

“When Life Isn’t Fair” (part 1)

Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16

One of the greatest films of all time is the 1946 classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” We don’t have very many traditions in our home, but each Christmas I insist that we sit down and watch it as a family. It is the story of George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, a down-on-his-luck businessman in Bedford Falls, NY, whose kindness is taken advantage of by others. After a series of events has him being exploited by a corrupt man named Potter, George stands on a bridge one Christmas Eve and seriously contemplates taking his own life. Before he does, however, his decision brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched, and how different life in his community of Bedford Falls would be if he had never been born. Instead of seeing his life as an unfair tragedy, George is finally able to see it as it truly is—a gift from above.

From the earliest years of our childhood, we had our own perception of whether or not something was ‘fair.’ Right? I mean, you have more than likely made this statement at some point in your life: **“It’s just not fair!”** You felt like you were getting the short end of the stick, the raw end of some deal. Maybe you were passed over for a job promotion that you felt you had earned. Or maybe you were at the height of your athletic career and suddenly had an injury that forced you to the sidelines. Or maybe someone you loved passed into eternity before you felt it was their time. No matter what the circumstances were, all of us have experienced the bitter taste of ‘unfairness’ in life.

Charles Swindoll—*“Sad endings we can handle, but not unjust ones. Suffering makes us sad, but injustice makes us mad. In our childlike minds we still long for fairness and equity. We still want stories to end well so that people can live happily ever after. But life is not that neat and tidy.”*

We don't live in a fairy tale world. In the real world, instead of Cinderella getting the slipper, it goes to the stepsister.

Solomon had experienced this same frustration as well. He came to that conclusion that under the sun, life just doesn't seem to be fair. To the victor goes the spoils, but the nice guys always seem to finish last. The rich and powerful Potter's always seemed to take advantage of the George Bailey's of life.

It was all frustrating to the Preacher and seemed so empty. And yet deep down, Solomon knew full well the truth that God is the ultimate Judge. It is not up for you and me to decide on what is fair and unfair, nor should we live with an accusatory finger pointed at another—even when we feel that we've been treated unfairly by them. There is a throne whereby the universe is ruled, and you and I don't sit upon it. But Almighty God does, and somehow and in some way, He will one day make right every wrong, His justice will roll on like a river, and His righteousness will flow like a never-ending stream (Amos 5:24).

I want us to look at three observations that Solomon makes as he weighs the perceived 'unfairness' of life under the sun. To begin with, notice the...

1. Unresolved OBSTACLES to our faith (3:16-22)

"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."

Solomon says, "I have seen under the sun wickedness where there ought to be righteousness and justice." I've seen it too, haven't you? The powerful and corrupt seem to get off scot-free. I mean, from a very young age, we have a problem with this, don't we? I know how you felt when someone cut in front of you in line when you were on the way to lunch or to the playground. You teachers in the room hear the tiny little protests on a daily basis, don't you?

illus. of traffic

The Preacher says that when he looked around at life under the sun, it didn't seem fair. He saw some of the very things that many people use as an insufficient excuse for their unbelief. What are some these unresolved obstacles?

The absence of justice

The problem of evil and suffering, for example. If there is a God of love and justice, and if He is all-powerful like the Bible says that He is, then why does so much suffering exist in the world?

You've seen the pictures of starving children with stomachs that are swollen from malnutrition. You've seen the images of horrified men, women, and children living in war torn countries. I've been to some of those places and have sat down with parents whose children have terrible scars.

You've heard it all before—*“How do you Christians explain the problem of suffering and the continued existence of evil and still hold forth the truth that there is a God who is loving and all-powerful?”* How do you look the victim of abuse in the eye and tell her that God loves her, when in her mind she goes back to a time in her childhood when someone in a position of power took advantage of her and spoiled her innocence? If God loves her, and if He is all-powerful, then why didn't He keep her from being hurt like that?

There are plenty of unbelievers who will use this line and conclude—*“If God is loving, then He is not all-powerful. If He is all-powerful, then God must not be loving.”* But it is a conclusion based on faulty logic and incomplete theology. It fails to understand both the nature of God and man.

If you look at verse 16, Solomon says that he considered life under the sun, he saw that in the place of justice, “even there was wickedness,” and in the place of righteousness, “even there was wickedness.” Lady Justice wasn't really wearing

a blindfold. Her scales were not really balanced. Truth was forever on the scaffold, and wrong was forever on the throne.

Things seemed so upside down under the sun. In fact, by this point in the book, Solomon has used the phrase some 17 times to describe his horizontal view of man's situation.

When it came to truth and justice, things seemed so out of whack. The injustices of life led Solomon to ask serious questions. He's borderline cynical. And even though he has breakthrough moments where he is thinking vertically, most of his observations lack vertical perspective. Much of his thinking reflects the skeptical thought processes that we hear from many unbelievers today. One person has even said of him:

"You won't find Solomon on his knees, but on his feet. You won't find him looking up, but looking around. You won't find him seeking patience in prayer, but shouting back with questions."

Let's just be honest with each other. All of us have been there, haven't we? Have you ever looked around at the presence of evil and wickedness on parade and asked, "How long, O Lord?" It was the question David asked:

Psalm 13:1-2—"How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

You won't find a single person walking around High Point this morning who will tell you that there is no evil in the world. That's because deep within humanity is a sense of morality. It was put in you by the God who made you. We have a sense of right and wrong. Yet sin has warped and twisted our sense of morality.

A man will appeal to some measure of morality, but he will not give glory to God who put the sense of it within him.

Without an objective standard of truth, we always end up setting ourselves up as judge, jury, and executioner.

It reminds me of the book of Judges, a book that is several thousand years old, but is just as relevant today as it ever was. In fact, some of the things that happened during the days of the judges seems like that could have been ripped from today's headlines.

- political chaos
- gender confusion
- sexual abuses

The book of Judges is a warning of what can happen to a society of people that forsakes the Lord and His Word. In short, it presents us with a picture of societal collapse as people lose sight of God as the ultimate Judge. When we reject God's rule and seek to establish our own version of morality, chaos and destruction will always follow.

In a fallen world, truth and justice is turned on its head. What's wrong becomes right, and what's right is wrong. Now, depending on who you ask, it is 'immoral' to teach children their gender is assigned at birth. It is 'immoral' to refuse homosexuals the right to marry based on a standard definition of marriage being strictly between a man and a woman.

In fact, one of the reasons that social justice is such a hot button issue today is because people have a sense of morality. I mean whenever you see blatant injustice, how can you turn a blind eye to it, right? The problem, however, is that

our sin leads us to excuse our behavior and play the victim card. I never have to take responsibility for my own sins if there is always someone else to blame.

Jesus didn't run from those who needed a Physician. He ran to them! But what He gave to needy sinners could not be described as 'justice.' He gave undeserved grace. He demonstrated mercy. Through His own death on the cross, He satisfied the justice of God. At Calvary, justice cried out and demanded sin be atoned for—and mercy answered.

So if anyone ever brings up the problem of evil in the world and tried to use it as an argument against God's love and God's power, preach to them the cross of Jesus Christ.

The arrogance of the wicked

Wicked individuals were bent on wickedness rather than forsaking their sin and practicing true righteousness. This vexed Solomon deeply, as it also vexes us.

I'll get to this in a minute, but you'll notice down in chapter 4 that he saw oppression and violence. Those who were at the bottom were being kicked while they were down, and power was on the side of their oppressors. In chapter 8, he will point out how we live in a world where some men have power and others have to suffer under their heavy yoke.

I think of those who are suffering under the brutal regimes of the world, such as those Christians suffering intense persecution under the Kim regime in North Korea.

One person exercises his authority at another person's expense. Solomon sees it and it is as if his hands are tied behind his back; he feels powerless to do anything about it and he knows it isn't fair.

"It's just not fair!" we say. "Life shouldn't be this way!"

You feel it when one of your kids is bullied and picked on and excluded by the group and you're not there to make things right. You feel what Solomon feels when you see the rights of everyone else being defended except Bible-believing Christians. You feel it when you see the strong taking advantage of the weak. You feel it when you've been wronged and yet you know that the gospel demands that you forgive the one who has wounded you.

The absurdity of death

As he observed life around him under the sun, not only does Solomon point out the absence of justice. Notice that he calls attention to the absurdity of death. He says that what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. Man has no advantage over the beasts. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to the dust all return.

illus. of untimely death

In addition to these apparent unresolved obstacles to our faith, Solomon then moves to the subject of the...

2. Unjust OPPRESSION of the weak (4:1-3)

“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.”

Back up in verse 16, Solomon says that under the sun he saw wickedness where there ought to have been justice, and here he says that he found oppression where there ought to have been comfort.

“Oppressions”—*word is a passive participle; means that it is something done to you beyond your control; extortion*

The Message paraphrases this way:

“Next I turned my attention to all the outrageous violence that takes place on this planet—the tears of the victims, no one to comfort them; the iron grip of the oppressors, no one to rescue the victims from them.”

Solomon examined all the ‘outrageous violence’ that takes place on our planet. One could only wonder what he would say if he were given today’s headlines.

Have you ever been the victim of a crime? How'd it make you feel on the inside? You feel violated. When we are wronged, there is a longing for justice that cries out from within our hearts. You want the wrong to be made right.

When it comes to personal injustices and oppression and wrongs to us that come at the hands of others, how are we to respond? Part of me longs for vengeance. Part of me longs for justice. Part of me seeks the role of the judge. So what is the solution?

Look at what Solomon understands back up in verse 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.’”

Under the sun, it didn’t seem like justice and righteousness was being carried out. Yet the Preacher is not foolish. He doesn’t try to take matters into his own hands. He doesn’t point an accusatory finger to the sky and assign blame to God. No, he fully understands that there is a time for every matter, and that includes future judgment. One day, God will judge the secrets of men.

And knowing that God is the Judge ought to keep you from usurping that role for yourself. We’re to use sound judgment, but we are not to sit in judgment over another. You are not judging a person when you stand upon the truth of God’s Word. You’re using sound judgment.

To say that God will judge the righteous and the wicked is not a judgmental statement; it is a true statement. God is merciful and gracious. He is also holy and just.

It was the poet Longfellow who said:

*Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceedingly small,
Though with patience He stands waiting
With exactness He grinds all.*

When you look around at what's going on under the sun, you wonder at times if justice can truly be found. But what the Preacher says here in the text ought to cause you to fear and tremble. God will judge the righteous and the wicked. It is who He is.

And if there is a time and season for every matter under heaven, then there must also be a time for justice. A time when we stand before the Judge.

Revelation 20:11-12—“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”

God will one day judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus!

That doesn't mean that you and I shouldn't pursue what is right. As Christian men and women, we have a God-given responsibility to stand for what is right, to be a voice for truth.

Philip Ryken—*“Depending on our place in society...as fathers and mothers, as pastors and leaders, as citizens and public officials, we are called to do what is right in the home, in the church, and in society.”*

Our confidence does not lie in a justice system but in the Chief Justice Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ! The day is soon coming when He will indeed judge the wicked.

Therefore, instead of getting angry and bitter and jaded by all the oppression we see in the world, we can trust God to make all things right in the final analysis. Instead of being filled with resentment over being wronged by someone, I am free to forgive and move on with my life.

John Iverson—*“The man who refuses to forgive destroys the bridge over which he himself must cross.”*

Yet at the same time, I know that strictly in myself I lack the power and ability to forgive. That’s why God gave His Son. Jesus Christ came to satisfy the demands of the Law, and He condemned sin in the flesh.

He knows what it is like to be oppressed and victimized.

Isaiah says that He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. By His wounds, I am healed.

Isaiah 53:7—**“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”**

If anyone had the right to say, “It isn't fair,” surely it was Him. If anyone had the right to take to Twitter and let everyone know how he was a victim, it was Him.

Through His resurrection, He now gives His life to those who repent of their sins and believe the gospel. His Spirit comes to live within you and live His life through you. And while it is true that people will mistreat you and wound you and hurt you—you are free from having to be their judge, from being the one who sees to it that they get their just desserts. You're free to forgive and leave it to the Judge.

Romans 12:19-21—“Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

When life isn't fair, what are you going to do? Are you going to be full of resentment and become bitter? Will you complain to every person who will lend you their ear? You can stew over it until you go crazy, and it won't solve a thing. Why not commit it to the Lord?

Dr. David Jeremiah tells the true story of Charles Tindley, one of the greatest African American preachers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He had been born into slavery in 1851. After the Civil War, he moved to Philadelphia where he began attending church and was saved. It wasn't long before he was called to preach and made the journey from being the church's janitor to its senior pastor.

Tindley's congregation grew rapidly and thousands came to hear him preach every Sunday. Most of them were poor and black, and this was in a time when there was particular oppression for the poor and black. Tindley himself died in abject poverty, and despite his fame, was buried in an unmarked grave.

He faced great oppression in life—racial injustice, false accusations, and plain old mistreatment because of the color of his skin. When he was a candidate for

a bishop's position, a competing minister called him an 'unlettered idiot' to his face. An anonymous letter accused him of something that wasn't true, and he was denied the position. Not long after that, his wife died. His son was killed in World War 1. His ministry was one long road of hardship.

He didn't get bitter about it. He didn't lash out and try to take matters of justice into his own hands. Instead, Tindley channeled the burden of his suffering into hymn writing. He knew the Judge! One of the hymns he wrote in 1905 says:

*1 When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When the world is tossing me
Like a ship upon the sea,
Thou Who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me (stand by me).*

*2 In the midst of tribulation,
Stand by me (stand by me);
In the midst of tribulation,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When the hosts of hell assail,
And my strength begins to fail,
Thou Who never lost a battle,
Stand by me (stand by me).*

*3 In the midst of faults and failures,
Stand by me (stand by me);
In the midst of faults and failures,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When I do the best I can,
And my friends misunderstand,*

*Thou Who knowest all about me,
Stand by me (stand by me).*

*4 In the midst of persecution,
Stand by me (stand by me);
In the midst of persecution,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When my foes in battle array
Undertake to stop my way,
Thou Who saved Paul and Silas,
Stand by me (stand by me).*

*5 When I'm growing old and feeble,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When I'm growing old and feeble,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When my life becomes a burden,
And I'm nearing chilly Jordan,
O Thou "Lily of the Valley,"
Stand by me (stand by me).*