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Dust to Dust

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3

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Several years ago, I had someone in my office who, it was quickly evident, was just miserable. He spent an hour talking about the last years of his life and all these choices he had made…sinful disastrous choices! He was unfaithful in his marriage, talked about his addictions, talked about financial decisions, and all of it had made a mess of his life, and he was absolutely miserable. He then put his head down and stared at the floor for a little bit, looked up, and asked me a very odd question. He said, "Pastor Clark, why would God do this to me?" Even though that seems like a very odd question, over the years I've found it's not that unusual. People often lack the ability to connect the dots between their own choices, and the misery they're experiencing. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3.

If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the book of Ecclesiastes as our summer study, and the Preacher is not in a very good place. He's trying to figure out what gives life meaning and purpose. He's tried wisdom. He's tried pleasure. He's tried substances. He's tried material possessions and wealth and position and work…and he found all of it leaves him empty. ***Vanity of vanities***! It feels like he's just chasing the wind. He can't figure out what gives life meaning. But it did seem like last week, in our texts, there was a glimmer of hope, for he concluded, "Maybe it's just understanding that every day is a gift from God, an opportunity to live in relationship with God and to do good." That God is writing a story. He's been writing a story from the beginning.

We used the imagery of a tapestry, that from God's perspective, He's weaving this beautiful tapestry, but all we see is the underside. We see the yarn and the threads and the knots and the chaos. And it just seems like a big mess. From our vantage point, it's hard to understand, "What is God doing?" But if we're willing to believe that God is writing a story, He's up to something, and we offer our lives like a thread that God ultimately weaves into the tapestry, so that we can be part of the beauty of the art He's creating.

So, it's kind of like going to the coffee shop with a friend who's not in a good place. You have this conversation, and at the end of the conversation, it kind of feels like. "Alright, I think this person's in a better place. I think we made progress today. And then you wake up the next morning, and you get this text. Verse 16 is the text. It's not going well.

> **Furthermore,** (to which we're like, "Oh boy, here we go.) **I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 3:16)

So, the Preacher is looking around, and he's deeply disturbed by what he sees. It shouldn't be this way. This is not the way the world should be. It's very important to understand that he's not simply saying that he looks around and there are bad people doing bad things. That's to be expected in a fallen world. What he's saying is that in the very places that have been established to be about

justice in a fallen world, he doesn't see justice. He sees wickedness where there should be righteousness, so people can flourish together. He doesn't see the righteous. He sees wickedness. The Bible teaches that the primary purpose for government is in concession to the reality that we live in a fallen world, and that even a bad government is better than no government at all, or we would consume one another. So, the role of government is to promote good and to punish evil. Whatever else government does is neither right or wrong, good or bad. Everybody is going to have different opinions on that. But biblically, from God's point of view, at the core of government is to promote good and to punish evil. So, what do you do when those who are in positions of power are not about justice? They're not about righteousness. Rather, it's controlled by the wicked. There is no chance for flourishing. Certainly there will be oppression.

So, let's define some terms here. If you were with us in our study of the book of Proverbs, these should be familiar terms. The first is the Hebrew word "mishpat," that's translated *justice*. In ancient cultures, oppression was a way of life. The people in power had the freedom to oppress others. But God had a different vision for the Hebrew people, the vision that there would be a mutual flourishing—shalom—among the people. That there was a better way to live, and at the center of that vision was mishpat. The only way for that to happen is there had to be true justice. Mishpat carries the idea of *true fairness and justice*, regardless of whether you're rich or poor, male or female, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of whether you're old or young. For there to be flourishing, there has to be true justice and fairness among the people. So, what the Preacher is saying is where there should be justice, there's not. There's wickedness. So the weak, the poor, the disadvantaged, have no hope.

The second term is the term for the *righteous*. We saw this in Proverbs—the "tzadik". This is one where he or she is passionate for God's vision for the world, passionate for shalom, passionate to try to create at least glimpses or pockets where people can flourish together. The tzadik is so committed to this vision that he or she will even disadvantage himself in order to advantage the greater community. We learned in Proverbs that when the tzadik is in charge, the city rejoices. When the tzadik is in positions of power and justice, then it's possible for there to be flourishing. But when the wicked are in charge, oppression is sure to follow.

The third term is *the wicked*, "rasha" in Hebrew. It's important to understand that *the wicked* is not merely a reference to criminals and law breakers and murderers and thieves. It's the opposite of the righteous. It's the idea of someone who is selfish and self-centered…someone who is in it for himself…someone who's going to use position and power for self-gain…someone who won't hesitate to disadvantage others in order to advantage himself. So, when the wicked are in places of justice, it can only lead to oppression. So, the Preacher looks around, and that's what he sees. And of course, it bothers him. Verse 17:

> **I said to myself,** (which is language reflecting this is what he knows)**"God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.**

He started this conversation in verse 15, with the reminder that at the end of the story, God will call people to account. Everyone has been given life as a gift, and people will be held accountable for what they did with the days they were given. There may not ever be true justice and fairness in

a fallen world. But one day, God will sort it out, and God will make things right. The Hebrew word translated **judge** carries the idea of both the *judgment*, meaning *the verdict*, and the *consequences* for *both the righteous and for the wicked*.

"...God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," (The way this verse ends is interesting.) **…for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.** It kind of picks up on the poetry at the beginning of the chapter, "**There's a time to be born, a time to die**…a time to do this, a time to do that…a season for everything. So, what he's saying is, "There may not be true justice now, but there will come a time, there will come a season. Nothing is going to be swept under the carpet. Nothing is going to be missed. No plea bargains. Accountability before the judge. It may not happen *here*, ***now***. But it will happen in its season, *then*, **there**. That's how he ends the verse. Verse 18:

> **I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts."**

This gets into a confusing part of the text. So, what is he saying here? He's saying, concerning people, God **has tested them.** The Hebrew word translated *test* carries the idea of sifted, or exposed, or unveiled, or revealed. At the core of what causes wicked people to be wicked is the belief that somehow that can work in their favor. That's why they do what they do. "I'm going to be my own god; I'm going to decide for myself what's right and wrong. And I'm going to, if need be, disadvantage others to advantage myself. If I have power, I'm going to use it for my advantage and oppress others." All of that is ultimately to accomplish something that the wicked think will make them happy.

So, what the Preacher is saying is, "Wait a minute. Let's pull back the curtain. Take a good look around you. It's not a pretty picture. When people are in charge, doing their own thing, it does not lead to a utopia. It leads to oppression, pain, suffering, and abuse." That's essentially what he's saying. To go back to the imagery we used in week one, with the emperor's new clothes, what he's saying is, "Take a good, hard look around. The emperor has no clothes on. It's not working." When people are functioning as their own god, when people are in charge of their own lives, connect the dots between their choices and the effect. And what you don't see is people flourishing. What you see is oppression.

So, what he's seeing, is saying that at the end of the day, people that think of themselves as having arrived—the movers, the shakers—being their own gods, of having arrived in some way, actually, at the end of the day, are no different than the beast, than the cow. So, he goes on:

> **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.** (It's chasing after the wind). **All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?**
>
> (Vs. 19-21)

So, what does that mean? First of all, the Preacher is not espousing a theology of life after death. The Preacher is not saying there's no difference between man and beast. The Bible has a strong

theology that what distinguishes us, as people, is we're made in the image of God. But that's really not the point the Preacher is making. In his observations, in his struggle, in his search, his quest, what he's saying is this, "The beasts have breath. The rich and the powerful have breath. At the end of the story, the cow runs out of air; the rich and the powerful run out of air. They both die."

It's very similar to the conversation in Psalm 49 when the psalm says it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, they both die. It doesn't matter if you're wise or stupid. The psalm says they both die. “Spoiler alert!” No matter how rich, no matter how powerful, no matter what you think you've accomplished, guess what? The story ends the same way. You die! So here we have a cow: cow died. Here we have the most significant, wealthiest, most powerful person you can imagine. Guess what? The story came to an end. Out of breath, out of breath…both die. As a matter of fact, not only that, they both decompose. They both rot away, and at the end of the story, dust, dust. And what he's wrestling with is, "What is the point of that? It's no different than the cow." So, when he's talking about **they both go to the same place**, it's not a life after death theology. They both die; they both go to the grave; they both turn back into dust. It’s not so great after all.

So, let's imagine the Preacher is having this conversation with someone else. And this other person is a great admirer of the significant, wealthy, powerful person who has died. And so this person has died; the cow has died, and the Preacher is making the point, "What do you know? They both died; they're both turning to dust." But his friend says, "Yeah, but he's going to be great and rich and powerful in the world to come, because it seems he was great and rich and powerful in this life."

Ryan mentioned a couple of weeks ago that the Hebrew people did not have a real developed theology of life after death. It gets much more developed in the New Testament. But the ancient world, in general, had all kinds of interesting ideas about life after death. And there was a belief that if you're rich and powerful and impressive in this life, that that carries over into the life to come. If you are practically a god in this life, you will be a god in the life to come. Like the pharaohs who were buried with all of their wealth and their stuff, because they would take it with them into the next life.

So, imagine the Preacher's friend is saying, "Yeah, he's dead, but he's not like the cow. He's going to be great in the life to come." What the Preacher is saying is, "Based on my observation, what I see here, how do you know that?" So, when he says in verse 21, "**Who knows that the breath of man ascends?**" He is like, "From pure observation, how do you know that? You can't tell that. You're just making it up. There's no reason to believe that." Which then gets him to his point in verse 22:

> **I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?**

So, what the Preacher is saying is, “You don't know what's next. What you have is today, and today is a gift from God, so live that gift, that day in relationship with God, seeking to do good.” Seek to offer your life as that thread that's going to be woven into the tapestry of the beauty of the story that God is writing. That's what you have. So that's where he's at.

So, we get to the end of our coffee meeting, and it feels better. “Alright, I got him talked off the ledge again. He’s in in a better place.” He goes home. Then the next morning, you get the follow-up text, Chapter 4, verse 1:

> **Then I looked again** (Like. “Oh, no, here we go.”). **at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I *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*.** (Chapter 4, Vs. 1)

To be honest, I don't really have a hard time identifying with what the Preacher is talking about. It's this roller coaster of emotion. Even if you understand that today is a gift to be lived for God's purposes, it doesn't mean you're unaware of the oppression and the pain and the suffering and the struggles and the abuse of the people around us in the world. There is this tension between, “This is what I have; this is how I should live, but this is not the way the world should be.” We should not be okay with all the oppression, all the injustices, all the unfairness, all the pain and suffering that people around us endure. He says if tears are in the oppressors of power, who's going to look out for the oppressed? If in places of justice and righteousness, you have the wicked, there is no solution other than oppression. So, this is what he's seen, and, of course, he's bothered by that. He should be. Verse 2:

> **So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better *off* than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen** (or experienced) **the evil activity that is done under the sun.** (Vs. 2-3)

So, in his emotion, in his struggle with this, he says in poetic language, he **congratulated the dead. “**At least you're dead. You don't have to endure the oppression anymore.” It seems to be better if someone never even existed at all than to experience the oppression that defines our world today. Now, it's really important to understand these verses within the context in which they're given. This is poetry. It's graphic…emotional…hyperbolic…exaggerated language. You see this a lot in the psalms, for example. But you even see it from Jesus. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, He says, "Pluck out your eyes,” “Cut off your hands." It's hyperbole. It doesn't mean actually go out and do that. This is poetic, exaggerated language that captures the frustration that the Preacher is feeling.

It's really important that we understand that, in a culture where the rate of suicide is escalating at an alarming rate, that the Preacher is not saying, "Better to just be dead and get it over with." That is never God's answer. That's never God's solution. As a matter of fact, wouldn't we say that what the Preacher is seeing and experiencing and feeling is the whole point for why God is writing a better story? Because it is true, this is a fallen world. And there is heartache and there is pain and there is suffering and there is injustice and there is oppression, and we shouldn't be okay with that. God is not okay with it.

So, God is writing a better story. That's why He chose to send a “Rescuer”, because it's the only chance we have. God is so committed to His vision for the world. His heart is longing for something different from this, something better, and it cost Him His own Son to make it possible to rescue people from their sin and the fallenness of this world, and offer them a relationship today,

and a promise to one day deliver them to the world their hearts long for. What the Preacher has seen is disturbing. It's the whole point of why the bigger story tells the story of what God was willing to do about it. If that's true, it's not better to have never existed, because the story offers hope for the life that everyone longs for, offered freely as a gift of God's grace.

So, the Preacher is up and down in his roller coaster of emotion. He's not doing very well. So now what? Well, we'll have to see…next week! But to wrap it up this morning, here's a couple of things to think about. It's very easy when we see the oppression and the injustices and the pain and suffering in the world around us, to kind of move ourselves into a rather self-righteous mode, where we convince ourselves that we apparently are much more kind, much more compassionate, much more concerned than God. It's reflected when we see it and say something to the effect of, "God, why don't You do something?" If we were going to really put into words what we're feeling is, "God, why don't You see it the way I see it? Why aren't You as kind as me? Why aren't You as compassionate as me? Why aren't You as loving as me? Why don't You do something?" And it's very important to understand, whatever feeling you have toward the oppression and the suffering and the struggles of our world, it is but the slightest taste of what God must feel. Those emotions don't originate with you. They originate with God and the depth of what He feels when He looks on the world, such as it is. It goes dramatically beyond what you could ever understand.

But we have to come back to the fact that this isn't the world as God intended it to be. This isn't what He wanted. This wasn't His choice. This was our choice. We made the choice to rebel. We made the choice to be our own gods. We made the choice to do our own thing. And there isn't a single person in the room this morning that hasn't contributed to the breakdown of shalom in the world today. It's called "sin," and we've all made our contribution to the mess. So, before we come off as being so self-righteous—that we get it so much more than God—we need to connect the dots and realize my sin has contributed to the breakdown. And the breakdown breaks God's heart. But His commitment to do something is so great, that He gave up His own Son to provide a rescuer to make a way out.

Lastly, it's very easy in a text like this, to start thinking about all the wicked people you know in positions of power that are causing all the problems. So, we point fingers; we cast blame. Like, "Oh, yeah, Preacher, I know exactly what you're talking about." But we do that often in order to divert attention away from ourselves, because we don't want to look at our own lives and our own contribution to the mess. So, before there's too much finger pointing, before there's too much casting of blame, let's start with ourselves. As the people of God, He's given us the gospel of hope. He's given us the message. I'm quite certain all of us have people around us that feel the emptiness and the desperation that the Preacher is reflecting. We have the message of hope. We know what God did to provide a rescuer.

So, what are we doing with that message? Is it a secret? Are we sharing the message of hope with the people around us? We understand what they are feeling. This is why God sent His Son. This is the hope that He offers. We need to make sure that we are numbered among the righteous—the tzadik—and that we have a heart for flourishing, mutual flourishing of people. Are we even willing to disadvantage ourselves, if necessary, to advantage the people around us to try to create these little pockets of flourishing to give people at least some glimpse of the world as God intended it to be? We need to make sure we aren't contributing to the anger and the hate and the prejudice and

all the junk that's destroying our culture. You don't have the freedom to pick and choose who you're going to be kind to, who you're going to love, who you're going to have patience with, who you're going to care about. If you're going to be serious about justice, these are all people made in the image of God…people that Jesus died for. You can't pick and choose. Let's make sure we're not contributing to the mess, and that we're rightly representing the hope of the gospel. Whatever else you get, I don't know, but you get today. Today is a gift from God. Today is a day to live in relationship with Him. Today is the day to devote to doing good, as God defines it—contributing to the shalom—in whatever environment God has you. To settle for anything less, would be nothing more than *Chasing after the Wind*.

Our Father, we're thankful that in a world with no hope, You sent Your Son to be the rescuer, to be to be the Savior of the world, to be our *Savior. Lord, we've all contributed to the mess. We've all sinned. But you offer us forgiveness. You offer us a new story. You offer us a glorious hope. Lord, may we never be guilty of keeping this message to ourselves, but that we might be a light, that we might rightly represent Jesus to a dark and needy world. In His name we pray, Amen.*

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