

Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 | “Death & Injustice”
Preached on April 26, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 today. *[pauseee]*

The book of Ecclesiastes can be confusing to many people, but when you look closely, you realize that a major thing that Ecclesiastes is doing is giving you a heaping dose of *realism*. *[pause]*

It doesn't allow you to live in a dream world, or ride the coattails of delusion, but it slaps you in the face with the nitty-gritty facts of life. *[pause]*

Our passage today is a prime example of what I'm talking about, for it will talk about death and injustice.

Listen to what it says, as I READ it. *[READ 16–22]*

Death and injustice. *[pause]*

When you hear those two terms, your heart probably sinks a little bit. *[pause]*

They aren't the most pleasant topics to think or talk about, yet they are facts of life. *[pauseee]*

They are two *common* realities...

We experience the death of loved ones, we just barely escape death by avoiding a car accident, or we hear about the death of people on the news. *[pauseeee]*

We feel constantly bombarded with it sometimes.

Young, middle, and old—we have probably heard of people in every age group die at some point in our lives. *[pause]*

Sudden death hits one person, while another suffers for a while and then eventually dies. *[pause]*

There are hundreds of ways that people can die, and we have heard of countless ones.

You cannot escape the reality that there is death in our world. *[pauseeeee]*

Likewise, injustice seems ever so common...

We hear about court cases like OJ Simpson, where many people believe that a great injustice occurred, or people bring up the Duke Lacrosse Team being wrongfully accused. *[pauseee]*

There's not only injustice in the courtroom, but injustice at the workplace, too...

A person totally undeserving is promoted, while you are overlooked. *[pause]*

Maybe you have experienced it on a sports team as it became political, or you saw it in school, or somewhere else. *[pause]*

Death and injustice are two common, horrible, and significant matters that we do not ultimately control. *[pauseeee]*

The author of Ecclesiastes writes about them here, and he shows us how common they really are, but he will also help us to think through how we should respond to them. *[pause]*

First, we see in verses 16–17 that...

I. Injustice should remind us that we are not in control, leading us to look to God’s judgment. (16–17)

Look at what he says in verse 16, “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” *[pauseeee]*

As the author looked out on the world, he couldn’t help but see *injustice*. *[pause]*

Have you ever felt that way? *[pauseeee]*

Back in 1983, Henry McCollum and Leon Brown were charged with murder. *[pause]*

They were coerced into confessing the crime, and spent almost 31 years in prison before being declared innocent after DNA matched another person. *[pause]*

Talk about *injustice*!

Think about all of the court cases that have been deemed unjust due to new evidence, and now think about all of the cases that we don’t even know about—it’s mind-boggling! *[pause]*

There’s corruption, dishonesty, misconduct, bribery, extortion, and so much more. *[pauseeee]*

The Bible is realistic, for here it tells us that injustice is common in this fallen world.

So we must not be shocked when we hear about it, for it was also going on in the author’s day. *[pauseee]*

He looked to the places where justice and righteousness were *supposed* to prevail, and he saw wickedness. *[pauseeee]*

Of course, justice should be pursued everywhere, but he’s saying that the very place that is set up to be the place of justice is actually a place of wickedness.

Isn’t that such a shame? *[pause]*

The court's role *is* to be just—that's what they are there for, yet they weren't doing their job.
[pauseeee]

This is no minor thing, either, for it affects people's lives...

Injustice in the court determines whether you live or die, whether you are bound or free, whether you pay up or not. [pause]

Your life, freedom, and money are all in the balance when it comes to dealing with the places of judgment.

And the implication is that if in the place of justice there is wickedness, then I most likely won't find it in other places, either. [pauseeee]

If the places of justice aren't being just then what hope do people have? [pause]

They are in the hands of wicked, corrupt people, and what a horrible place to be.

And this can lead people to despair, for who knows if the judge will be just today or not? [pause]

Could I be thrown into prison for something that I didn't do? [pause]

Could someone get off free, who did something horrific to me? [pause]

This corruption, injustice, and wickedness can really get to a person—it gives them no security, so despair and pessimism can set in. [pauseeee]

Maybe you've been there, or maybe you are there now...

You look around and you see so much corruption, and you feel like you can't take it anymore.
[pause]

Your heart cries out with, "This isn't right! This is so unjust!"

Know that that's a *normal* feeling—something would be wrong with you, if you didn't feel upset to some degree over injustice. [pause]

But how should we respond to such wrongs? [pause]

Should we despair? [pause]

Should we just throw up our hands in disgust? [pause]

Should we seethe with anger and bitterness?

Well the author shows us how to respond to wickedness: look to God's judgment. [pauseeee]

Listen to verse 17, "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work." [pause]

In light of the injustice he saw all around him, he made sure to remind himself of the truth.

And this is so vital for us when we see something that stirs up negative emotions in us—we must remind ourselves of the truth. *[pauseeee]*

Often we dwell on the situation and get upset about it, and leave it at that.

But every situation, especially difficult ones, should lead us to make a beeline for the Bible. *[pause]*

It's *there* that we are led out of despair, it's *there* that our minds and hearts can be stabilized, for it's *there* that we find the truth that triumphs over all lies. *[pauseeeee]*

Injustice and wickedness do NOT have the final word—praise God! *[pause]*

If there were no God, then injustice would go unanswered forever, but thankfully, there *is* a God and He reigns.

His judgments are sure, His justice will prevail, His righteousness shall triumph over wickedness. *[pauseeeee]*

While we look around and see unjust and wicked men, that should lead us to look up to the just and righteous God—*He* will have the final word. *[pauseeeee]*

The author writes, “for there is a time for every matter and for every work.” *[pause]*

Remember how in the last passage it said that there was a time for everything?

Well here we see that there's a time for God's judgment. *[pause]*

Yes, there's a *time* when injustice abounds, but there will be a *time* for God's judgment. *[pauseeee]*

This judgment of God will be righteous and good, for God is righteous and good.

This judgment will also be all-encompassing, for it takes into account every matter and every work—nothing escapes His sight. *[pauseeee]*

This means that *every* judgment by *every* human court is not actually the final decision on the matter, for *everything* will be evaluated by God someday.

And what truly matters in the end is the judgment of God, no matter what everyone else says. *[pauseeeee]*

What a comforting thing to remember, for those of us who love, submit to, and trust God...

Though we see wickedness all around us, we can be assured that it will be dealt with eventually. *[pause]*

We do not have to throw up our hands in despair, as if injustice will be let go.

And this is why Paul says in Romans 12:19, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” [pause]

And like Christ, we don’t revile in return, we don’t threaten, but continue entrusting ourselves “to him who judges justly.”¹ [pauseeeee]

It’s normal to feel upset when you see injustice, but what do you say to your heart? [pause]

We should say, “God will judge. There is a *time* for justice, and it will come.” [pauseeeee]

Imagine the difference this can make in your life...

Instead of being constantly bitter, despairing, or retaliating, you can rest in God’s judgment. [pause]

You can actually be at peace, even amidst a world filled with wickedness. [pause]

You can live with hope, confidence, and a certain tranquility that doesn’t make sense to the world. [pauseeeee]

This can also radically impact your life if injustice is done to you. [pause]

Let’s say that you were wrongly imprisoned...

It would be hard and unjust, but in your heart, you can know, “What God says is what’s most important.” [pause]

You could still live by faith and be content.

Just read the book of Philippians, which Paul wrote from jail after being wrongfully imprisoned, by the way, and see for yourself that it’s possible to be content and even *rejoice* amidst that.² [pauseeeee]

Injustice—it’s all around us and is hard to take at times.

We do not have the power to dispel it completely, but we know Someone who will judge it someday. [pause]

In Him—in the Lord—we put our trust, knowing that He will take care of it. [pause]

It won’t be in our time and in our way, but there *will* be a time, and it will be done in the *perfect* way. [pauseeeee]

¹ 1 Peter 2:23.

² See Philippians 1:18, 2:17–18, 4:4, 4:11–13.

So the author has spoken about injustice, but now he goes on to talk about another gloomy subject: death. *[pause]*

We see next that...

II. Death should remind us that we are mortal, leading us to look to God. (18–22)

Verses 18–20 speak all about death, and it feels like sort of a grim passage. *[pause]*

It essentially says, “We all die, just like the animals”—not very pleasant to think about, right? *[pause]*

Well let’s look closer at what the author is doing here...

We see that when it comes to death, it is something that “happens” to us.

If you do not want to die, it’s not like you have a choice in the matter, but it happens *to you*. *[pauseeee]*

What’s interesting is that the author connects our death with the death of animals—what happens to us happens to them. *[pause]*

We all know this: we see dead birds on the side of the road, or hear about the death of someone’s pet, just like we hear about the death of humans. *[pause]*

Likewise, we breathe like animals and we both return to dust, as our bodies decompose. *[pauseeee]*

This ‘death’ is also universal, as he says, “*all* have the same breath,” / “*all* go to one place,” / “*all* are from dust, and to dust *all* return.” *[pauseee]*

Unless Christ returns first, we will all meet death, so it’s not like death is this hit-or-miss kind of thing, but it’s a universal reality. *[pauseeee]*

By speaking this way, the author wants us to see how mortal we really are, for we breathe, die, and return to dust just like the animals.

So when it comes to our physical mortality, “[we] are but beasts.” *[pauseeee]*

Additionally, from an earthly standpoint, we don’t know “whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth.” *[pause]*

How could you know unless God revealed that because from an earthly perspective, it just looks like we all go to the same place.

But Ecclesiastes is not denying the afterlife—it is denying that we can know the afterlife apart from God’s revelation. *[pause]*

So we are not only limited in our ability to prevent death, but also, limited in our knowledge of life beyond the grave, without God telling us. *[pauseeee]*

This passage carries us kicking and screaming away from our dream-worlds, so that we are face-to-face with the reality of death. *[pause]*

This is intentional, and we must not shy away from it...

Listen to verse 18: "I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts." *[pauseee]*

So God uses death as a wake-up call to confront us with the reality of our mortality. *[pause]*

The point is that He wants us to really and truly see that our physical lives are mortal. *[pause]*

That word 'testing' is a word used for purifying or cleaning something to reveal what's really there.

So likewise, through the reality of death all around us, God burns away our delusions, so that we see the truth that we all die. *[pause]*

God wants you to take death *seriously*. *[pauseeee]*

What's interesting is that modern-day Americans try to avoid the unavoidable. *[pause]*

When a family member dies, some people live in *denial*.

They almost act like death didn't even happen, but what good is it to deny reality? *[pause]*

Living in denial doesn't help you, but only hurts you, for you never deal with what actually happened.

You are trying to live in some dream-world, instead of the real world. *[pause]*

This is why many people will even shy away from talking about death, or using terms of death, because many do not want to face the hard fact that death happened. *[pauseeee]*

Similar to this is the fact that some people do not help their family members face the fact that their loved one is dying. *[pause]*

It's like they are trying to avoid reality by acting like 'all is well.'

But when someone is legitimately dying, we need to make the dying person aware of that fact, and we must make each family member aware of it, too. *[pauseeee]*

Commentator David Gibson put it well when he wrote...

“Ecclesiastes says that a day is coming when some people will discover that they are not ready for the most important event in the world. And it won’t be a dream. *[pause]*

Their life has been one long exercise in avoiding reality and ignoring what is coming toward them—death and judgment are coming.”³ *[pauseeee]*

Now why would God want us to know that our physical lives are mortal? *[pause]*

On the one hand, it’s because it’s the truth, but also, He wants you to know that you are mortal because it’s then that you are primed to look outside of yourself and to Him. *[pause]*

God wants us to take *death* seriously, so that we take *Him* seriously. *[pauseeee]*

I cannot prevent my death, so I must trust the One who holds my life in His hands, and who promises me eternal life through His Son.⁴ *[pause]*

I cannot know where my spirit goes when I die through human knowledge alone...

So I must look to His revealed truth, which tells me that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord.⁵ *[pause]*

I cannot see what will happen on earth after I die, so then I must trust the One who knows the future and controls it. *[pause]*

We need to continually say, like the psalmist, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”⁶ *[pauseeee]*

Interestingly, this knowledge of your mortality and limitation leads you to enjoy God’s gifts *today*. *[pause]*

Instead of trying to control everything and know everything, you are led to accept life from God’s hand. *[pause]*

Verse 22 says, “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.” *[pause]*

Our lot is not to be sovereign, our lot is to be joyfully dependent people of God. *[pauseeee]*

There’s a certain joy that you can have when you stop trying to control the world, and can rest in the control of God. *[pauseeee]*

³ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 161.

⁴ See John 3:16.

⁵ A reference to 2 Corinthians 5:8.

⁶ Psalm 90:12.

When you think your lot is to eradicate all injustice in the world, you will wear yourself down to a pulp in frustration and effort. *[pause]*

When you think your lot is to avoid death at all costs and so try to control every single variable of life, you will end up burnt out and defeated. *[pause]*

So many people are fretting over death that they do not enjoy life!

But when you humble realize that ‘I am not in control, I was never meant to be, but God is,’ that’s when you can find joy in the simple gifts of God. *[pause]*

You have accepted and are functioning in the lot that God has given you. *[pauseeee]*

“I don’t have to control the world, I don’t have to know everything, work myself to the bone, fix everything, or give myself ultimate security”—and what a relief! *[pauseeeee]*

Since God’s in control, I can rejoice in the things that God *has* given me to do...

I can live in the present, be faithful, and trust Him with the outcome.

I can be thankful to Him for the good gifts that He’s given. *[pause]*

This is no begrudging resignation, but this is humble acceptance of God’s design, and in that, there is freedom and relief.

So no wonder the author says, “there is nothing better than” to do this! *[pauseeee]*

We have a role to perform, and it’s not ‘Lord of the Universe,’ so let’s rejoice and live according to what God has given to us to do. *[pause]*

Being limited and dependent is not a mistake or error, but it’s what God has given us, and when we receive it as a gift and live according to it, that’s when we can find joy. *[pause]*

So your lot is to enjoy the time God has given to you, and to trust Him with justice and with eternity. *[pauseeeee]*

When we take this passage as a whole, we discover that...

Death and injustice remind us that we are not in control, leading us to trust God and enjoy what He gives.

We see death and injustice all around us—they are ever before our eyes. *[pause]*

We are not to avoid looking at them, and act like they don’t exist, rather, we should really *see* them for what they are...⁷

⁷ Note the times that the writer uses the words “I saw” or “see” in this passage.

Death and injustice are reminders that we do not have ultimate control. *[pause]*

Knowing this, we are meant to see God, full of justice and full of life.

We are meant to joyfully rest in the role that God has given to us as dependent creations of Him.

So stop trying to control life, but rest in God's control, and enjoy the good gifts that He has given you. *[pauseeee]*

The injustice of this world should point us to see that God will bring righteous judgment someday.

And death should push us to see that in Christ, our physical death does not have the final word. *[pause]*

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."⁸

And he said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed *from death to life*."⁹ *[pauseeee]*

You see, Christ was no stranger to the injustice and death found in this world, but experienced it firsthand. *[pause]*

He was unjustly condemned, though He did nothing wrong, and crucified on a cross, dying there. *[pause]*

He did this so that we, who were wicked and under the condemnation of death, could experience forgiveness and life. *[pause]*

He faced injustice so that we could be justified in God's sight.

He faced death so that we could have eternal life. *[pause]*

Through faith in Him alone, we are declared righteous and given everlasting life! *[pauseeee]*

This means that although injustice and death are still present in this world, they have lost their sting! *[pause]*

They are no longer something that we have to *ultimately* fear, for they have been *ultimately* conquered through Christ. *[pause]*

⁸ John 11:25.

⁹ John 5:24 (Italics is mine).

In the end, Christ will banish all wickedness,¹⁰ throw death into the lake of fire,¹¹ and we will live with Him forevermore.¹² [*pauseee*]

When death and injustice are seen in light of Christ, they are no longer as dark as they once were.

So will you look to the just and life-giving One today?

¹⁰ A reference to Matthew 13:41–42.

¹¹ A reference to Revelation 20:14.

¹² A reference to Revelation 21:3–4.