Evil Under the Sun
Ecclesiastes 3:16-5:7

We're looking at Ecclesiastes and the author's investigation of life 'under the sun' - when this life is all there is - and where can you find answers to the most difficult questions of life if there's no God and no eternity.

And in today's passage, the Preacher - as he calls himself - takes a look at the winners and losers in life. Because, if there is no God, how do you handle the fact that some people - the rich and influential - seem to win at life, while others lose? How do you handle the heart-breaking implications of injustice, oppression and suffering in a world where God has been erased?

The Problem of Injustice
On top of the dome of The Old Bailey, the UK's central criminal court, is a statue of Lady Justice. In her left hand she holds a set of scales - to weigh evidence fairly. And in the right's a sword, the authority to deliver a verdict and punish the guilty. Of course, elsewhere Lady Justice wears a blindfold - because justice should be blind and not swayed by position or wealth.

But what if the legal system wasn't blind? What if the blindfold were lifted? What if those with power had their finger on the scales? What if some - the rich, or well-connected, or even just the majority - could get justice, or get away with it, but others got no such thing?

Because that's the scenario the preacher wants you to consider: chapter 3v16, 'I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness.' *I saw*. Because this is a reality for many.

And not just in the courts of law. Economies are ruined, jobs are destroyed and people starve while rulers live lavishly. Families are broken by alcohol or drug use, while the people who sell them prosper. How are you supposed to make sense of suffering like that if there is no God?

Chapter 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*.'

You see, if there is no God, how can you comfort the sufferer? 'You can't', the Preacher says. Because in a secular, materialistic world, where there's no ultimate point to life, there's no point to suffering, no higher meaning to it. So you can never comfort the sufferer. Life's just random chance. So all you can do is harden your heart, and tough it out. But what kind of comfort is that? Especially for the one whose ability to *tough it out* is broken.

Or, you could take the path of eastern mysticism and pretend suffering isn't real. But if I walked onto the children's cancer ward and told the parents, 'your child's leukaemia is an illusion, it's not really real, because this life isn't really real' would they say, 'thank you, that was so comforting, please come again'?

Or, you could take the moralist's approach and say, the people who suffer, they deserve it. Or, this is karma. Which is very convenient when it's someone else who's suffering, but what happens when it's your turn?

In a nihilistic world, where there is no God, and no eternity, there's no point to life and so there's no comfort to be had in life, the Preacher says, especially when suffering comes knocking.

But that's not the only problem with a secular take on suffering. Because it can also never end oppression, can it? You see, if there is no God, what should the oppressed do? Get their justice now! Do to their oppressors what they have done to them. Get your vengeance in this life, because this life is all there is. It's why the French Revolution descended into Terror. No God, no final judgment, so we've got to be the judges, we've got to make them pay now. And the cycle of violence keeps rolling.

And if that's really what the world is like, then the Preacher's dark verdict is, you're better off dead: v2, 'And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.' Or better still, never be born. Because at least then you don't have to experience the pointlessness of suffering.

But the Preacher's point is not that you consider suicide. He wants you to take a step back, and ask, where do you get this idea of justice from? Because if the world really is meaningless, there can be no ultimates, which means a secular world view can never say why anything is just or unjust, right or wrong.

But the Preacher can: v17, '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.' So what makes most sense of your belief in justice, that there is no ultimate judge, or that there is and one day he will call all to judgement?

And if a secular approach to life can never give you a meaning for suffering, what if God could see a purpose you can't? And what if one purpose was to teach us? Verse 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 beasts.' In other words, the injustices we witness in the world should make us examine ourselves. You see, people with a secular mind-set think unjust suffering is a test of God: if he really existed, how could he let this happen? And the preacher says, no, it's a test for us. Because what does injustice say of the human heart? That man, left to himself, is no better than the animals who devour each other. And the law of the jungle rules, and life really is the survival of the fittest.

And scientific materialism says, 'Correct. The idea that you're made in the image of God, is the stuff of fairy tales. You're really just an animal.'

But if that's true, why not live like that? If as the Preacher says, v20, 'All go to one place [humans and animals alike]. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.' Why not live out the reality of the survival of the fittest? Why care for the poor, or the suffering, or the rights of minorities? If that's true, what finger can you point at Nazi Germany or Stalin's Russia, or Pol Pot's Cambodia? And if that's unthinkable, maybe the secular world-view is too.

But the Preacher goes further. Because he also tells us *why* oppression happens.

The Roots of Injustice

And the first is ***Power.*** Chapter 4:1, 'On the side of their oppressors *there was power*.' You see, in a dog eat dog world, where we're really just animals, life is competitive, and ultimately everything comes down to power.

But what drives the desire for power? Well, that's the second root: **Envy.** Verse 4, 'Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour. This also is vanity.' So, the Preacher's saying, behind so much of our striving to get ahead, to be the one calling the shots, or influencing others, is envy.

Last week, the BBC ran an article: 'Why do we buy into the 'cult' of overwork?' And the reason, it said, was that we think overworking puts us on the path to success. That our 'work worship', as it called it, promises us what we want. That, 'as long as we glamourise money, *status* and achievement, there will always be people who work hard to get them.'

And the author quotes Gordon Gekko, Michael Douglas' character in the 1987 movie, Wall Street: "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures *the essence of the evolutionary spirit*. *Greed, in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge in mankind*."

Exactly, the Preacher would say. Because if greed is this inordinate longing for wealth, or love, or knowledge, envy wants it because the other person has it, and won't be happy until it has more of it than they do. And we envy someone else's life, or parts of their life. Their influence, their learning, their relationships, maybe even their body. As Harold Coffin said, 'Envy is counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own.' Because envy wants to be first. It wants to be the one shining brightest, the one who everyone looks up to. And it's that desire to be at the top that's at the bottom of so much injustice and oppression, the Preacher says.

But if you think about it, a secular, scientific materialistic world view can't offer you anything else, can it? You're an animal and this is the evolutionary spirit, the upward surge. In an under-the-sun world, this is what enables you to get ahead.

The problem is, the endless pursuit of more never satisfies, does it? David Foster Wallace, the author and atheist said, 'Pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things - if they are where you tap real meaning in life - then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough.' Sure, says the Preacher, v7, 'his eyes are never satisfied with riches.' Enough is never enough.

Plus, envy isolates you. It's the third root of injustice the Preacher identifies: ***isolated individualism***. Because envy can never be happy, or smile or applaud at someone else's success.

And he gives us two case studies. In v8 it's a man driven by work but, 'who has no other, either son or brother.' He's devoid of community. And yet, he never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself?' He's entirely self-absorbed in his own self-advancement. He has no one to share life with. You see, if we really are just animals, then it's not just that you've got to keep up with the Joneses, you've got to get past them, and if necessary, trample over them. And so in your desire for self-advancement, you've simply added to the oppression of the world.

And the Preacher's judgement: v8, 'This also is vanity.' It's *hebel*, smoke. You may end up incredibly rich, but in reality be incredibly poor. You can have everything and yet have nothing. Because you have no one to share it with.

Then, in v13, it's the case of 'an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.' So he too is isolated. He's at the top, but there's only room for one at the top, and he's become an echo chamber of one. Until a young contender arises and takes the throne, and everyone flocks to him: v16, 'There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.' And the people desert him like they did the previous king. In other words, you just have to hang around long enough to discover that success and popularity - getting to the top of the tree - doesn't last. Verse 16, 'Surely this also is vanity.'

Ok, but if the desire for power, and the envy that drives it, and the individualism it creates are a cause of so much oppression, what's the answer? Well, the Preacher starts with a false one. Verse 5, 'The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.'

Because you could see the brokenness of the world and the greed and envy and personality politics behind it and think, 'I want nothing to do with this.' And you check out of the rat race and go live in a beach side villa, or van, and look on critically at the rats still running.

The problem is, that's just another display of indifference to suffering. Because it doesn't care enough to do anything about it. *And,* the Preacher says, it's self-destructive. You may not be consuming others, but you end up consuming yourself: your ability to care, your sense of priorities, all get eaten away. Even, eventually, your self-respect - because since when has deliberately under-achieving been a virtue?

So if withdrawing isn't the answer, what is?

Well, before he takes us there, the Preacher gives us two clues. Firstly, v6, 'Better is a handful of *quietness* than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.'

So instead of folding your hands in indifference, and instead of using two hands to grab as much as you possibly can, take with one hand, live modestly - and that'll leave the other hand free to give and serve. Discover the inner rest and quietness of soul that comes with contentment. Take joy in the present, rather than always wishing you were somewhere else, doing something else, with someone else.

But the second clue is community. Because if, as the Preacher says in v4, 'envy of neighbour' creates individualism, how about cultivating a love for your neighbour instead? Verse 9, 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.' Because when, in v10, mishap happens, and you fall in a hole, your friend can help you back up; or v11 when adversity comes, and you're facing one of life's cold nights, your friend will be there to help keep you warm; or, v12, when you get attacked, your friend will have your back.

In other words, there's safety in numbers. It's why if you're a parent you're happy for your kids to go out, provided they stick together. It's why at my college we had a parenting system, and older students, like Su, would act as college mothers and adopt younger students like me, and look out for them. In fact, it worked so well, I ended up marrying my mother.

And the Preacher's point is, winning in the dog-eat-dog world, may seem attractive, but it leaves you isolated and vulnerable in a way that having community around you doesn't. Because if two are better than one, three is even better: v12, 'A threefold cord is not quickly broken.'

The question is, how are you going to find that inner quietness and community? Because if work, or wealth, or anything else you worship, will eat you and others alive, you've got to change what you worship. And change it for something that'll leave you loving your neighbour not envying or oppressing them.

The Answer to Injustice

Winston Churchill was once asked, 'Are you ready to meet your maker?' To which Churchill replied, 'I am. Whether my maker is prepared for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter.' It's a great line, except Churchill falls into the trap that many fall into, of thinking God's your equal.

Chapter 5:1-2, 'Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools… Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.'

You see, if power and envy and individualism result in injustice, they also leave us thinking we're God; that the world should revolve around us. And that will inevitably influence the way you think of and speak to God. Because the envious person, who thinks life isn't giving them what they deserve, will speak to God out of their resentment and bitterness. While the person who thinks they've made it to the top will speak to God - if they speak to him at all - out of their pride. Both forget that God is in heaven and we're not.

One commentary I read this week quoted the American philosopher, Lisa Simpson, as saying, 'Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.' Yes, the Preacher would say, approach God to listen, not just talk. Remember his infinite greatness and your smallness. His wisdom and your lack of it. Because, v7, 'God is the one you must fear.' Or as the writer to the Hebrews puts it: 'Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire' (Heb 12:28-29).

But how are you supposed to approach a God like that at all? A God so different from us, so holy, that he's described as a fire that burns up everything before it? And when you know you're guilty of envy and individualism and walking over others to get what you want, how can you stand before a God the preacher describes as the Judge of all the earth, and listen? How can you ever know the inner quietness of heart you need, in the presence of such a God? Won't your head and heart just be full of condemning thoughts?

Well, John opens his gospel by telling us, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' (John 1:1, 14). And Jesus is the ultimate Word of God you're to listen to.

And Jesus said, be on your guard against envy, 'for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (Lk 12:15). And he didn't just teach that, he modelled it. He never envied. Because of all people, Jesus had reason to think that he was *not* getting the life he deserved. But instead of walking over others to get what he wanted, instead of using his power to get more power, or abuse people, he used it to serve and restore the broken and abused.

And at his trial he faced the injustice of a legal system tipped against him. And he was left isolated and alone, not because of his sin, but his friends'. And at the cross, he gave up power. He became the ultimate innocent sufferer. He took the burning fire of God's wrath at sin, that we might be spared it. He became the guilty, that we might become the innocent. He took the life he never deserved so we could have the life we never deserve. A life of being loved and accepted by a God so holy, but who we can now call, *Father*. The cross is the exact opposite of envy.

And when you see Jesus experiencing unjust suffering for you; when you see in him the friend who picks you up when you fall, who stands with you in adversity, who defends you from your enemies, and you don't have to do anything to earn it, you know you're loved, and you'll worship him, and your soul can begin to rest. Because you can stop trying to prove yourself. And you begin to discover the handful of quietness the Preacher's talking about.

And with it, you'll find a love for your neighbour that means you can build thick community around you. Because when you know you're loved in the highest court in the cosmos, you can love and do good to others, rather than trample on them. You can give your life in service of others, as Christ gave his life in service of you.