

Why is life so hard?

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[0 : 0 0] Life is hard. We've experienced this as we've lived through the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 has been tough. It has caused suffering and death. It has disrupted our daily routines, our family life, work life, social life. It has affected mental well-being. It has resulted in fear, anxiety and loneliness. It has impacted us all in different ways, if not physically, and socially, financially, even spiritually. It has reminded us that life is hard and it has forced us to reflect deeper on life and death. And so the question is, how am I going to live? How do I live despite the reality of life in the world around me? Well, this is where the Bible book of Ecclesiastes helps us. Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and it explores the search for meaning in life. But the teacher of Ecclesiastes doesn't look at life through rose coloured glasses. He doesn't give us an Instagram view of the world where the sun is always shining, where it's artistically beautiful, where everything is great, where there are no blemishes and it's just all so wonderful. He doesn't describe life in that way because we know that isn't real life. That's not the real world that we live in, is it? Instead, Ecclesiastes honestly looks at life as it is, taking into account all the difficulties, the despair and death itself. And that's why Ecclesiastes is enigmatic and fascinating as well as being bang up to date. And so whether you'd call yourself a

Christian or not, the teacher of Ecclesiastes forces us all to look at this world as it really is, in order to help us make best sense of life. And so in chapter four, he gives us various snapshots of life. And in each snapshot, he describes life as he sees it. But he also offers a better alternative.

And we know it's better because he uses the word better four times. The better option comes up in verse three, verse six, verse nine, and verse 13. So he's acknowledging that life is hard, but he offers consolation by recommending a better way. And so let's look at each of these four snapshots in turn. And they don't follow any logical order, which simply highlights the fact that life is just so unpredictable, which is what Ecclesiastes has been telling us all the way through.

So snapshot one is oppression, snapshot two, envy, snapshot three, loneliness, and snapshot four, success. Oppression, envy, loneliness, and success. Well, let's look at snapshot one in verse one to three, oppression. Listen to what the teacher says. Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors, and they have no comforter. So the teacher wants us to see the tears of the oppressed, of those who have no one to comfort them. And so whatever age we live in, we know that oppression is just rife in our world. It always has been. Consider the oppression of women and girls in much of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Or the oppression of victims of slavery and human trafficking. Apparently there are more children, women, and men trapped in slavery today than ever before in human history. And then there's the largest oppressed people group of them all, the unborn, who are aborted. So we can't ignore oppression. And we can't ignore oppressors like Adolf Hitler,

Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, Robert Mugabe, the list could go on. And the United Nations struggles to tackle so much oppression. But oppression doesn't just happen on a global scale, it also happens locally, with sexual abuse, domestic abuse, emotional abuse in households up and down our land. The murder of Liam Fee a few years back is one of Scotland's worst child abuse cases.

[4 : 1 9] Liam was a two-year-old boy who died after enduring horrific suffering at the hands of his mother and her partner. He was found dead with heart injuries, similar to those found on road crash victims after a severe blunt force trauma to his chest and abdomen. And pathologists find more than 30 external injuries on the toddler's body and fractures to his upper arm and thigh. And so what the teacher is doing here is he is forcing us to watch this kind of tragic news on TV. He doesn't want us to change channel. He stops us from turning a blind eye to all the oppression that is around about

us.

There's a powerful scene in the movie *Good Morning Vietnam* starring Robin Williams, which brilliantly captures the contradiction between the beauty of our world as well as the oppression in our world. It contrasts Louis Armstrong's song *What a Wonderful World* with the reality of the Vietnam War. So the song celebrates the wonder of the world we live in. But in the movie, as the song is saying one thing, well the pictures tell a different story. And so we hear the words, the colours of the rainbow so pretty in the sky. And we see protesters being beaten up and young men being shocked.

And then the chorus of *I say to myself, what a wonderful world* is accompanied by images of the bloodied sandal of a child. But this is the world we live in. And that's why the teacher forces us to consider life under the sun as if there was no God. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitry Karamazov poses the question of what would happen to mankind without God. And in mortal life, with the suggestion that all things are permitted and people can do what they like. And then Richard Dawkins in *The River Out of Eden* explains, The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares.

DNA just is. And we dance to its music. Well, what a disturbing view of life without God. Try telling all the oppressed that their oppressors were just dancing to the music of their DNA.

[6 : 52] For example, those who rape young girls, just dancing to the music of their DNA. Those who chop off heads or hands, just dancing to the music of their DNA.

Or oppressors abusing small children, just dancing to the music of their DNA. Really? It won't do, will it? And yet if you take an atheistic or a secular view of life to its logical conclusion, that's just where you end up. And yet we can't stand living in a world where evil doesn't matter.

We want justice for all the oppressed. And so what is the teacher's suggestion? Well, first of all, he suggests that you're better off being dead. Listen. And I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive.

He's suggesting that the dead have a better deal than those who are alive and depressed. But he gets even more extreme by suggesting a better option than either of these.

Listen. He's saying that you're better off if you've never been born at all.

[8 : 08] Why? Maybe to avoid all the evil and all the oppression in our world. It is a devastating snapshot. But it's also a very real one.

And it is meant to shock us because nobody wants to live in a world of oppression if there is no God. So that's snapshot one, oppression. Snapshot two is envy in verse four to six.

He says, And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

So the world is full of envy of people who are never content with what they have. Why is it like this? Well, the teacher tells us it all springs from envy of our neighbour.

So whether it be envy of someone else's looks or job or success or partner or home or car or lifestyle or possessions, envy motivates us to want more and want better.

[9 : 11] Advertising exploits the envy in our hearts. And so we strive to attain all the things that impress us in other people. But it's not just a matter of keeping up with the Joneses.

We want to go one better than them. So the teacher exposes this kind of one-upmanship that exists in us all, where we're more concerned about ourselves and the image we portray than anything else.

And it happens in all walks of life and in all kinds of ways, even church ministry. So no matter what age, stage or status, we can get sucked in to the rat race.

And we can spend so much of our time trying to outshine other people, or at least not be outshone by them. It can become the driving force in our lives. It's an attempt to be the high flyer that the teacher talks about.

But then there's the opposite extreme in the dropout that he introduces us to. He says, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.

[10 : 13] And so the opposite of the person who tries too hard to achieve is the person who doesn't try at all. They're lazy. They just sit around all day with their arms folded. And so the teacher is describing the kind of person who doesn't bother getting a job, even though they could work.

And so they shun the rat race and everybody in it, but they still expect all the handouts they can get, with no desire to contribute to the good of society. And so what does the teacher recommend to these two extremes?

Envy that results in working for yourself on the one hand, and laziness that results in no work on the other. However, he recommends a better way. So he says, better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

So two handfuls means you grasp to gain as much as possible, but it ruins your life because it's more than we can handle. And no handfuls means you do nothing, but it also ruins your life.

And yet one handful means you have just what you need. And so he's saying that we are better off being content. So we should avoid the anxiety of the envious high flyer who's chasing after the wind.

[11:26] But we should also avoid the laziness of the dropout fool. He's urging us not to get sucked in, but neither to drop out. But rather, he's saying, be satisfied with whatever God has given you.

And so we should work hard enough for what we need, and we should be content with what we have. And in that way, we'll be far less envious of others and far less focused on ourselves.

You see, the teacher's better way will help us better obey what Jesus said is the most important commandment. Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And love your neighbour as yourself. And if we seek to do this, then we will enjoy all the good things God has given us. But we'll be motivated to use our time and our talents and our treasure to better serve God and others.

And so contentment, as opposed to envy, will make us far better at fulfilling our responsibilities as a child of God, as a spouse, as a father, as a mother, as a friend, as an employee, as a neighbour, as a member of society.

[12:42] So that's snapshot one, oppression. Snapshot two, envy. And now snapshot three, loneliness in verse seven to 12. Listen to what the teacher says.

Again, I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone. He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil. Yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

For whom am I toiling? He asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless, a miserable business. So we're given a picture of a man who's all alone.

And it sounds so contemporary. This man has no family and no real friends because he doesn't work to live. He lives to work. And his life may be a success in the eyes of the world, but he doesn't enjoy it.

He's got no family to share his wealth with. And so he's miserable. He worships the God called work. And yet all the costly sacrifices he's making are pointless because work and wealth can never be substitutes for love and companionship.

[13:50] He's lonely, just like so many people are in modern society. The Beatles used to sing about it in Eleanor Rigby. Ah, look at all the lonely people.

Ah, look at all the lonely people. And Judy Garland, who played Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, said, If I am such a legend, then why am I so lonely?

In 2018, the UK government even appointed a minister for loneliness. Because according to the Joe Cox Commission on Loneliness report, more than 9 million people in Britain, that's around 14% of the population, often or always feel lonely.

And so what's the teacher's answer? Well, his better way is friendship. He says two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour.

These words are sometimes read at weddings. But marriage isn't the only application because the teacher is talking about other relationships too. Because we all need companionship.

[14:55] And for some, this will be in marriage. For others, it will be through great friendships.

Because there's a need to love and to be loved. And so the teacher illustrates what this looks like.

So he says, if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. He says a friend helps you when you fall.

And so we need friends who will help us when we fall down. And when we're down. He says, also if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

A friend keeps you warm when you're cold. And so we need friends who are available at the most inconvenient times. And who will do the most inconvenient things. He goes on. Though one may be overpowered.

Two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. So a friend protects you if you're in trouble. And so we need friends who are loyal. And who will stand with us.

[15:57] Even when nobody else does. That's why a cord of three strands is not quickly broken. He's saying that there's strength in numbers. And so if two are good, three are even better.

We need friends who will be there for us. And we need to be friends who will be there for others. That's how God has hardwired us. Because we were never designed to go it alone in life.

We were meant to belong in community with others. And that's why the church is described as a family in the New Testament. It's the place in society where there should be no lonely people.

Because diverse and different people are united together through faith in Jesus Christ. And that's why there are so many commands in the New Testament about how we relate to one another.

And so we're told to love one another. To honour one another above yourselves. To live in harmony with one another. To serve one another. To carry one another's burdens.

[16:59] To forgive one another. To offer hospitality to one another. To pray for one another. And many, many more. And so the challenge is. Do we relate to one another like this?

Because there's more to belonging to a church than showing up at a worship service. Attending a service doesn't make you belong to a church any more than visiting a zoo makes you an animal.

Being part of a church means loving Jesus. It means loving Jesus' people. And it means loving others enough to help them become part of God's family.

It involves building deep and committed relationships. So snapshot one. Oppression. Snapshot two. Envy. Snapshot three. Loneliness.

Snapshot four. Success. The teacher says. Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning.

[17:59] The youth may have come from prison to the kingship or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor.

There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

So there's an old foolish king who refuses to take advice from anyone anymore. And there's a poor but wise youth who rises from rags to riches and becomes king.

And so the people follow the new kid on the block. But soon the people get fed up of him too. And the teacher's point is that success is fleeting no matter who we are.

And so it's meaningless. A chasing after the wind. It's a tale so true to life, isn't it? Winston Churchill led Great Britain during the terrible years of World War II.

[18:58] But in 1945 he was swept from office in a result which shocked and hurt him. But that's the way it is. Popularity is short-lived.

Someone's significance fades quickly. And people can be so fickle. Just ask any football manager. A good example is Claudio Ranieri, the former Leicester City manager.

He led Leicester City to the most unlikely Premier League title ever in 2016. And then he was sacked only nine months later. Because when you make it to the top of anything, the only way is down.

And so the teacher's better way when it comes to success is be wise. Listen to advice. Heed warnings. And don't be a fool.

Position, popularity and prestige aren't what to aim for because they can come but they can go so quickly. And so we have been forced to look at four snapshots of life in this world.

[20:04] Oppression, envy, loneliness and success. And the teacher is brutally honest about life. And he's not always easy to listen to.

But he forces us to stare and to ask, why is life so hard? Because he wants us to see that life is meaningless if you view it from an under the sun perspective without God.

And so even with the teacher's better ways, we are well aware that there is something fundamentally wrong. And you have got to admit this, even if you aren't a Christian believer.

But the reason why our lives are like this and our world is like this is because we live in a fallen, broken world. Our sin against God means that we are broken people and we inhabit a broken world.

Albert Einstein said, what terrifies us is not the explosive force of the atomic bomb, but the power of the wickedness of the human heart. And so the teacher of Ecclesiastes wants to highlight the real problem or else we'll never reach the only solution.

[21 : 16] And the good news of Christianity is that there is a solution because everything will be put right in the end. How? Through Jesus Christ.

You see, the poor but wise youth who became king at the end of Ecclesiastes chapter 4 reminds us of Jesus. Jesus was born in poverty and he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross, for he died for our sins.

And Jesus said, greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. And so Jesus is the perfect and the ultimate friend who laid down his life for us.

But then God raised Jesus from death to be the ultimate king. And so he is exalted to the highest place. And one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And so Jesus doesn't just restore our broken relationship with God. He is restoring this broken world. And the day will come when he will judge the world with justice.

[22 : 33] And that's how we can be sure everything will be put right. Paul says in Romans chapter 8 that the creation has been subjected to frustration. But it will be liberated from its bondage to decay.

And so we still live in this fallen world where life is so hard. But our greatest hope and comfort is that through being united to Jesus, not only do we have everlasting life now, but we look forward to God's new creation when everything will finally be put right forever.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for the hope that you give to us in Jesus Christ, that there is a solution to the distress and despair of this life and to death itself.

We are so grateful for the death and resurrection of Jesus, for the restoration of our broken lives now, and for the promise of the restoration of this broken world when Jesus comes again.

So we give our thanks in Jesus name. Amen.