

“A World of Oppression”
Ecclesiastes 4:1-4
(Preached at Trinity, June 18, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Solomon continues to make observations of conditions in this world. Remember, Solomon's chief focus in Ecclesiastes is life without God. His conclusion:
Ecclesiastes 1:2 NAU - "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
2. God is the sovereign omnipotent ruler of all things. Nothing comes to pass that He has not ordered. Many people find it difficult to reconcile the existence of an all-powerful, sovereign God and the presence of such suffering upon the earth. How do you reconcile tornadoes and hurricanes? How do you explain the existence of disease and famine? How do you explain the recent earthquake in Turkey where 46 thousand people lost their lives. Solomon has been dealing with some of the objections that God governs all things with sovereign precision.
 - A. The first objection he addresses is the presence of such injustice in this world.
Ecclesiastes 3:16 NAU - "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."
 - B. The second objection is, if God is sovereign why is there little difference in the end of men and animals. Both face the same end—they die.
Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 NAU - "For the fate of the sons of men 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. ²⁰ All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust."
3. Solomon's observations continue in **Chapter 4**. As we often find throughout Ecclesiastes, there is no mention of God in this chapter. A world without God.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "Then I looked again . . ."
 - A. **Chapter 4** opens with Solomon observing further dimensions of injustice. If God is sovereign over all things, why are there so many who suffer under the oppression of the powerful.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun."
Ecclesiastes 5:8 NAU - "If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight" Don't be surprised!

- B. With the case of oppression there are two participants – the oppressor and the oppressed.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "And behold / saw the tears of the oppressed and *that* they had no one to comfort *them*; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort *them*."
 Creditors oppressing debtors. Masters oppressing slaves. Unscrupulous men oppressing widows and orphans. The rich oppressing the poor. Kings oppressing their subjects. Unjust judges denying justice to the weak.
4. Solomon looked upon the oppressed and beheld their tears.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "And behold / saw the tears of the oppressed and *that* they had no one to comfort *them*"
5. We live in a world of oppression. But who are the oppressed? And what do we mean by oppression? This is a huge question and difficult to answer today when there are endless groups that claim that they are oppressed. The victim mentality has become highly popular.
 Iain Provan defines *oppression* as “Seeking after profit without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of other people.”¹
 That covers the oppression of the poor and needy. But there are others who suffer oppression in our world.
 The dictionary definition is more general and serves as an adequate description as Solomon is viewing it: “The arbitrary and cruel exercise of power.”
- I. Solomon observed the rich and powerful oppressors.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort *them*."
- A. God grants certain individuals and organizations power and authority.
1. There is the authority of the home, of the state, and the church
 2. We are granted this power, position, and authority by the sovereign hand of God. But to whom much is given, much is required. All of us need to be careful how we handle our authority and how we care for others.
 3. Husbands and fathers have been abusive.
 Civil magistrates have been abusive. Totalitarian regimes are often known for their cruelty.
 4. Church leaders must also guard against hyper authoritarianism.
 Some are guilty of spiritual oppression.
 5. Oppressors abuse their power because they are able. It is easy for them.
Micah 2:1-2 NAU - "Woe to those who scheme iniquity, Who work out evil on their beds! When morning comes, they do it, For it is in the power of their hands. ² They covet fields and then seize *them*, And houses, and take *them* away. They rob a man and his house, A man and his inheritance."

¹ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 95.

- B. In a world of oppression and tyranny who is there to offer comfort? Solomon says there is no one to offer comfort.

Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "And behold / saw the tears of the oppressed and *that* they had no one to comfort *them*; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort *them*."

1. This is what can happen when the powerful lord over the weak without mercy or concern for their fellow man.
Who is there to help the oppressed?
2. There can be the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.
3. One can imagine the hopelessness of the American slaves.

II. What is the proper response to the oppression of this world?

- A. We should always be ready to minister to the hurting – the abused and oppressed
1. I stated earlier that with the case of oppression there are two participants – the oppressor and the oppressed.
 2. There is actually a third group. The outside observers. They are neither the oppressed nor the oppressor.
 - a. We have the duty to come to the defense of the oppressed when able. This was like the abolitionists fighting against the abuses of the slave trade.
 - b. Those who have stood and are continuing to stand against abortion are coming to the aid of the oppressed.
 - c. There is a huge human trafficking problem in our nation but few are even aware.
 - d. While it is true that we have a border crisis and there are those who are entering our country illegally, we must not close our borders to the oppressed.
 - e. We must always be willing to come to the aid of the afflicted. We find them in unexpected places.

B. What about the other two groups—the oppressors and the oppressed?

- A. The oppressors must repent of their sins of abuse
1. Those who have perverted justice through bribery.
 2. Those who have used their authority to harm others.
Zacchaeus repented -
Luke 19:8 NAU - "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."
 3. We need to remember God's charge to all:
Micah 6:8 NAU - "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?"

- B. What about the oppressed? What is their duty? Few even consider the duty of the oppressed. There is a common misconception that the oppressed are righteous and there are no expectations placed upon them.

1. We need to understand oppression is a common occurrence upon the earth. There is hatred and envy. No one is immune to this malady of sin.
Ecclesiastes 4:4 NAU - "I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of rivalry* between a man and his neighbor."
 We are filled with anger towards one another. This must be resisted. It is very tempting for the oppressed to respond with anger. Anger is intensely gratifying to the sinful heart. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king."²
 2. We need to guard against having a victim mentality. That everything is unfair and I deserve more than I have received. There are those who go without comfort because they refuse to be comforted.
 3. We need to guard against fighting the oppression of some by dealing out injustice to others. Fighting oppression with more oppression.
 4. We need to remember that even our Lord was oppressed upon this earth. He always serves as our highest model. In the midst of His oppression He maintained meekness and humility.
Isaiah 53:6-8 NAU - "All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away"
 5. Our duty is to press on with patience.
- C. Solomon's approach was a humanistic approach that dismissed the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God.
1. In light of the oppression of this world, Solomon's conclusion – it would be better if the oppressed were dead.
 In fact, they would be better off if they had never been born.
Ecclesiastes 4:3 NAU - "But better *off* than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun."

² John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning: Ecclesiastes Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 94.

2. Jeremiah wrote similar words.
Jeremiah 20:14-15 NAU - "Cursed be the day when I was born; Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me!
¹⁵ Cursed be the man who brought the news To my father, saying, "A baby boy has been born to you!" *And* made him very happy."
3. Again, this is a humanist perspective. It describes a world without God. It describes a world without purpose. It describes a world that only has worth and value if it is free of suffering.
 - a. This is the mindset that leads to suicide. Life only has value if it is free of difficulty.
 - b. This is the mindset of those who abort babies with birth defects. Life only has value if it is void of suffering or discomfort. In the mindset of many, an imperfect baby is better off dead.
 - c. Fox News ran a story of a local official in Mass. "FRAMINGHAM, Mass. – A local Democrat official in Massachusetts is facing calls to step down after complaining about the cost of special education for children with disabilities who are not aborted. He said crisis pregnancy centers could misdiagnose a defect in a baby in the womb, leading to them being born and becoming a strain on a school budget."³
4. It is sinful to hate life. It is sinful to see value in only the pleasurable experiences of life. It is sinful to despise the purposes of God. It is sinful to murmur against God. God called it evil.
Numbers 14:27 NAU - "How long *shall I bear* with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me."

Conclusion:

1. May God grant us to be merciful to all, to care for the poor and needy.
2. May God grant us patience and steadfast faith as we continue to live in this world of oppression. Oppression will never be gone. As soon as one source of oppression is gone another rises. After Hitler there was Stalin. Today, we removed Saddam Hussein but what about the Taliban? What about the communist oppressors? What about our own politics that are often void of justice.
3. We must all do what we can, but we must always trust the God of all the earth and spend much time in prayer.
We must also remember that the world to come is a place of righteousness and justice. Until then we must press on with patience.

³ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/massachusetts-democrat-told-step-down-abortion-comments-leave-parents-irate>