

# The Search for Justice

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good afternoon, everyone. Let me add my own welcome to that of David and the guys have! been leading us in worship this afternoon. My name is Martin, married to Jennifer and one of the ministry! partners here at Christ Church Glasgow, also a member of the church, which is probably more important than being ministry partners as a family. For the next few weeks, I'll be taking us through a short series looking at the book of Ecclesiastes. So if you could open up your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 9, we're going to read from God's Word from verse 2 down to verse 16. So Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 2 to verse 16. The words will be up on the screen and it's in page 676 in the church Bibles.

Let's hear from God's Word. All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful.

As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live and afterwards they join the dead.

Anyone who is among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward and their name is forgotten.

Their love, their hate, their jealousy have all since vanished. Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the realm of the dead where you are going there is neither working nor planning, planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. I've seen something else under the sun. The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.

[ 3 : 01 ] Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come as fish are caught in a cruel net or birds are taken in a snare so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it and a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a poor, a man poor but wise and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man.

So I said wisdom is better than strength, but the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are no longer heeded. Let's pray. Father, as we turn to hear from your word, we ask for your spirit to teach us and to help us, to guide us and to lead us so that we would enter into your truth which sheds light to our lives under the sun. Amen.

Amen. We read that passage, we read that section and let's be honest, we can tell right from the very beginning of this reading, this is quite a different book, isn't it? When we hear the words coming out of Ecclesiastes, this is kind of not what a Bible sounds like, is it? This is not the stuff that we picture when we pick up a Bible. We don't expect this sort of tone to be here. And why is it? Why does it sound like this? Why does it have this different tone to it? It's because it is a book which seeks to handle life and belief from a very different perspective. We've been introduced right at the very beginning of the book in chapter one to someone who is called the teacher. This person who presents himself to us, onto us as an audience and also onto his audience back in history. And he is

a preacher and some have also called him a pundit who's seeking to help us understand life. But our teacher is being deliberately provocative.

He's deliberately seeking to waken us up, almost like coming behind us and hitting us in the side to kind of shock us into recognizing reality and life around about us. In chapter one in verse two, he gives his almost summation of what life is like and it has come up in this passage as well. He says, human life is meaningless. Other translations, it is vanity. Probably the best way to take this word that is used at the beginning of Ecclesiastes and all the way through is that it's like a vapor.

It's almost like the dew of the morning. It's kind of there for a little bit and then it just disappears. It's like a mist on a cold day. It's there for a little while and then it just disappears.

[ 6 : 05 ] He's saying to us, life is something which is like a vapor which is just floating away very quickly. It's meaningless. Now, this is where you're sitting going, I can't wait for the next half an hour.

Isn't this going to be super cheery? Isn't this going to really set me on fire? Help me to go out there and to live for Jesus in my work? Help me to understand more of God? And the answer is yes, it is. It actually is. We need to know that this isn't someone, the teacher or me, simply being provocatively gloomy like someone who's just done a few courses in philosophy 101 at university. That's not his point.

His point is to awaken us to reality so that we actually live, so that we understand the point of life, so that we engage with reality around about us. And he tells us the perspective he's using to engage our hearts and our minds today. He says, I'm going to look at life and belief from a perspective of life under the sun. It's really deliberate that he uses that sort of terminology because he's helping us to understand where he's giving us boundaries and limits to our assessment. He's saying, life under the sun is my area of concentration. That's the reason the book hits us differently. In effect, he's engaging with us as if this is it. As if life, as we can see it around about us, this is all there is. It's what today we would call practical secularism. I have one life, this is it. I've got my body, I've got my stuff, I've got, and then I'm going to pass away. He says, okay, let's engage with life as if this is it. Life under the sun. A practical secular approach to life is what we would call that in contemporary 21st century Scotland. See, this is a provocative thing both for the religious and also for the non-religious, for someone who is a believer and also someone who is a skeptic because it comes to us as a believer and the teacher says to us, okay, you're confident. You're confident in how you understand the way things work. Okay, let's test this out a little bit because remember he's not just writing this to a whole group of people who don't believe. This is a book in where? In the Bible.

He's seeking to challenge those who have faith in the God who has made promises to his people and he's saying to them, do you really understand what these promises actually mean or do you just think you understand who he is? So it's a challenge to believers but it's also something which engages the minds and the hearts of people who are skeptics. The skeptic says, well, I don't kind of know what life's like. This is all we've got and this is what we have. Okay, you've got your doubts, says the teacher. You have your doubts about faith, about God, but isn't it responsible for you, the teacher says, to actually doubt your doubts, to come up to them and say, well, you've got this lens where you doubt all of these things that are potentially beyond the sun. Why are you not using that lens that you use on God on your own faith position, which is that you can't have anything else outside of this?

[ 9 : 26 ] The teacher comes along and he says, why are you unwilling to doubt your doubt? Why are you unwilling to use the same lens that you apply to everything else on your own position? Shouldn't you bring this to bear on your position? Now for the next three weeks, we're going to look at three different themes, three different lenses that the teacher uses to engage us in looking at life under the sun. These are three life-defining questions, projects for the human being as they live here on earth. First of all, there is the search for achievement. We've been given gifts and we've been given a life, so what should I do with that life? That's in a few weeks time. Next week, we're going to look at the the search for pleasure.

How is it that I can be happy? What does happiness look like? But today, we're going to be looking at the search for justice. How do I deal with pain, suffering, injustice? How do I deal with these things?

Because it comes across our lives, whether we want it to or not. And there's two big things that we're going to work through today that hopefully help us tackle this passage, but also just this

general theme that comes out of the book of Ecclesiastes. First of all, I want us to recognize that we don't just avoid the question of justice. We don't avoid the question of justice. And then secondly, in this passage, the teacher leaves us some clues which actually lead us to answers. So we don't avoid, but there are also some clues which give us some form of answer about this question. For some of us today, the question of injustice, of suffering, that is the number one reason why you just don't want to believe in Jesus. It's the number one reason that you don't want to engage with God, because you have seen things, you have experienced things in your own life, and it has shattered you.

It's penetrated right to the depth of your being, and it... How can that be? How can this God actually exist? So the teacher comes to us to help us recognize that to deal with injustice, to deal with this big question. We can't allow ourselves to become sedated by reality. We can't allow ourselves to just detach from these things which are happening or have potentially happened to us or around us in the world. We need to come towards and to deal with this, to address it, and not to avoid it. Look how he raises his point in verses 11 to 12. He says that he's seen something else under the sun. The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong. Food doesn't come to the wise or the wealthy or wealth to the brilliant. Favor to the learned.

Then he moves on. He says fish are caught in a cruel net. Birds are taken in a snare. People are trapped by evil times that fall upon them unexpectedly. He highlights that life is full of random pain and injustice. He raises this up. He doesn't run away from it. He says look this this is what happens. This is what I see as I live my life under the sun. The best don't always win. The strongest sometimes lose. The gifted don't always get the promotion. The most capable don't always have a satisfying life.

[12:53] Irrespective of our age or gender or race or our class, suffering can come across the path of our life at any moment, any time. Everything can change. And it pains us deeply because we are forced to recognize one great thing which we don't like to engage with which is that we don't actually have as much control as we like to think we do. Believer or skeptic. He's already told us time and chance happen to them all.

Let's ground this randomness in reality because in one sense it's just kind of up there isn't it? Here is here is a bit of a reality. Headlines from the last week help us to explain the randomness that we see in this this world, this under the sun life. Israel have launched an offensive in Gaza amid fears over starvation. At least 20 have died as a fighter plane has crashed into a school campus in Bangladesh.

Russian drones have hit a Kyiv station where hundreds had been sheltering for fear of their life. There's been a life sentence handed down for a killer who knifed his wife to death and he filmed it. There's passengers who are fighting for their life as 15 have been hurt in a bus horror crash. Cambodia and Thailand are about to enter into military conflict in Southeast Asia. That's the reality of our world.

Here's the kickback though. Martin, preacher, teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, you're kind of sensationalizing these things.

[14:34] That's all out there. That's all with other people. I'm not living in Cambodia. I've not been on a bus recently. These things aren't going to happen to me. I don't I don't live in that place and I don't do things like this.

This won't happen to me. Are you sure? How sure are we about that? If that is our kickback to this position, then there's probably two main reasons as to why. Number one, and this is not to be patronizing, we're probably young enough that we've not actually experienced the random pain that comes across the path of life.

We're young enough that we've not actually seen it, felt it and experienced it. Number two, we're desperately clinging on to a narrative in our life which says, I just don't need to engage with this question. Thank you very much.

I just don't want to think about this. I want to construct a world in which I am actually in control and I don't have to deal with the messiness which actually exists in reality.

You see, most of us try to avoid the question that our lives in, we try to avoid the question why? Because we don't want our lives to become overcomplicated.

[15:56] We don't want to sit there and think about these things because actually it is the sort of thing which can really derail us. It makes things overcomplicated for us. When we see things on our news, we begin to tune it out.

When we see devastating stories flash up on our social feeds, we can quickly scroll past them, can't we? There is a famine coming up in Gaza because of X.

I then flick up and it says, Martin, this is how you can make some amazing Korean chili chicken. Then I flick up again and it says, oh, here's three steps to fixing how you hit your nine iron. I would much rather those other two than sit there and think about the reality of life around about me. You know it, don't you? You've been in that situation. A big thing is presented in front of you in the palm of your hand and you go, oh, but there's chili chicken that I could make and it's so much better.

That's not wrong. But do you see? There's never been a moment in human history where we are so connected to the outworkings of the random suffering in other humans' lives than in our time right now.

[17:02] And yet there has never existed a moment or a method with such sophistication as to censor our engagement with suffering. In order for our lives to not become so complicated, we can sedate ourselves through our consumption of algorithmically defined preferences, which help us to avoid the reality because we just don't want to think through, if this is it, if life under the sun is my lot, then I don't understand when my hour will come.

You see, the teacher is saying to us, don't tune this out because tuning it out actually decreases your humanity. You need to engage with the world around about you.

Address it, confront it, because it is a teacher to your life. It points beyond the blue glare of the screen that is put in front of you or the limited imagination that we have of our idealized perceptions of life under the sun.

He's saying, listen up to it because it is actually a teacher. It's saying to you, you don't know when this is coming to an end. But the teacher doesn't allow us to sit with random general occurrences away out there from our lives.

He points out the terrifying reality that if this is all there is, we can look at verses 3 to 5. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun.

[18:39] The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live and afterwards they join the dead. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.

They have no further reward. Even their name is forgotten. Cheery, right? What he's saying is this. Good or bad, victim or perpetrator, at the end of the day, it doesn't make any difference.

Everything is going to end and it makes no difference whatsoever. Everything that we do is going to vanish. Everything that we do is going to come to an end. Everything about the fact that we even existed will vanish like a vapor and nobody's even going to remember you existed.

And that's our problem. And that's why he's such a good teacher. If in the end, all that happens is that we cease to exist and that the sun burns out and we have no meaning, then in the grand scheme of things, everything is meaningless.

Everything has no purpose. We recently went along to a great event, High Culture, right here. One of our friends in the fellowship has also attended this with us.

[19:58] We went along to Horrible History's Awesome Egyptians, the pinnacle of cultural achievement in Glasgow over the last few weeks. And in the Awesome Egyptians, they considered the life of Ramesses II, a great and powerful pharaoh, someone who history looks back on and says, this person was spectacular, building projects everywhere, amazing economic record, military victories.

And here is how this person's life is summed up after Egyptologists in the 19th century looked and found the remains of his legacy. It's a poem by Percy Shelley that some of us may have come across before.

It says this, I met a traveller from an antique land who said, Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies, Whose frown and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command Tell that its sculptor well those passions read, Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things, The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.

And on the pedestal these words appear, My name is Ozymandias, King of kings, Look on my works, you mighty and despair. No thing beside remains Round the decay Of that colossal wreck Boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away.

You see, maybe if you build a pyramid, Maybe if you go to the moon, And maybe in the future if you discover a cure for cancer, You might be remembered for a little while longer than the rest of us. But

if we all go in the ground, And if the universe will just end, That's it.

[ 21 : 44 ] It's meaningless. And this is the underlying tremor In all of our lives which shakes us to the core. A sense that we will be utterly forgotten, And that nothing we ever did Had any meaning, purpose or value at all.

If all we have is life under the sun, Then as Tim Keller has summed it up spectacularly, He says, Cosmic forgottenness is all we have. Now here's the pushback you're going to give, Because the preacher's actually already Anticipated this, Because he's done this cycle with people before. He's given his message to numerous people, And he turns around, And they say, Well, you're just being gloomy. We've already said this, You're being gloomy, You're being pessimistic on life. And the preacher says, Yeah, I get that.

He then says in verses 7 through 10 of chapter 9, It's a wonderful section, He says this, Go eat your food with gladness, Drink your wine with a joyful heart, For God has already approved these things. Good food, Great parties, Nice clothes, A happy family, Go for it, Says the teacher. This is a beautiful thing, And actually to do these things is good, And we'll touch on these things next week.

[ 23 : 00 ] We don't want to get into next week's sermon In the middle of this week's sermon, Because then it doubles the length Of everything that we're doing, And it's already a bit depressing. But the teacher says, Recognize that this pursuit Cannot fundamentally dull the murmur Rumbling inside you That cosmic forgottenness is all you've got If this is all there is.

If this is it, The murmur will not move If that is all you pursue with your life. So, We're not to avoid the question The teacher asks, The teacher presents to us.

He says, Don't avoid the question, Deal with it, Engage with it, Recognize that it's present around about you, Don't sedate yourself from it, Engage with this. But the teacher wants us to work.

He's not going to give us answers To the big questions that he's tackling, He's going to say, Here are a few things That I'm going to dot around about the room for you. Our children have just rediscovered A wedding present that we got, And I'm quite excited about it Because inside it there's drafts, There's chess, There's some dominoes, But there's also Monopoly and Cluedo.

And it's got me really interested. My kids are like, Oh, can we use Cluedo yet? And I'm like, I don't know if I should be teaching my kids How to play Cluedo And to hide murder weapons somewhere in a room. But that's effectively what we've got happening here.

[ 24 : 18 ] There are a couple of clues That have been put around about This chapter in the book To engage us and say, But what if under the sun's not everything? What if it's actually more?

And with this particular subject, He does this, The teacher does this By inviting us to consider Some animals And a poor, wise man. The animals deal with our mind And the poor, wise man Addresses our heart.

Right. Let's read verses 4-5 Because it's been a while since we've done that. Anyone who is among the living has hope.

Even a live dog Is better off than a dead lion. We don't need verse 5. Verse 4 is enough. Now, this is where I offend everyone who loves dogs, isn't it?

This is the point at which you get really frustrated with the preacher And also with me Because he's addressing something quite important here. When we think of dogs, In Scotland, we think of a nice collie.

[ 25 : 28 ] Maybe if you like to think of yourself as even more sophisticated, A nice poodle or some sort of thoroughbred. That's not what he's thinking of here whatsoever. He's not thinking of a dog in that fashion.

The ancients did not see dogs with the same reverence and joy that we do in the contemporary western world. They were low creatures, beasts, people who... People?

Animals who scavenged on dead things. They hunted in packs. They were not pleasant. And I can tell you as someone who lives the majority of his life in Southeast Asia just now And goes on holiday to Thailand When you are running your 5k It's 10 o'clock in the morning And you've got 500 metres left to go And there is a pack of dogs who have just seen you coming round the corner They are not fun.

They are not pretty. There is a three-legged hound that looks like it's come out of some horrific novel And it's chasing you with about 10 others And you just have to burst it down the road That's what we're to imagine.

You can see that the trauma is still here and it's still real. I did make it. Dogs were not positive images.

[ 26 : 46 ] You can see that in the Bible. You can see that in ancient culture and literary sources. But lions. Even to this day a lion. What does that picture... What does a lion mean to you in your head and your heart?

When you think of a lion what do you think of? You don't think of something that's kind of mangy down at the side. You think of something which is powerful, strong, majestic. It is the apex predator. It can do as it pleases and everything submits underneath it. They are regal. And they are rightly associated with kingship because of all of the qualities we can see in them.

But do you see the shocking thing the teacher is doing with these two animals? He is saying to us something very important. He's saying it's better to be a dog than to be a lion. If under the sun is it, it's better to be a dog than to be a lion.

If life under the sun is all we have, then the point of leading a life which is good has actually lost all of its meaning. Better to be a cheat and a fraud.

[ 27 : 48 ] Better to be a dog who's still alive than to be a lion who at the end of the day, his life, it makes no difference. It's a shocking image actually that he's presenting to us.

And it grates against us, doesn't it? When we see this happen in life, when we encounter this in our own circumstances. And that's because actually we all sit back and say, good and bad's a thing, Martin.

And no matter which perspective we're coming from, it grates against us because we turn around and say, but there is good. Of course it's better to be a lion than to be a dog.

Why is the teacher saying this? The teacher's saying this because he's saying, ultimately you need to understand what it means to be a person. To be a person, to be good, to be a person who is righteous, that comes with an understanding of your purpose.

Goodness, to define whether something is good or not, can only be understood in line with its purpose. Take for example this very simple thing. I have wonderful history of car failure and more than likely you'll get to hear another story of that in the next few weeks.

[ 29 : 02 ] Tyres. If I said to you, is this a good tyre and you had no idea what a tyre was, what would you say? What's it for? This thing that I've described to you, this thing that I'm putting out in front of you, if you don't actually know what it is for, can you actually give me some sort of explanation whether it's good for its purpose or not?

And this is what the teacher, the preacher is asking us about. He's saying, if life under the sun is all that it is and there is ultimately no meaning, there is no purpose to what it is, then actually what's the concept of goodness?

Why pursue this in the first place? Actually, you need to understand why you were made in order for you to perceive what really is good and right and it's going to lead to a life of value and meaning which will extend beyond the under the sun life that you have right now.

You see, if it is the case that this is it, then we might as well be the dog, the teacher says.

That is, unless there is more to life under the sun. You see, injustice, pain, suffering, these are all huge problems to faith and to belief and you know that.

[ 30 : 17 ] Which is why the teacher doesn't back away from it or shy away from it. He says, this is hard, but I'm not going to move away from it because it's also real and it is there. There is no denying the complexities and the profound pain and challenges that come across our life and which these big objections pose to faith.

But it also presents an even greater problem for skepticism and unbelief. This is it. It really literally is dog eat dog and that's it.

This is all that's left to us if this is it. And the question the preacher is posing to us, to the mind, is to say, can you actually cope with that being life?

Can you actually cope that that is therefore reality and there is nothing else? That the massive pain and suffering that will cross your life, zero purpose to it whatsoever.

Time and chance happen to everyone and you're just going to have to deal with it. This is it. Can we cope with that being reality?

[ 31 : 24 ] Can you cope with knowing that nothing matters and that fundamentally there is no such thing as justice and goodness if life under the sun is all that there is? Now, I think that there's probably two ways that we can approach this.

When we hear that, we can get to a point of saying, well, this is not fun and I am going to sink off and sulk off into despair because it seems like there is no answer.

Or I can go on another track which says, I'm just going to deny that this stuff's even true. And you see the beauty of the Bible and the beauty of God is that the gospel presents for us a way which is in between despair and denial.

It comes to us and it says, there's something decisive which takes place, which gives us hope, and it actually points beyond the sun and right off into eternity. And that's what he does by giving us the example of the poor wise man.

Read verse 13 to 16 with me. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it.

[ 32 : 30 ] And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it, and built huge siege works against it. Now, there lived in that city a poor man, but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom.

Nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, wisdom is better than strength. But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

It's a fascinating little story, isn't it? Why is that there? Well, let's think about what does this poor wise man possess. Number one, he possesses a wisdom which can save the people.

Number two, he is humble, even though he is great and he has already provided deliverance. And thirdly, he is vehemently rejected by the people who are around about them.

They don't want to remember his words. Hear the voice of the teacher explaining to us the path in between despair and denial. It is to trust in the humble servant who can save.

[ 33 : 35 ] It's to come to the humble servant who actually enters into this and says, you don't need to fall on either side of despair or denial. You can come to me and you can live.

And see that there is something beyond the sun which goes on into eternity, which actually cuts right through that deep pain that you have that you will be cosmically forgotten. Well, Sinclair Ferguson, a minister in Scotland, has said this about this section.

He says, the words here read almost like a prophecy. Whose name most naturally comes to mind when we hear of a poor man full of wisdom who became a savior, but whose life and teaching have been neglected and rejected.

And we are supposed to answer the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is this poor, wise man who is rejected by many and yet is the deliverer that we all need.

Despair or denial, but there is a deliverer in the center. At the cross, Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God is the one who becomes cut off from God.

[ 34 : 44 ] If one of the things which gives us the greatest fear in life is that our life will absolutely have no meaning whatsoever and we will be cosmically forgotten, then we hear the words from the cross of Jesus which say, My Father, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why have you cut me off? Why have you forgotten about me and left me hanging here? Because you, bearing sin and injustice and pain and suffering for this people at the cross, the only perfect person who has ever set foot on this earth, suffered the greatest injustice for you and for me.

Suffered intolerable pain. Not just physically, but the separation from God even in his perfection. so that you and I would not need to look to the future and think, all that I have in front of me is cosmic forgottenness and no one will remember me.

The murmur can be stilled, the heart can be changed, and life can be altered all because of him.

We forget him. But here is the stunning thing about the gospel for every one of us here.

He knows your name. And he does not forget you. This isn't all there is. You'd be glad to hear me say.

[ 36 : 07 ] There is life above the sun. There is life which goes on into eternity. And the good news is that you are invited into God's family.

And you are welcomed then, not by a saviour with lovely blonde hair and perfectly white skin, but by a saviour who stands there with scarred hands and says, my friend, brother, sister, welcome.

These wounds pay for your entrance. I am yours. And you are mine forever. Whilst we're under the sun, the pain and the injustices will keep coming.

They are going to come. And you may be walking through them right now. But the gospel of Jesus says this to us. In the midst of our pain, there is one who will not leave you or forsake you.

And in the fear of then, for when that last day comes and the breath slips from our lungs, there is one who says, look at my son.

[ 37 : 17 ] I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. Let me pray. Let me pray.