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Death and Injustice

Ecclesiastes 3:16 to 4:3

Death and injustice DIG: What does this passage teach concerning the destiny of humans? Animals? Who are the “oppressed” in 4:1? The “oppressors?” Why does the Teacher say that the dead are happier than the living? Why did Solomon fall back down into a deep depression?

REFLECT: Do you fear death? How do you respond to those who act as if there is no God or final judgment? How does the promise of eternal life in John 5:24 help you deal with injustice? Are you really sure that after you die you will go to heaven and live with God?

Rather than getting angry and sad about the oppression we see in the world, we can trust God to make things right in the end.



In his book *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes*, Philip Ryken writes that few contemporary writers are more highly regarded than Julian Barnes, the English essayist and novelist who wrote *Flaubert's Parrot*, *The Sense of an Ending*, and other prize winning books. In 2013 Barnes published *Levels of Life*, a poignant memoir that the author wrote after the **death** of his beloved wife. This followed an earlier memoir, in which he admitted that he was afraid to die. This confession was something of an embarrassment because, as an agnostic, Barnes honestly didn't

think that **death** was anything to be afraid of. If there was no good reason to believe in **God**, he reasoned, and also no such thing as life after **death**, then there is (to use the title of his memoir) *Nothing to be Frightened Of*.

Yet, in the memoir, Barnes frankly admitted that he *was* afraid to die – desperately afraid. *The New York Times Book Review* correctly diagnosed the author’s condition as *thanatophobia*, or the fear of **death**. Barnes admitted that he thinks about **death** every day and that sometimes in the night he is “roared awake” and “pitched from sleep into darkness, panic and a vicious awareness that this is a rented world.” Awake and utterly alone, he finds himself pounding his pillow with a fist and wailing, “Oh no, Oh No, OH NO!”

Julian’s dreams are even darker. Sometimes he is buried alive. Other times he is “chased, surrounded, and outnumbered.” He finds himself “held hostage, wrongly condemned to the firing squad, and informed that there is even less time than he thought he had. The usual stuff,” he calls it. And perhaps this is the usual stuff, because **death** is the sum of all our fears: of being alone, abandoned or condemned.²⁷¹

When you wake up in the middle of the night, what are you afraid of?

Man’s inhumanity to man: Ecclesiastes faces up to all our fears by asking the most difficult questions that anyone could ask about the meaning of the universe, the existence of **God** and the life to come. So far **the Solomon of Ecclesiastes** has tested the limits of human knowledge, attempted to do **his** moral duty, indulged in many pleasures and immersed **himself** in **his** work . . . trying anything and everything to make sense of **his** world. Now, at the end of **Chapter 3, the Teacher** deals with the most difficult question of **death**. **He** had been thinking of all the **injustice** in the world and about **his** longing for **ADONAI** to make things right. But dwelling on the Judgment Day naturally caused **him** to wonder what will happen when we **die**.

Try to follow **Solomon’s** reasoning: **Another thing I observed under the sun, cutting God out of the picture. There, in the same place as justice, was wickedness; there, in the same place as righteousness, was wickedness (3:16)**. As we have seen before, the phrase **under the sun** may be taken to describe the futility and pointlessness of life lived only for self and the moment, without gratitude to or regard for **God** and **His** ways. What we see **under the sun** in this instance is rampant **injustice** – what the Scottish poet Robert Burns

famously called, “man’s inhumanity to man.”

Here, **Solomon** sounds like one of the biblical prophets, crying out for **justice**. This is one of the deepest longings of the human heart – an end to all the unfairness. The specific problem in this case is that even the courts were unjust. The very place where people most need to receive **justice** turned out to be the site of unfairness. Innocent people were being convicted for crimes they never committed. People were lying, cheating and stealing; sometimes even getting away with murder. It was all so unfair. When **the Teacher** saw what was happening **he** longed for someone to **comfort** the oppressed and dry their tears. Even worse, there was nothing, **he** reasoned, that could be done about it. **His** frustration was that **injustice** was going unpunished. When the halls of **justice** become corridors of corruption, where can righteousness be found? Since **God** is good, why do so many bad things happen?

A time for justice: **Solomon** had a good answer to the problem of **injustice**. **He** affirmed that **God** would **judge both the righteous and the wicked**, but that this **judgment** would come only in **His time, because there is a right time for every intention and for every action (3:17)**. But that **judgment** will come only in **His time**. The **time** of this **judgment** is ambiguous; it’s in the future and in **God’s time**, but the verse neither states nor implies that **it** will be in the afterlife. **Solomon** undoubtedly believed, along with the wisdom writers of **his** day, that **the judgment** would take place on the earth (**Job 27:13-23, Psalms 37:2, 6, 11, 13, 15, 17-40, 73:18-20, and Proverbs 22:22-23**).²⁷²

Here we see **the Teacher** applying one of **his** own sermons to **his** own heart. **He** takes a spiritual principle that **he** taught earlier and applied it to the issue of **injustice**. Since **there is a right time for every intention under heaven (3:1)**, then there must be a time for **justice**. Consequently, rather than merely getting angry and sad about the oppression we see in the world, we can trust **God** to make things right in the end.

This doesn’t mean that there is never a time for us to pursue **justice**. Depending on our place in society – our position of privilege, our place of influence, and our **God**-given authority – it is our duty to fight against oppression in the Church and around the world. Yet, even our best interests will not bring an end to oppression. There will still be violence against women and children, structures of corruption in business, government, and even law enforcement. But in all the situations that we do not have the power, the authority or the wisdom to resolve, **Ha’Shem** will see to it that **justice** is done. Nobody is getting away with anything.

Dust to dust: Even if we believe that **justice** is coming, we may still wonder why it is delayed. To be sure, **God** will make everything right in the end, but why doesn't **He judge** people right now? Why does **He** wait until the Day of Judgment?

Solomon had a reasonable answer to this question as well: **Concerning people, I said to myself, "God is testing them, so that they will see that by themselves they are, in one sense, just like animals (3:18).** Our present existence is a proving ground. It is a test, not simply in the sense of something we pass or fail, but also in the sense of something that reveals our true character, our true relationship with **ADONAI**. This **test** is not for **His** benefit, as if there was anything about us that **He** doesn't already know, but for *our* benefit, so that we recognize our own mortality. Will we learn to see ourselves for who we really are? This is the searching question that waiting for **justice** poses for every one of us.

Ecclesiastes helps us to clarify our identity by telling us that we are, in one sense, **just like animals**. This is not a comment on our biology, but on our destiny. Here is how **the Teacher** explains it: **After all, the same things that happen to people happen to animals, the very same thing - just as the one dies, so does the other. Yes, their breath is the same; so that humans are no better than animals; since nothing matters, anyway. They all go to the same place; they all come from dust, and they all return to dust (3:19-20).** This is one of the Bible's strongest statements of the inevitability of **death**, which is the greatest equalizer of all. **Animals** are living creatures. Like us, **they** have been given life and **breath** by **their Creator**. But this life will not last forever. The day will come when we breathe our last. With our parting **breath**, each of us will go to the same place, returning to **dust**. By using this language **the Teacher** is reminding us of **God's** curse against **Adam's sin: dust we are, and to dust we shall return (Genesis 3:19).**

Not everyone responds to **death** in the same way. Some people laugh it off, like the American comedian Woody Allen, who famously said, "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens!" But many people *are* afraid, like Julian Barnes. They have terrors in the night and despair of ever finding any lasting hope or true meaning in life. **Solomon** was at that desperate point here, saying: **everything is pointless.**

Life after death: For a moment it seemed as if the Final Judgment would solve the problem of **injustice**. But as it turns out, the solution was only temporary at best. As **the Teacher** reflected further on the delay of divine **justice** and started thinking about the implications of **his** mortality, **he** ended up right back where **he**

started. Here we go again: **Pointless! - says the Teacher - everything is pointless (1:1-2)!** Still, **Solomon** knew of one thing that could make a difference in the face of **death**. Even if our bodies return to **the dust**, maybe our souls will live forever. This would give us some reassurance that the wicked will come to **justice**.

The trouble was that **he** wasn't quite sure if **he** believed in life after **death**. **Who knows if the spirit of a human being goes upward and the spirit of an animal goes downward into the earth (3:21)?** The **Teacher** had heard the conventional wisdom that when animals die, they just die, but when people die their spirits go to either Paradise (heaven) or sh'ol (hell). But, **he** was starting to have **his** doubts. So, **he** asked the agnostic question: **Who knows?** Can we really be sure that after we die we will go to heaven and live with **God**? This is the most basic question that we can ask about our destiny. We know that one day the time will come for us to **die**. The question is: Will we live again? **Solomon** was struggling to know for sure. **Who knows?** **he** said. As **he** wrestled with this doubt **the Teachers** first impulse was to throw **himself** back into **his** work: **So, I concluded that there is nothing better for a person to do than to enjoy life, that that is his allotted portion; for who can enable him to see what will happen after him (3:22)?** **He** just wanted to stay productive.

But unless we have the assurance of eternal life (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see the link click [Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer](#)**), finding joy in our everyday work will never give us lasting satisfaction. And sure enough, **Solomon** spiraled back down into a black hole despair. **I turned away and thought about all the acts of injustice being done under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed** who cried out for help but **they had no one to comfort them** because of **the irresistible power of their oppressors. They had no one to comfort them. Solomon considered the dead happier (because they were already dead) than the living, who must still live their lives; but happier than either of them, he thought, was the one who has not yet been born because he has not yet seen the evil things that are done under the sun** because of **injustice (4:1-3)**.

From dust to glory: By this point, it is clear that **Ecclesiastes** doesn't have all the answers. This frustrates those who want a progression of thought from one section to another, and who claim that **Solomon** offers no satisfactory answers to any of the problems **he** poses. But at least the book asks the right questions. As well as anyone in history, **the Teacher** accurately identified the problems of human

existence. One way to find the answer to life's most difficult questions is by searching the Scriptures. In the final chapter of **Ecclesiastes**, the **Teacher-king** affirms that **the dust returns to earth, as it was, and the spirit returns to God, who gave it (12:7)**! Clearly, **Solomon** came to believe in life after **death**.

But the best answer of all is the one that **ADONAI** has given in **Messiah**. Anyone who wants to know what will happen after **death** should ask **Yeshua**, because **He** has been to the other side. When our **Savior** was brought to the place of **justice**, there was no **justice** for **Him** at all. There was no one to speak in **His** defense, no one to rescue **Him** from **the deadly** cross and **no one to comfort Him** as **He** was laid in **the dust** of **death**. But **Yeshua** did not stay **dead**. On the third day, **He** rose; **His** body and **His** spirit ascended from **dust** to glory. Now everyone who believes in **Him** can **obtain a better resurrection (Hebrews 11:35)**. This is why we can be absolutely certain of eternal life. It is because **Messiah** brought eternal life out of a **deadly** grave. As the Bible says: **He abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (2 Timothy 2:10)**.

Have you claimed this promise by **the death** and resurrection of **Yeshua Messiah**, that when you go down to **the dust** of **death**, you will rise again to glory? If so, then you have resurrection comfort in all your sorrows. You can rejoice in whatever good work **Messiah** gives you to do as you wait for the Day of Judgment. You have faith and **hope** to persevere in the face of **injustice** and **oppression**. Yes, **He** is our **blessed hope (Titus 2:13)** after all our troubles and sorrows, **He** will raise us up to glory.²⁷³

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** are **Almighty** - **Sovereign** over the world and **Sovereign** over **death**. **Yeshua** was victorious over **death** when he rose from the grave, defeating **death** and its hold on sinners. As the sacrificial **Lamb of God** **He** paid the penalty for our sins so we could have **His** righteousness (**Second Corinthians 5:21**) and enter heaven. Praise **You, God**, for **Your** love for mankind to **send Your one-and-only Son** to **die**. Praise **You** for **Your** power to be victorious over **death**! That same power that **You** used to raise **Yeshua Messiah** from **the dead**, **You** will use to raise **Your** children. **Therefore we were buried together with Him through immersion into death - in order that just as Messiah was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become joined together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also will be joined together in His resurrection (Romans 6:4-5)**.*

Praise **You** that those who love **You** can look forward to that moment when we are changed into incorruptible bodies. **We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last shofar. For the shofar will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed (First Corinthians 15:51c-52).** Your children have no reason to fear death for **death is swallowed up in victory.** Because of Yeshua's great sacrifice, we can ask: **Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting (First Corinthians 15:54c-55)?** We cannot thank **You** enough for **Your** painful conquering of **death.** We want to show our thanks and our love by following **You** in all we say and do and think! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen