

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 5 - "But what about...?"

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 9, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This morning we are going to tackle what most people consider to be the biggest problem with Christianity. It is often referred to as the problem of evil.
 - The problem of evil says it is illogical to believe that a good and all-powerful God exists when evil also exists. It is said that these two things cannot both be true.
 - The problem of evil is a great intellectual challenge but it is a greater emotional challenge. Simplistic answers and clichés will not do when you burn with anger over injustice or when the cold hand of death takes someone you love.
 - We must take this problem seriously because it hinders some people from coming to faith, causes others to lose their faith, and stirs doubt in those who do have faith.
- Right at the outset though, I want us to see that the Bible does not shy away from facing this question and Ecclesiastes 3 is one of the best places to start.
 - As we saw last week, Ecclesiastes 3 declares the absolute power of God in controlling all time and events. The chapter begins with a poem describing the many seasons we face in life, both good and bad. Then Solomon interprets the poem in verse 11 when he says, "**[God] has made everything beautiful in its time.**"
 - We described this with the image of a tapestry. A tapestry is woven with thousands of different threads. If you look at a tapestry from the bottom it all seems like a chaotic mix of threads with no purpose or design. But the weaver does have a plan. When it is all done and you turn it over you can see that every single thread has been woven with a purpose.
 - So, Ecclesiastes 3 declares the absolute power of God who is weaving every thread of time into a beautiful tapestry.
- But Solomon knows that what he has just said will provoke questions about evil and suffering. He is not naïve to this. He does not gloss over it but singles out this problem for special consideration in verses 16-22.
 - In particular, he deals with three objections to the idea that the all-powerful God is weaving every thread of time into a beautiful tapestry. First, *what about injustice?* Second, *what about death?* Third, *what about joy?*
 - It is my hope and prayer that this message will remove this as a hindrance to faith, that it will bring comfort to those who have faced injustice, and that by the end we will all, like Solomon, find a place for rejoicing amidst the hardships of life.

BUT WHAT ABOUT INJUSTICE?

- So, as we come to our first point let's restate the truth of what has already been said and then raise an objection. We can put it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) God is weaving every thread of time into a beautiful tapestry. But what about injustice?**
 - Look with me at verse 16. **READ 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.**

- We can all resonate with the Preacher’s angst and frustration. There is injustice and wickedness everywhere but what really angers him is when you find it in the very places it should not be.
 - He mentions two of those places: in the justice system and in religious circles.
- The place of justice is the courtroom. A person goes to court expecting justice but so often there is only corruption: “even there was wickedness.” As is so often the case, you will get as much justice as you can afford. This is bad but what really grieves the Preacher is that it goes unpunished.
 - How evil it is when those in positions of justice abuse their power. I was reading the story of Nadia Murad. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for her efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon in war. This came out of her own experience. In 2014, ISIS attacked a village of Kurdish-speaking Yazidis in Iraq. Nadia was taken to a slave market in Mosul and bought by a judge. The judge raped Nadia daily. He beat her when she displeased him. When she tried to escape, he let his guards gang-rape her.
 - Such stories of abuse of power by those who are supposed to stand up for the law could be multiplied a million times over: **“in the place of justice, even there was wickedness.”**
- There is another place where one would expect better things and that is within religious circles, what the Preacher calls “the place of righteousness.” People expect to find right conduct in the church, the synagogue, the mosque, and the temple. But like the Preacher we are filled with rage because “even there was wickedness.”
 - On September 30th each year Canadians participate in Orange Shirt Day. It is about promoting hope and reconciliation to honour those effected by residential schools. This past year an article came out describing the horrific stories at the five Residential Schools right here on Vancouver Island.¹
 - I could hardly read it because it tells of Indigenous children being beaten tortured, starved, and sexually abused. It documents the fact that 202 children died right here on the Island. In 1939 six boys escaped the school on a small island near Chemainus after repeatedly being raped by the Priest. And of course, much of this abuse was done by priests and nuns. **And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.”**
- The injustice in this world is overwhelming but what’s even worse is that people get away with it. All this can lead one to despair. How do you deal with this?
 - I want to suggest to you that the true Christian message, not the twisted version of abusive priests and nuns, can save you from despair, particularly if you are one who has experienced such wickedness.
 - While it does not answer every question of why God allows such things it does give an ultimate answer that is far more satisfying than anything provided by secular thinking, atheism, or the new age.
- The Preacher gives the ultimate answer in verse 17. **READ 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.**
 - God may allow times of war and times of injustice but here we learn that there will be a time for justice. A day is coming when every person must answer to God for their actions.
 - Hebrews 9:27 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.”**
 - Acts 17:31 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 5) “[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.”**
 - And the very last verse of Ecclesiastes says, **(SHOW SLIDE 6) “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”**

¹ <https://www.capnews.ca/news/here-are-all-202-children-known-to-have-died-in-vancouver-island-residential-schools>

- People sometimes object to the idea that God will judge or to the idea of hell. But listen, this is one of the most comforting truths there is for it shows us that we live in a universe that is ruled by a God who cares about justice.
 - Jesus offers you something secular world cannot. If God does not exist, then the priests will get away with what they did at the Residential Schools, Hitler will get away with killing six million Jews, and the people who have harmed you will get away with what they have done.
 - If this is the case then all you can do is bow your head in despair or you can take justice into your own hands and seek revenge.
- Listen, the great truth of God’s final judgement saves you from despair for a day is coming when justice will be served. This also saves you from having to take revenge for you leave what has been done to you in his hands, trusting that he will settle all scores and make all things right.
 - All of this should also cause us to fall to our knees before Jesus, the Judge of all, and ask for his forgiveness for any sins we have committed against him and to then get up and use our lives to work for justice in this world and to live our lives in such a way that honours him.
 - So, there you have it. We may not understand why God allows the times of injustice to continue but there is a time for every matter under heaven. And soon there will be a time for justice, a day of reckoning, when God will give a fair and final assessment of everything that has been done.

BUT WHAT ABOUT DEATH?

- Even though this answer has been given, Solomon, the Preacher, keeps pressing into the problem of evil and suffering in the world. He has dealt with injustice but there is another objection. Let’s restate the truth of what has already been said and then raise the second objection.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) God is weaving every thread of time into a beautiful tapestry. But what about death?**
 - Death takes everything from us. How does this fit into God’s tapestry? Verses 18-22 bring us face to face with two great facts about what it means to be human. These two facts are in direct conflict with each other.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Fact #1: we live as if we matter and what we do matters.** Notice that word “advantage” at the end of verse 19. This is the same theme as the thesis question at the beginning of Ecclesiastes: ***“what does man gain from all his toil under the sun?”*** We all give tremendous effort to our lives. We toil and toil believing we can gain an advantage from all our work.
 - In this sense we believe we are different from animals. Dogs don’t produce great works of art. Cats think they’re smart but they don’t study physics in order to build airplanes, space shuttles, or skyscrapers.
 - This is why Ernest Becker writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 9) “The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count.”**²
 - You live as if your life matters and what you do matters. However, there is a second fact that crashes into this first one, like a freight train crashing into a car on a railroad track.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Fact #2: death will annihilate us and everything we have accomplished.** You may live as if you matter and what you do matters but, as Matt McCullough writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “Death makes a devastating counterclaim. Death says, in effect, go on and decide what to do with your life. Do something other than what an armadillo would do, or a carpenter bee, or a snail. Have**

² Matt McCullough, *Remember Death*, 103.

fun with that. Just know that whatever you decide to be, whatever you decide to do, you cannot decide to be immortal. You still end up dead, just like the animals.”³

- So, you see every person lives with this incredible contradiction at the heart of their life. To cite Becker again, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) “Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.”⁴**
 - The Preacher hammers this same point home. Look at verses 19-20. **READ 19-20 -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. ²⁰All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.**
- Do you see the contradiction at the heart of human life? We live as if we matter and what we do matters and yet the reality of death argues that you aren’t special because you and all you have done will be utterly forgotten.
 - How do you deal with this contradiction? Let me show you the basic answer of the secular world and then show you a far more satisfying answer in the Preacher’s words.
- The French philosopher Albert Camus said that, if there is no God, there are really only two options for you. The first is to commit suicide. You are going to die anyways. So why are you just delaying the inevitable? You might say, **“Because there is meaning in my life.”** Camus says, **“You are being naïve. Any idea of meaning is an illusion. All that you are and all that you do will perish and be utterly forgotten. It will be as if you never existed.”**
 - Camus preferred a second option which he called, “the Revolt.” To revolt means to live as if you matter. Pretend that your life and the lives of your loved ones have value. And when death threatens to take it all you raise your fist against it. In the words of the famous poem, **“Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”**
 - This is the most common way people in our culture face death. But this is not being honest. It’s living a dream and refusing to face reality as it is. It’s also incredibly foolish. Revolt all you want. It will make about as much of a difference as an ant defiantly standing against an oncoming bulldozer or a sandcastle on Rath Trevor beach defying the oncoming tide.
 - Rage all you want. Death cannot hear you. Death does not care. And death will utterly annihilate you and all you have done.
- So, to summarize: you live as if you matter and what you do matters but how can you live this way when death will annihilate you and everything you have done?
 - What we have seen so far is that the secular world cannot offer a satisfying answer to the problem of death. Let’s turn to the Bible’s answer now as found in the Preacher’s words.
- First, the Preacher agrees that you do matter and everything you do in this life also matters.
 - Where do I get that? Well, I want you to notice that as the Preacher wrote this paragraph he was meditating on Genesis 1-3. In verse 18 Solomon refers to human beings as “the children of Adam.” He speaks of the beasts that God created and humans are to rule over, of the breath of life that God breathed into all living things, and of human work.
 - Genesis 1-2 declare that your life does have value for you are created in the image of God. In this sense you are not like the beasts. Not only that your work has value for God created you to accomplish things.

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Ibid., 68.

- But second, the preacher also agrees that death will annihilate you and everything you do. That is his primary focus here for he is clearly meditating on Genesis 3.
 - It is in Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve believe a lie. The lie is that God is holding them back from their true potential of becoming like God himself. And so they rebel against God in an effort to become gods themselves.
 - For this great act of rebellion God punishes them by making work difficult and by sentencing them to death. Listen to Genesis 3:19: **“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** Picking up this language the preacher says in verse 20 that, **“All are from the dust, and to dust all return.”**
- But it is right here that we begin to see a different way for you to face the reality of your own death. This way is not through suicide and it is not through the foolish idea of revolt. Rather, it is to see death as a test from God that is meant to teach us something.
 - Look at verse 18. **READ 18 - I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them.** He says that we are to view death as a test from God. It is human sin that brought death but here we see that even death has a purpose. God has intentionally woven the black threads of death into his tapestry. There is a time to be born and a time to die. So what is the big lesson that we are to learn from death?
 - Answer: you are not a god. Death’s purpose is to humble you for it should teach you that in one sense you are no different than the beasts. Look again at verse 18. **READ 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.**
- We are so filled with pride in who we are what we do. We act as if we are gods who can control our world and destiny. We say, **“I will decide what is right and wrong, who I will sleep with, and how I will live my life.”**
 - But the Preacher says, **“You are failing the test. You’re not facing reality.”** Death should humble you to realize you are not a god and this should in turn cause you to bow the knee to your Creator.
 - This is to live in sync with reality. But Solomon isn’t entirely sure what happens to the human spirit when it dies. He believes in some sort of final judgement and afterlife but for him it was not clear.
- Yet for us who live on this side of the cross, there is an even more satisfying answer to the problem of death.
 - Through his death Jesus took the punishment for our sin so that our arrogance can be forgiven. Through his resurrection he conquered death itself. Do you see how much more satisfying of answer this is?
 - The Bible says you matter and everything you do matters. Yes, death is a terrible enemy. God has woven its dark threads into the tapestry of our lives to teach us through hard experience that we are not gods. If we will learn this lesson then we will humble ourselves before our Creator and seek his forgiveness. Have you done this? If you do then it is right here that Christianity offers you something nothing else can and that is to pass beyond death into a world where death is no more. You are offered a resurrection body that cannot die, a world in which death is abolished, and a relationship with the living God that is eternal. This is the Christian answer to the problem of death.

WHAT ABOUT JOY?

- But very quickly now we must deal with one more objection. Here’s the third point:

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) God is weaving every thread of time into a beautiful tapestry. But what about joy?** Can there be joy in this life if death will annihilate it all?
 - Once again, we come back to the Preacher’s wisdom for our lives. He’s been arguing that you should not pour all your effort into life in an effort to gain something at the end. There is no final advantage for you will die. But that does not mean you cannot find joy in this life. How do you find it? By living in the moment.
 - Look at verse 22. **READ 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?***
- The Preacher says we cannot know what will come after our lives. We can’t know if kids or grandkids will live well. We can’t know if our work will make a lasting difference. So, the Preacher says, **“stop stressing about that because you have no control over it anyways. Leave that in God’s hands and enjoy the work that God has given you in this moment.”**
 - Solomon has said this before but he adds one new piece here. Notice the word “lot.” It is the same word as “portion,” like when God gave certain portions of land to each tribe in Israel when they entered the Promised Land. In the same way God has given you a certain piece of land. That is, he has given you certain skills, gifts, jobs, and circumstances. Just like working the land has hard times you will have hard times but there is also great joy working the land such as when you eat the food that comes from it.
 - So the wise person recognizes there are hard times and good times. There is toil and there is joy. Rejoice in the good things.

CONCLUSION

- So you see, here are some solid answers to the problem of evil. God will judge so you don’t have despair or seek revenge. Death is God’s tool to teach us a lesson that we are not gods and so we should humble ourselves. And even amongst this difficult test God also allots a portion to us that we can rejoice in each day.
 - You can do this for Jesus faced injustice so you could be justified. Jesus came to rescue you from your sins and deliver you from death. He has given good gifts now and promises an inheritance where one day you will rejoice as never have in this life. He will bring you into a world where there is no more death, where justice reigns, where swords are reshaped into gardening tools, where he wipes away the tears of the oppressed, where the last who have been harmed will be first, and where wickedness is a forgotten word.
 - This is why we pray, “your kingdom come, on the earth as it already has come in heaven.” This is the kind of king we all want. This is the kind life we all want under the sun. And Jesus will bring it all. Come Lord Jesus, come!