

Meeting God in an Unjust World

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Meeting God in the Psalms Series

Psalm 73

This past week I took our pastoral staff and their spouses to Cincinnati on Tuesday to visit the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, which is on the banks of the Ohio River. If you have not visited the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, you are missing one of the great treasures that are here in the State of Ohio. You can't understand where we are as a nation, or where we are going, unless you understand where we've come from. And this Underground Railroad Museum tells the story of slavery and slaves' quest for freedom. There are just so many powerful videos and exhibits. It is truly a moving place.

Probably the principle exhibit in the Center is a slave pen.

SLIDE – Photo of the Slave Pen

It was a 2-story log cabin built in 1830 that was used to house slaves who were being shipped to auction. Slaves would be imprisoned there for a few days or a few months while the owner was waiting for the slave market to change so that he would get more favorable prices for the slaves. Male slaves were chained on the 2nd floor to these wrought iron rings. The women were kept on the 1st floor to cook. You walk into this slave pen and touched the walls, recognizing that human beings were housed there for the purpose of sale. And it is hard to speak.

The Underground Railroad Museum also has exhibits of slave ships where you see the way Africans were transported across the Atlantic stacked almost like firewood in little compartments 2'x2'x5', no bathrooms, chained to the ceiling for three weeks. 11-15 million Africans were transported to the Americas during the slave trade, especially to Brazil and the Caribbean, and also, of course, to the US.

You walk through the museum and you see the exhibits printed on the wall of the US Constitution. Many of you probably know that slavery was written into our constitution when our nation was founded. In order to get Southern state support, slaves were counted as 3/5ths of a person. And the slave trade was guaranteed until 1808. Right from the beginning of our nation, we betrayed the Declaration of Independence which said that:

SLIDE

All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

So there was an inherent contradiction in our country from the beginning.

But for me, I think the poignant moment in going through the museum was the reenactments of children being pulled from their mothers' arms and taken to slave markets. When I think of the countless mothers and fathers who were forcibly separated from their sons and daughters and babies, their husbands and wives, I am confronted by the massive injustice that is at the foundation of our country.

They had one man's accounting book in which he very meticulously journaled the amounts that he got for each of the men, women, and children be bought and sold. And a letter in which he boasted of making several hundred dollars in one day buying and selling a human being.

You say: That is ancient history.

Roll forward a hundred years from the Civil War to the story of Emmett Till.

SLIDE – Photos of Emmett Till

Emmett was a 14-year old boy being raised by his mother in Illinois when in the summer of 1955 he was sent to Mississippi along with a cousin to stay with their great-uncle. And before Emmett went back to Mississippi, his mother warned him to mind his manners with white people because Mississippi was a lot different than Illinois.

Well, Emmett arrived down in Mississippi on August 21, 1955. A few days later he joined some other teens and went to a market to buy some candy and soda. The teens were all children of share croppers who worked out in the cotton fields. The store was owned by a husband and wife, Roy and Carolyn Bryant. And on the way out of the store, Emmett allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant, this white woman. His cousins began running because they were afraid of what was going to happen. A few days later, Carolyn's husband, Roy, along with Roy's half-brother, a guy who was known as "Big," went to the house where teenage Emmett was staying. They dragged him out of his bed at night. The folks who owned the house pleaded with these two white men on behalf of Emmett. They said that they would pay the two white men for any damages Emmett caused.

But the men dragged Emmett out of the house anyway. They drove him around for several hours until they got to Big's place. There they took Emmett to a tool shed, beat this 14-year old with a pistol repeatedly, shot him in the head, took his body to a river, tied a heavy fan around Emmett's neck, and threw his dead body into the river.

These two white men, Bryant and Big, were arrested just a couple of days later because of Emmett's disappearance. Emmett's body was found. The two men were tried for murder. Less than a month after Emmett's murder, a jury made up of 12 white men acquitted both defendants. Their deliberations took just 67 minutes. One juror said they took a soda break in which they went out for a cigarette and to joke with each other, to stretch the time so that it would go over an hour. Then they went back into court and acquitted Bryant and Big of the murder.

When Emmett's body was shipped back to Chicago, Emmett's mother refused to have a closed casket. She wanted the nation to know how her boy died. The pictures of Emmett Till were printed in Jet Magazine. They are simply too grotesque to show. But the photos were so shocking that they really spurred the Civil Rights Movement that was just gaining steam in the South.

After the men were acquitted, they were interviewed by Look Magazine and paid \$4000. In the magazine they confessed to having killed Emmett Till. They said they weren't afraid of being tried again because of double jeopardy. Big died in 1980 of cancer. And Bryant died of cancer in 1994. They never expressed a drop of remorse for killing a teenage boy. In fact, a few months before he died, Bryant complained bitterly that he never made as much money off of Emmett Till's death as he deserved. Emmett Till's mother just died a few years ago.

Justice was never served in this case. And this is just one of tens of thousands of illustrations of injustice that we could cite. Big things like slavery and the murder of a teenage boy; smaller injustices like being fired without cause, being betrayed by a spouse, privileges shown to the wealthy that they haven't earned.

I've been doing a series from the Book of Psalms, a series that I've titled "Meeting God in the Psalms." And one of the things that I think, if you've been here during this series, you've discovered is that the psalmist is so truthful, he is so real about his experience of life. There is no religious veneer; no "I shouldn't be saying this." We find in the Psalms life presented in all of its rawness, in all of its pain. Part of the pain the psalmist expresses in Ps. 73 is the pain of living in an unjust world. I've called today's talk, "Meeting God in an Unjust World." Let's pray.

SLIDE – Ps 73:1-2

1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

Psalm 73 begins with good theology. It begins almost with the conclusion of the argument. Here is the truth that I've been taught by the Bible. Here is the wisdom I've received from my teachers.

SLIDE - Ps 73:1

1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

What's the problem? Here is a wonderful statement of good theology. This is what we read in Psalm 1 when we began this series. Surely God is good; God is good to his people Israel. God is good to anyone whose heart is not divided, who seeks him. What's the problem?

The problem is life doesn't always look like it squares with this statement. The problem is that what we observe in the lives of other people doesn't always square with this statement. The psalmist is going to address the very common experience that every human being has at times when God does not seem to be good or just, at times where there seems to be lots of exceptions to this sound theological concept of the justice of God.

He says that as he looked at his life and as he looked at life around him, he almost fell into unbelief, or at least into total despair. Verse 2,

SLIDE – Ps 73:2

2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

SLIDE

The contradiction of Theology and Experience

What causes the condition of his feet almost slipping, and his faith nearly collapsing? The bottom line is his experience of injustice didn't square with what good theology taught him. Even though this man was trying his hardest to serve God, he wanted to be among those who were pure at heart, who God would be good to. He was trying to serve God and to please and obey God. But he wasn't experiencing what he believed he deserved from God, verses 13-14,

SLIDE – Ps 73:13-14

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. 14 All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.

Why Lord, does my spouse who is a really good person have cancer? People not half as good are perfectly healthy. Why do top executives at my company keep grabbing more and more perks for themselves, while they lay off dozens of hard working employees who don't make 1/10 of their salaries?

We don't know what problem the psalmist had. Maybe his problem was betrayal by a trusted friend or spouse; maybe it was debt load, and creditors hounding him, loss of property, or going bankrupt. Lord, you say you own the cattle on a thousand hills, that you are generous, that you freely give your resources. If you

have resources, won't you bless me? Won't you lift me out of this debt? I am trying to serve you.

Maybe the problem involved a painful relationship, a difficult marriage, a loved one's illness, being misunderstood, being lied about, being slandered, being persecuted for faith. Maybe the issue involved a child's rebellion, or a spouse's infidelity. It doesn't matter what the problem is, the real issue is – his experience of life's unfairness did not square with what he had been led to expect by the promises of scripture.

SLIDE – Ps 73:13

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.

Good theology teaches me verse 1,

SLIDE – Ps 73:1

1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But my experience is verse 13,

SLIDE – Ps 73:13

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.

I did what King David did in Ps 26:6

SLIDE

6 I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, Lord,

"I did what David did. I washed my hands in innocence. I didn't do anything wrong and where has it gotten me?" In other words, it doesn't seem to make any difference at all if I pray or not. It doesn't seem to make any difference at all, if I obey or not. It doesn't make any difference if I'm good or if I am bad. Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt: "Why do I bother praying, if God is not going to answer? What difference does it make if I'm trying to obey God, if I'm always going to get the short end of the stick? There is no justice in this world!"

Don't you love the psalmist's brutal honesty? "In vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence." Living in the 21st century, perhaps he would say something like this: Maybe the relativists are right. Maybe life is utterly random and it doesn't matter what you do – follow God, rebel against God, pray, don't pray, obey, disobey – it is all the same. Maybe there is no meaning. Maybe there is no ultimate reward in following Christ. Maybe life is not governed by a benevolent, sovereign Lord, but rather, life is just a crapshoot. When your number is up, it's up and you can't do anything about it.

And his misery is compounded when he looks at the arrogant and wealthy. As this man looks at the corrupt wealthy, at people who never give God a passing thought – they are totally self-absorbed. As the man looks at the arrogant, at the abuser, the liar, the vulgar, at the person who mocks Christianity and mocks truth, here is what he sees, verses 3-12,

SLIDE – Ps 73:3-12

3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. 5 They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. 11 They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” 12 This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

Let's look at verses 3 and 5,

SLIDE – Ps 73:3

3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

SLIDE – Ps 73:5

5 They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.

The psalmist is saying: Look at all of the unfair privileges and the pampered lives of the wealthy.

Now, it is important to immediately say that not all wealthy people are wicked and arrogant and not all of the arrogant are wealthy. But with wealth comes privilege. And with privilege often there is a sense of entitlement and arrogance. And so we see here that the wealthy are free from common human burdens. In other words, the wealthy have lots of help to ease the stress of life. They don't have to face life alone. They have maids, accountants, and lawyers. The wealthy don't have to stand in line at the airport. There is a line especially set aside for business and first class travelers. They have lounges with comfortable seating and media access. I've traveled business class overseas – talk about pampered. While everyone in coach is shoved into 20" seats with the person in the seat in front of yours head is in your lap, I was in a seat that folded flat down into a bed so that I could sleep all night.

They have access to politicians. And the super wealthy even get to speak to congress or to the UN about subjects that they actually know very little about, but everyone hangs on their words.

The wealthy get jobs for their children without having their kids go through the normal processes. They know the right people. They get second, third, and fourth chances when other people get only one chance. Some of us are the pampered wealthy. Would you say that you have an over large sense of entitlement for you or for your children?

A few years ago I sat in Barnes and Noble and read a book by Dan Golden titled *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges...And Who Gets Left Outside The Gates*. Dan Golden is a Wall Street Journal reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize for his series of articles on the inner workings of college admissions offices. And in this very provocative book written by a fairly politically conservative writer, Golden makes a powerful case that the number of wealthy whites who are given preference to highly selective colleges dwarfs that of minorities benefiting from Affirmative Action.

For years our country has been embroiled in a debate about the justice or injustice of Affirmative Action for minorities. But there has been almost no discussion about the much larger Affirmative Action program for wealthy whites especially at elite private colleges. Preference is given to the sons and daughters of alumni. Everyone knows that. But preference is also given to wealthy applicants whose families have been identified as potential donors. They are development cases in the language of the trade.

Duke University, for example, admitted a hundred development cases a year according to Dan Golden. People whose parents could be cultivated for big donations to the university.

And then there are the athletes, who are given preferential treatment. You say: How does that help wealthy whites? Because the sports for which preferential treatment is given are sports played almost exclusively by wealthy whites – sports like polo, sailing, fencing, squash, and crew. One NCAA official estimated that only 40% of the slots at Ivy League colleges are actually open to regular students.

So who gets into elite universities? People like Al Gore, Jr.'s son. Al Gore, Jr. graduated from Harvard in 1969. He was a member of his alma mater's board of overseers until he became Vice President of the U.S. He sent his son to a very elite prep school in Washington, DC. His son was suspended for smoking marijuana. And so Al Gore transferred his son to another very elite prep school. He was a very average student. And while his dad was a presidential candidate, Al Gore, III got into Harvard. His first year he was arrested for driving under the

influence of alcohol. His second year he was charged with marijuana possession. I won't go through his whole record.

And this wasn't just on the Democratic side of the aisle. Bill Frist, the former Senate Republican Majority Leader, had his son Harrison into Princeton. His academic record was anything but stellar. But the Princeton admissions office saw potential in young Harrison Frist, especially when the Frist family gave tens of millions of dollars to build a new student center on campus. Princeton's admissions staff gave Harrison the lowest ranking on its entire scale for evaluating an applicant's academic credentials, but he still got in. And like Al Gore, III, Harrison was arrested on substance abuse charges while at Princeton.

The wealthy live privileged, pampered lives and move from elite prep schools to elite universities, to Wall Street jobs and to elite law firms as a birthright. Does this offend you? And does it offend you that America engages in a 30 year long debate about reserving a few slots for poor minority students? But you almost never hear anyone rail about the thousands and thousands and thousands of slots reserved at the Dukes and Harvards and Princetons and Notre Dames of the world for the undeserving children of the wealthy.

But it is not just the unfair privileges that offend the psalmist. It is also their abuse of power. Verses 6-8,

SLIDE – Ps 73:6-8

6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.

Notice that the sins that the psalmist points to not only involve greed, but violence. Verse 6,

SLIDE – Ps 73:6

6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.

And oppression

SLIDE – Ps 73:8

8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.

The injustice that the psalmist is protesting involves an abuse of power. And this really does strike at the essence of injustice. There is an abuse of power. So when we see a single mom sexually harassed on her job by her boss and she is afraid to speak up because she can't afford to lose the job, that is an illustration of injustice. There is an abuse of power. When we have a husband continually berating his wife until her self-esteem is absolutely shredded, there is injustice because there is an abuse of power. When foster parent's duct-tape their 3-year

old foster child in a closet and leave him over the weekend to die as in that recent horrific case in the news, there is injustice because there is an abuse of power.

Whenever someone in a position of power chooses to abuse another who is subordinate: "Sign this paper or else..." the psalmist protests the injustice.

Let me ask you a personal question. What about you? Have you ever abused the power you have? Have you ever taken advantage of another person sexually? Have you ever taken advantage of another person financially? Have you ever abused your power in your relationship with an employee, or in a church setting? Or the power you have in your relationship with a child? Have you ever confessed to God that you have contributed to the injustice in the world? Are you currently abusing the poor?

And finally, among the unjust we see their blasphemous claims, verses 9-11.

SLIDE – Ps 73:9-11

9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. 11 They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?"

James Cameron, the director of the film Titanic, when he won his Academy Award jumped up and down on stage. He hoisted his Oscar in the air and he screamed over and over: I am the king of the world. I am the king of the world. He made \$115 million on the Titanic. He's been married five times. His first wife got \$1200 in the divorce settlement. He's lost a plagiarism lawsuit. It is not just his wealth, it is not just his serial marriages; this Sunday evening James Cameron is producing a show on the Discovery Channel attacking Jesus Christ. He argues in this show that they've discovered the bones of Jesus in a bone box, what is called an ossuary, in a tomb near Jerusalem. And, of course, this claim denies the central tenets of Christianity, which is the bodily resurrection of Christ.

And James Cameron, because he has access to the media, has created a huge buzz about this so-called discovery. There is a book being written along with this television show. And it will be everywhere in bookstores. Because of the buzz and because some of you may wonder about this; others of you have friends who ask questions, I've put in your bulletins an insert of a few basic refutations of this Discovery Channel's claims. You can read that in your spare time.

But the fundamental issue with the wealthy arrogant is the basic claim that no one knows and nobody cares. Nobody will interfere. Verse 11

SLIDE – Ps 73:11

11 They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?"

There will be no consequences for my hyper-inflated sense of entitlement. There will be no consequences for abusing power. There will be no consequences for attacking Jesus Christ. I can step on the weak and get away with it.

The Bible says that God loves justice. We read in Isaiah 61.8 and we read in Jeremiah 9.23-24 these words:

SLIDE – Is 61:8

8 “For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them.

SLIDE – Jer. 9:23-24

23 This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, 24 but let those who boast boast about this: that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.

Listen now, examining injustice in the world, and especially looking at your own experience of injustice, and then looking around and watching other undeserving people live pampered lives is a dangerous condition to be in spiritually. The psalmist says in verse 2,

SLIDE – Ps 73:2

2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

He feels himself going down a very dangerous spiral. His condition is described in verses 21-22 this way,

SLIDE – Ps 73:21-22

21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

SLIDE

Injustice: The Temptation of Bitterness

I don't think there is any spiritual condition that is more dangerous than having a bitter heart. He says,

SLIDE

My spirit was embittered...

Hebrews 12:15 warns us against allowing bitterness to grow in our hearts. Heb. 12:15 says,

SLIDE – Heb 12:15

15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Why? Why is it so essential for you even when life is hard, when you feel like God is not responding to your prayers, when it seems like nothing you do makes a difference, when it further seems like nothing anyone does makes a difference and it seems like in the moment that it doesn't matter if you obey or disobey. In those seasons when you wonder: do the relativists have it right? Does it matter whether I opt for truth or a lie, whether I opt for goodness or badness, kindness or meanness? In seasons where you wonder, do the deists have it right? Maybe God did just create the world and then let it go. Maybe it is all up to us. Maybe God doesn't intervene. When you experience injustice and doubt and questioning of your faith, why is it so important to guard your heart from bitterness so you don't fall into the condition of the psalmist in verses 21 and 22?

SLIDE – Ps 73:21-22

21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

Here is what I've discovered in two decades of pastoring and nearly three decades of Christian leadership, when a person becomes bitter, almost any sin, almost any behavior, and I mean any sin and any behavior, becomes possible for them. This man says that he started to act like an animal. He was like a brute beast. He was acting instinctually rather than thinking about his behavior. He was just reacting.

I've seen this over and over again. A person gets hurt. Maybe they are hurt by something the church does. They begin to feel like life has treated them unfairly. They are hurt by another Christian, or their mate. They are hurt because they didn't get what they felt like they deserved. But they don't deal with the hurt. They don't give the hurt over to God. The wound is not cleansed. They don't forgive. They get alienated from the church. They get cynical about the church. They get cynical about faith and gradually a shadow grows over their hearts and over their relationship with God. They experience injustice and this root of bitterness grows inside of them.

And the more they allow bitterness to grow and take control of their hearts, the more confused their thinking becomes. They are no longer thinking rationally. If you argue with a person who has become bitter, and you point out the facts, the psalmist says it would be like arguing with an animal. The bottom line of their thinking is: I'm not getting what I think I deserve from God, or from Christianity, or from the church. God and the church didn't hold up their end of the bargain. I've been mistreated. Life has been unfair, so forget about God, then. Forget about the church. I'm going to get mine. I'm going to start looking out for #1. I'm going to start reacting by instinct, out of my woundedness, out of my bitterness. I'm going to look out for myself no matter what God says about it.

And in this state of bitterness, friend, any sin, any behavior becomes possible. We can break marriage vows. We can cut corners in business. We can react and fight fire with fire. We can get down in the mud and relate to them the way they are relating to you. I've seen people quit jobs. I've seen people leave their kids. I've seen people start using drugs, or get drunk, visit prostitutes, go on spending sprees, hook up on the internet, have affairs – anything is possible when you allow your heart to become bitter.

Friend, have you seen any bitterness growing in your heart toward God, or toward the church? Is there any place where you've been hurt, where you've reacted and said: Well, if that's the way it is, then I just don't want to play. I'm going to be like one of those kids who takes my ball and bat and says: I'm going home. I'm going to pull away from God.

Are any of you far from God today? Are you far from the church because there is a wall of bitterness between you and God, or you and the church?

I will tell you, you can trace really insane, totally crazy behavior, Christians, you can trace your own bad behavior or the bad behavior of other people down to the root and often you will find their bitterness. A person has been hurt because of perceived injustice and they haven't turned that hurt over to God and that wound has gotten infected and made their hearts bitter.

So how do we escape this downward spiral? Verse 15

SLIDE – Ps 73:15

15 If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.

SLIDE

Injustice: Stopping the Slide

There is one thing that stop the psalmist on his downward spiral. He stops short of sharing his bitterness with others and poisoning them. It says in verse 15:

SLIDE – Ps 73:15

15 If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.

That word “betrayed” is a strong word. It is used of a faithless spouse who betrays the trust of their husband or wife. The thought here is: I will not cause someone else to stumble. This is the way a spiritual person thinks. The world doesn't think this way. In the world, if you are in a bad mood, others better watch out. If you are feeling cynical, you spread that cynicism around. If you are impure, you spread your impurity around. But in the Bible the thought that I could stumble someone else, that I could get in the way of someone else's faith – it is a terrible thing, indeed.

Jesus said in Mt 18:6

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were drowned in the depths of the sea.

So what causes the turn around then? Verses 16-17

SLIDE – Ps 73:16-17

16 When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

How does he deal with the mystery of injustice? Why good deserving people struggle so much in life? And why undeserving people do so well? He doesn't solve this problem through introspection. It says:

SLIDE – Ps 73:16

16 When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

Notice verse 17 doesn't say: I didn't understand until I went into my study. It doesn't say: I didn't understand until I went to the library or the lab. I didn't understand until I consulted with the experts. I didn't understand until I took this university class in anthropology or sociology or genetics. You can never get any light regarding injustice until you consult with God.

SLIDE

Injustice: Beginning to Understand

This is the whole meaning of the book of Ecclesiastes, by the way. You say: I've never understood the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer of the books keeps complaining about all the injustice in the world. What's up with this book?

The key to the book of Ecclesiastes is found in Eccl. 1:13-14 which reads:

SLIDE – Eccl. 1:13-14

13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on the human race! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

When we consider all of the options and all of the reasons regarding why the way the world works the way it does under the heavens, under the sun, we find ourselves hopelessly knotted up, no answers, no meaning. Why does a 14-year old boy like Emmett Till get murdered and his murderers are never convicted; the murderers take money by openly confessing they're murderers; and go to their

graves without remorse? Why do good decent men and women get cancer and self-indulgent men and women live healthy lives? Why do partying, drug-using children of the rich and famous go to elite universities and hard-working children of the not-so-wealthy go to community college and work full-time jobs? Why do bright, pretty godly women end up single and those who are not nearly so bright, nearly so pretty, nearly so godly get married and have children?

The psalmist says: I didn't understand until I entered the sanctuary of God.

What do we find in the sanctuary of God? We find in the sanctuary the teaching of God's Word regarding injustice. And one thing we know from God's Word is that everything is changed when you understand people's rebellion.

SLIDE

Everything is changed when you understand rebellion.

Why do teenage boys like Emmett Till get killed? Why do folks abuse their power? Why do children get locked in closets for a weekend while their foster parents go out partying? Because the Bible teaches that people have chosen to live in rebellion against the God of love and justice who made us. And when we live in rebellion, we are left with nothing other than our sinful natures. And so in our sinful natures we brutalize the defenseless. When there is no love for God, no respect for his ways, then as the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky said:

SLIDE

Without God, anything is possible.

We are taught this in the sanctuary. When we go into the sanctuary, we also discover that everything is changed when you understand the cross.

SLIDE

Everything is changed when you understand the cross.

When we looked at Psalm 22 I said I could not believe in a God who stood aloof from the world's pain and problems. Over the years one of the most convincing arguments for me regarding the truthfulness of Christianity is that only the Christian God stepped down out of heaven and entered this world and allowed himself to be victimized by all of the injustice, all of the brutality, all of the hatred, all of the sin that is found in this world. To any victim of injustice, only the Christian God can say with credibility, "I understand what you've experienced because I experienced the very same thing. I know what it is like to have people abuse their power. I know what it is like to suffer violence. I know what it is like to be betrayed. I know what it is like to be rejected. I know what it is like to not get what you deserve. I've been there and I feel your pain."

And Psalm 73 teaches that everything is changed when you understand eternity.

SLIDE

Everything is changed when you understand eternity.

Eternity changes everything.

SLIDE – Ps 73:17-20

17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. 18 Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! 20 They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

And in verses 23 and 24,

SLIDE – Ps 73:23-24

23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Instead of looking at life just in the moment, he begins to consider life from the vantage point of the future, from the vantage point of eternity. He says: “Let me consider for a moment a different view, not what I’m experiencing now, or what others are experiencing now. But let me roll the film forward 20 years, 30 years, into old age. Let me roll the film further all the way to death. And then let me roll the film beyond death to judgment. What will I have if I continue on the road with you, dear Lord, that I’m on? What will they have if they continue on the road that they’re on without you, dear Lord?”

Friend, do you ever stop looking at life just in the moment? Do you look ahead not just a day or a week, but do you ever look ahead to the end? This is spiritual thinking to consider the consequences of a life lived in rebellion against God, or the consequences of a life lived in obedience to and surrender to God.

You know, here’s where Christianity and secular psychology totally differ in their orientation. Secular psychology says you discover the meaning of life by looking backward. You consider what kind of home someone was raised in, what traumas they experienced, what their mother was like, what their father was like. Secular psychology is always looking backward to the past, to figure out the meaning of life.

But spiritual thinking discovered in the Bible always tells us to look forward to the future. It’s not that we never look back, but if you want to really figure out someone’s life, find out what road they’re on. What is their destiny, not what was their past? What is their future? What is the end of their life going to be like? What road are they on?

Let me make it more personal. What road are you on, friend? Think about your life all the way to the end. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14

SLIDE – Mt 7:13-14

13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

What road are you on? Are you on the broad road, the easy road, the popular road, the road that everyone else is walking on? Or are you on the narrow road, the hard road, the unpopular road – are you walking with Christ? Are you living for Christ? Are you submitting yourself to Christ? Which road are you on? If you consider the way you are going, if you continue what you are doing, if you extend out the consequences of your activity now, where is it all going to end? Where will you end up?

Do you like the road you’re on? Do you need to change directions? Do you need to take the next fork in the road a different way? Would some of you say: “If I continue on this road, it is just going to lead to my destruction.”

We see this all the time. The road we are on becomes more evident as we age. People, as they age, begin to lose their health, lose their productivity. But you see some people as they age become kinder, more others-centered. The hard edges of pride and selfishness have been knocked off, rounded off. You see other people as they age become more self-centered, more embittered, more manipulative, hard to get along with.

You can tell what road someone is on. Just watch them as they are dying. I’ve been around dying Christians and I will tell you, when you are around someone who has lived their life for Christ, Christ shines so brightly as that person’s life heads for eternity. You feel sometimes like you are in the presence of Jesus himself.

I’ve also been around the dying who have not lived for Christ. There is nothing sadder, nothing uglier, nothing more awful than watching someone head for eternity without Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church said that one of the things he was proudest of was “We Methodists die well.” Wouldn’t you like this to be true of you? To not only live well, but to die well? I would love it if this was true of folks here in this church – we Vineyard people die well.

C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian writer, in his incredible essay titled “The Weight of Glory,” said:

SLIDE

We are warned that it may happen to any one of us to appear at last before the face of God and hear only the appalling words, "I never knew you, depart from me." In some sense, as dark to the intellect as it is unendurable to the feelings, we can be both banished from the presence Him who is present everywhere and erased from the knowledge of Him who knows all. We can be left utterly and absolutely outside – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand, we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.

There is a God who judges. This life is not all there is. One day each of us will meet the Lord and the Lord will sort out all the hurts, all the injustice, all the deceptions, all the lies. No one will get away with anything. No one will get off scot-free. And then God will give to each one what he deserves. God's eternal judgment will resolve all of the questions we have about the injustices of life perfectly. God's judgment is our comfort and our hope in an unjust world. Let's pray.

Meeting God in an Unjust World

Rich Nathan

March 3-4, 2007

Meeting God in the Psalms Series

Psalm 73

I. Injustice: In Our World

II. Injustice: The Contradiction of Theology and Experience (Ps. 73.1,2, 13)

III. Injustice: The Unjust Described (Ps. 73.3-12)

- A. Unfair Privileges (Ps. 73.3-5)
- B. Abusing Power (Ps. 73.6-8)
- C. Blasphemous Claims (Ps. 73.9-11)

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- A. No Answers Under Heaven (Eccl. 1.13, 14)
- B. Answers in the Sanctuary
 - 1. Everything is Changed When You Understand Rebellion
 - 2. Everything is Changed When You Understand the Cross
 - 3. Everything is Changed When You Understand Eternity