine a situation where toil and skill is rooted in love:
because I love God – and because I love you –
I want to do something that will make you smile,
I want to imitate you, so that you will rejoice in my labors,
as you see how my craftsmanship has improved.

But let's face it, *most of the time*, that's not what motivates us!

Most of the time, we just want to keep up with the Joneses.
(and that's envy!)

This also is vanity^[c] and a striving after wind.

Better and faster and harder – oh my!
Where does it get you?

In contrast,

⁵ *The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.*

The fool says that envy and striving is pointless,
so he refuses to work at all!
What's the point of doing anything?

If the envious man is the caricature of the greedy capitalist,
then the fool is the caricature of the lazy bum who consumes himself.

But in both caricatures we recognize important truths –
and so verse six concludes:

⁶ *Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.*

You don't want to be a fool and starve to death.
But neither do you want to strive after wind – being jealous of others.

How then should we live?
With one handful of quietness and rest.

“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!”
If you have enough for your own needs, and
and you are able to be of use to others in their time of need,
if you have rest, and can give rest to others –
then that is better!

Indeed, if you think back to the problem of wickedness in the place of righteousness,
you will probably be able to do *more* to establish righteousness in your community

by having one handful of quietness,
than you could by the endless pursuit of wealth and power –
because by pursuing one handful of quietness,
you are *exemplifying* righteousness in your own household!

And then in verse 7:

c. Two Are Better Than One – the Perils of Greed and Isolation (v7-12)

⁷ *Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.*

The picture of futility is clear:

a lonely man who works hard, always trying to accumulate more and more –
the Ebenezer Scrooge of the ancient world!
His eyes are never satisfied with riches.

The whole of Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is contained in verses 7-12,
because verses 9-12 show us something better than the greed and isolation of Scrooge.

⁹ *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

Now, I need to point out the gendered language of verses 9-12.

We’re talking about men here.
The isolated man of verse 8 may well be married.
It says nothing about a wife.
What he lacks is a son or a brother.

In our day, we are tempted to say that verse 9 can refer to your wife.
“Two are better than one...”

But it can’t.

Men, you need other men in your life.
Women, you need other women in your life.

If you try to practice verses 9-12 with your spouse,
you will be isolated and alone (as a couple).
How many suburban marriages have failed
because they try to be a world unto themselves?!

I realize that the “two lie together” may sound a little weird,

but until the 20th century, this was common.
It's cold at night –
so if a man is away from home,
then you're going to share a bed with another man.
And if it's cold, then you're going to snuggle up to stay warm!

Whether with work, with parenting, with all the things of everyday life,
we need that “cord of three strands” –
that band of brothers –
those faithful sisters –
in a word, we need *friends* who will be there for each other.

As we set up our Bible studies for the fall,
we need to think about this in terms of how we can draw others into those bands.

If I have my “band of brothers” and no one else can join,
then that's not going to strengthen others.

We have around 40 families/singles in the orbit of MCPC.
As we set up our small group bible studies,
I would encourage you to think about connecting with
at least one family that you are already close with –
at least one family that you ‘sort of know’ –
and at least one family that's ‘new to you.’

Verses 13-16 conclude with a story about a “poor and wise youth” –

d. Better Was a Poor and Wise Youth Than an Old and Foolish King (v13-16)

¹³ *Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.* ¹⁴ *For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.* ¹⁵ *I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that^[d] youth who was to stand in the king's^[e] place.*

Who is the “poor and wise youth”?
It might be David – certainly Saul was “old and foolish” –
but it would be more plausible – and more striking –
to think of this as Jeroboam!

Jeroboam was a poor and wise youth who was “very able”
and Solomon had put him over the forced labor of the house of Joseph (1 Kings 11:26).
After the prophet Ahijah prophesied that Jeroboam would become king of 10 tribes,
Solomon tried to kill him (reminding us of how Saul tried to kill David!),
but Jeroboam fled to Egypt – only to return after the death of Solomon.

And then, when Jeroboam and all the people asked Rehoboam to lighten their burdens,

Rehoboam refused to take good advice,
and so the kingdom was divided,
and Jeroboam stood in the king's place.

You could probably think of other stories that fit the paradigm as well.
And that's fine, because the Preacher is using a paradigm
that has been repeated over and over again for thousands of years –

the rags to riches story – the poor but wise youth
who shames the old, foolish king –
and winds up becoming king (or ruler).

Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Jeroboam, Daniel –
and that's not including the rest of human history and literature!

But then comes verse 16:

¹⁶*There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

This is why I think we need to hear the story of Jeroboam –
the one who fell from his wisdom and led Israel into sin and idolatry –
so that “those who come later will not rejoice in him!”

Okay, where does this leave us:

There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work....

but as I consider the oppressions and brutality under the sun:

Better is he who has not been and has not seen the evil deeds under the sun.

And if you have to be born and live in this envious and jealous age:

Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

And if you are living in this age, then you need a band of brothers:

Two are better than one... a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

And since we cannot rejoice in Jeroboam,
we still *need* a poor but wise youth to become king
and to implement that wisdom – to establish righteousness and justice –
a righteousness that will endure –
a justice that will never fail.

In other words, Ecclesiastes says that we need Jesus.

Because only Jesus is a king that “those who come after” will rejoice in!