

## Part 4 - The Cruelty of Life

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] All right. Good morning, everyone. As Jesse alluded to, my name is Alan. He even referenced to my nickname, Bear, earlier. And my mom is here, and if you ask her, she'll say, my name is Sugar Bear. So I will answer to any of the three and maybe even a few others.

Who knows? It is such a great honor for me to be here this morning and to bring the Word of God to you. I love being up here and just being able to talk about the Bible and Jesus and how great he is and how much he deserves our entire lives. As he alluded to, we are going through the book of Ecclesiastes. This is actually the fourth week going through, many people would call it a very strange book. Many of us who have been Christians for a long period of time may have never heard a sermon on this book, much less a series. The man who writes this book references himself as a preacher, which is pretty cool. And all he's had to say about everything in life is that it's vapor or vanity, that kind of thing. So it's a really popular book. It's a lot of happiness and joy and those kind of things. But like I said, most scholars believe this preacher guy to be the actual Solomon, King Solomon, a king who had it all. He's a member of the billionaire club, if you will. He had no wants. He had no needs. Anything he could think of was only a request away. I know I cannot relate to that.

Ever. And so, but just to have a guy in those kind of shoes speak to us in this kind of fashion is just invaluable to us as Christians. So the preacher who writes this book is running at all the hard tensions, dragging the listener into uncomfortable conversations about the grimness of life, the pain of disappointment, and the stench of regret after living for all the wrong things.

Remember though, that he's the guy who's done it all. He's the guy who's had it all. That guy gets up to the mic and says, listen up, it's vanity. All of it. It's vanity. I have been to the end, he says, I've been to the end of every rainbow and there's nothing. There certainly is not a little man with a pot of gold.

He says again and again that it's all vanity, meaninglessness, delusion, smoke, vapor. You try to grab it and it disappears before your eyes, like trying to grab smoke or fog. You know, it's not there.

[ 2 : 2 7 ] Like a mirage, you run hard at it, thinking that's where you'll finally find satisfaction, but all you get is sand in your mouth. You might be thinking, I came here to hear how good Jesus is and how can he fix my jacked up situation. That may be where you are. The fact is, this subject is uncomfortable, but the last thing we should do is ignore it. Ignoring it leaves people like us with real feelings and questions to think that God has nothing to say. Ecclesiastes runs to the weeping, head scratching hard places, but it's not to call us to abandon God, but to show us that he's there and nothing or no one else but him makes a difference. If you're new to Christianity, doubting its relevance, I'm glad you're here and I sincerely hope this helps you today. If you're old to Christianity and you can't understand why some people genuinely struggle with doubt, let's lean in and listen up. So far, we've looked at pleasure, we've looked at wisdom, knowledge, possessions. All of them have struck out in giving more than vapor.

That's how they started. Now we're going to talk about a super popular subject and that is the pain and sorrow of life itself. I'm going to read this scripture. It's Ecclesiastes 4, the whole chapter 4 and the first seven verses of chapter 5. Some of you are going to get lost.

Some of you are going to check out. I just ask you to just lean in, plug in and listen. Okay? Here we go. So again, Ecclesiastes 4 verse 1. Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

On the side of the oppressors, there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill and work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after wind. Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil. And his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been poor, he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business and a fool's voice with many words. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. But

[ 6 : 49 ] God is the one you must fear. That's the word of God. I can certainly admit this is a super tough book and subject. But can we be honest enough with ourselves and say there may not be a more relevant passage to reflect on? There have been many days in the past year where I have witnessed someone's life being forever changed with some type of suffering. Why would I think the possibility of that happening to someone here today would be zero? I mean, we all go through seasons of life when tragedy strikes, and maybe, just maybe, that is you today. Often I think back to my life as a kid and how safe the world felt, especially here in eastern North Carolina. Leaving my house in the morning and not returning until well after dark. No cell phone, never calling home, not a care in the world. Now we live in a time with so much suffering and oppression that I would not even dream of letting my kids do the same.

Maybe I was just young and had no idea. I don't know. I'm sure that was true to a point. But I also think that the world is becoming a worse place. That's what Solomon observed. Said it was so bad, it would be better to be dead. Actually, better to have never been born. We're going to work through this the best we can, but we will not be able to cover this subject as much as I would like.

The first thing we need to do is realize that the world is a cruel place to live. I'm thankful my kids don't totally see this, but it won't be long. I feel like there is the potential for them to be exposed to so many terrible things. And as a dad, one of my primary roles is to protect them and keep them from harm. This is a constant battle of mine in every good parent wondering, how much is too much? I'm waiting for the proverbial question, why do bad things happen to good people? The world is broken. Actually, bad things happen to all people. But there are so many people who seem to be a target. The vulnerable, the weak, the sick, the elderly, the young, the poor, the uneducated, the unborn. All of them are historically prone to cruelty and oppression.

And there are innumerable kinds of acts of oppression. We may think this billionaire cannot relate or even know what is going on with little old me, but we must not overlook verse 1. Solomon states, I saw all the oppressions. So many sad causes. Behold the tears of the oppressed. Terrible suffering comes to those who are oppressed. Think of the Holocaust Museum's room of stacked shoes.

I mean, just think about that. Talk about oppression. Well, thankfully, we have lots of people in power to help, right? I mean, people with power and prestige should be able to stop or at least help those in need, right? But verse 1a says, on the side of their oppressors, there was power. Often, it's the people in power who caused the oppression. This is a terrible reality. Those who are in charge are often the ones who are causing all of the pain and suffering, or at the least, turning a blind eye and condoning it.

[ 10 : 14 ] Why is that true? Greed, insecurity, pride, arrogance. I'm not sure, but I feel like these hit the heart of the matter in most cases. Here's a question for you. Where was a slave to look when

his master sold his kids and then beat him while the government, our government, condoned it? Where does the child look when their parent assaults them or hears of their assault and doesn't stand up for them? Solomon, a man with ultimate worldly authority, says, I know how the system works.

It's often people in power condoning abuse. They wink at the slave owner, the serial rapist. If there can be any comfort in this, it's that it's nothing new. This has been going on for almost as long as humans have been on earth. Think of Cain and Abel. Cain murdered his brother, Abel. Cain was the older brother, the one who should have been more mature, stronger, more responsible, the one who should stand up, the one who should have died protecting his little brother, but he became the first of many in power to use it for evil. Thousands of years later, we now live in a world soaked with tears and blood from thousands of years of oppression, much of it condoned by authorities. You think that would make all of us social activists? You think we'd all be fueled by compassion and empathy? But Solomon goes on to list how we live lives fueled by envy. Verse 4 says, all toil and effort comes from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is vanity, a striving after wind.

Instead of helping, most people choose to look the other way. Many times I have thought over this verse, all toil and effort. It sounds extreme, doesn't it? I mean, everything we do. However, the more I've reflected on it, the more I tend to agree. How many of us have thought, this is me thinking, man, can you believe how many people are overdosing these days? It really breaks my heart. I need to get involved and make a difference. And then 20 seconds later goes by, but did you see the new truck John just brought home? He must have sold a kidney. Maybe I should make an appointment with my doctor. You know, I've had those thoughts. Here's a thought. I read an article recently talking about six to eight-year-old kids, boys, being sent to private quarterback trainers so that by the time they are seniors in high school, they are a shoe-in for division one football teams and scholarships. Why is that? I have an eight-year-old son, Liam, and I assure you, the only thing he is studying is riding his bike, playing with his friends, and seeing how mean he can be to his sisters. He's in here. I could talk about it anyway. Why do we as parents push our kids to get good grades? Is it really so you're doing your best or so that you're better than the others and you have a shot to get the scholarship? I think about these things. I have five kids. College tuition is not getting any cheaper, so your kids better shape up. That's all I'm saying. You say, Alan, that's just the way the world works. Exactly. Well, my pushback to that response is that we are called to not be like this world. I mean, good Lord, we just spent an entire series working through 1 Peter entitled Hope in Exile. We are sojourners. We are aliens. Is it possible to have effort and toil that isn't driven by envy? Sure, but not without massive intentionality. Consumerism is a type of self-soothing that we don't grow out of, but this envy and consumerism has not got its own kind of oppression. [14:11] Verse 7 and 8 says, Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asked, For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

He doesn't have a son or friend or brother. He's alone and giving himself the things that can never love him or satisfy. All of this selfishness leads to an exhaustingly meaningless and lonely life. That's the context of all of Ecclesiastes. The exact opposite of being happy because you ignored the plight of the poor and the oppressed and got all the stuff your neighbor had. You actually find yourself increasingly vulnerable and lonely. You work to find that there is no end to your toil. No matter what you get, your eyes are never satisfied. You never ask, what is all this for? You too find yourself enslaved to an unhappy business. No brother, friend, or child, or anyone to share life with. It says two are better than one. No thanks. Then I'd have to share.

Alone and giving yourself to endless work to get endless stuff that will never love you back or come close to satisfying you. That is a terrible existence that too many are familiar with. Whole cities seem to be built around this kind of living. Solomon, surrounded by money, possession, and pleasure, no doubt feels the loneliness he's so accurately articulating. I can almost hear him shouting, please listen to me. It's all vapor.

[15:57] In a world of suffering, please don't buy into an envy-fueled life of loneliness and consumerism. That's wasting your life. So what should we do about all this oppression?

We should acknowledge this is the way of the world. Acknowledge it. That seems modern, but it's not. I think Solomon, from his place of immense privilege, seeing the plight of the oppressed is a

major thing.

That guy could have definitely made sure he didn't encounter. You can pay to not encounter suffering. If you have enough money, think of it like the all-inclusive resort.

And I'm guilty of it. I love going to all-inclusive resorts. But think about it. You land, you get whisked away to a massive gated facility where you never leave or see any suffering.

Those who wait on you endlessly likely live in total poverty, but they are paid to smile and pretend. Your beach doesn't have any litter or any beggars.

[17:03] Everything's perfect. Those people are forbidden from bothering you. Not saying that vacation is bad, obviously, or that an all-inclusive resort is bad, or that anyone who stays there doesn't care about the poor.

I'm not saying that. I'm simply trying to show you how you can buy deniability. Solomon could have, but for whatever reason, he didn't. The first step is to see the oppression and the suffering.

Consider how you've processed the whole Me Too movement. Many people who have never been sexually assaulted or raped are often heard saying things that show their disbelief. One of the worst things that a victim can hear is disbelief.

It's why so many people suffer in silence. The first step to helping people who are oppressed is accepting that this world is the kind of place where cruel things happen. Acknowledging that we have played a part.

When we look at pornography, for example, we contribute to the kind of world where women, mostly, are exploited for their body. I read an article earlier this week about a deputy sheriff, a lawman, and his wife, a middle school teacher, who have been convicted.

[18:13] They have been arrested for, it was like 60 counts of creating child pornography. I was blown away. And they look like the typical deputy sheriff and the typical middle school innocent teacher.

I was blown away. That just happened last week. But you may say, well, it's on the internet. It's free. I assure you, someone's paying. Someone's paying the bill. When the kind of person Solomon writes about here finally picks up his head after a life of living for himself, the first step is to admit that for many, the world is a very hard place to live.

I'm convinced that every American should take at least one trip to a third world country. Central America, Africa, Asia. Perspective is so huge in influencing our lives and the decisions we make, and I feel like that trip could help change our perspective.

For some of us, we are totally aware of the oppression. For some of us, this is the first step, coming to terms with the place that we live and admitting it's not the same for everyone. Make sure, this is very important, make sure you're not part of causing the oppression.

[19:27] The world we live in is a good place to be if you want to take advantage of people. Why do we need so many lawyers, insurance agents, judges? Why do we need so many? Why do we sign so many documents when you buy a house or a car?

We need lots of mediators because everyone is out to scam you. So it's possible and it's easy, but it is absolutely wrong. One of the ways that God always wanted his people to stand out was by being the people who didn't take advantage of others.

Now, sometimes, those causing oppression don't even know it. That's one of the benefits of good Christian community, gospel-centered community. We should be surrounded by people who can call us out.

We should be surrounded by people who can say, man, you're out of line. That's wrong. That's why I love community groups so much. We get to know each other.

We get to say, man, that is wrong. You're not treating your wife correctly. You're trying to take advantage of these people. And hopefully, that response would be out of love from that person.

[20:41] I hear you. I understand because I know your angle because you love me. You want to see me succeed. You want to see me be more like Christ. We don't want to be like the king that Solomon mentions who no longer takes advice, surrounded by people who won't challenge.

This is a great challenge to all of us who are in leadership. The way of the world is always lording over people. How can I work my way up the ladder? Jesus definitely addresses this in Matthew 20 verses 25 through 28.

But Jesus called them to him and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them.

It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. Even as the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many.

Jesus said, I want your leadership to look like sacrifice. I don't want your leadership to look like crushing those under your feet. We all expect that to be true of the church. But these weren't just the future church leaders.

[ 21 : 53 ] They were the disciples of Jesus. Right? Managers, owners, city or county leaders, elected officials, parents, older siblings, etc. All of us are given responsibility.

Christians who have influence have the challenge of leading like Jesus did. Laying down our comfort in exchange for those around us flourishing. We don't look the other way.

We don't participate in causing. If we're going to do that we're swimming against the rip current. Maybe right now we feel ready to do it. Turn away from selfish evil desires. What's the best motivation for actually doing this?

He answers that too. The next thing Solomon says is a reminder to fear God. There are a lot of hard things in here. He has no pleasure with fools.

God is the one you must fear. What is this? It's a reminder. It's an invitation. It's a reminder in a world full of powerful people oppressing others less fortunate that there is a God in heaven who sees it all and he will take action.

[ 22 : 59 ] It's an invitation to not be foolish pretending like coming to God is just about you doing some religious duty but to come to him in a position of humility for who he is listening to him.

But why say that after all of this about oppression? Why say that after all of this about oppression? We are not to go along with the way of the world or give up.

We are not to think that fighting the power is all we've got. Put your hope in God who will one day make things right. We live in a hard world.

Absolutely. No doubt about it. But Jesus is coming back. Slaves sang songs that lifted their eyes. In the darkest of places God comes and lifts our heads.

We hope in him who sees all the oppression and has a plan. Micah 7 1-4 says, Woe is me for I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered as when the grapes have been gleaned.

[ 24 : 02 ] There is no cluster to eat no first ripe fig that my soul desires. The godly has perished from the earth and there is no one upright among mankind. They all lie in wait for blood and each hunts the other with a net.

Their hands are on what is evil to do it well. The prince and the judge ask for a bribe and the great man utters the evil desires of his soul. Thus they weave it together.

The best of them is like a briar. The most upright of them a thorn hedge. Micah goes on to say you can't even trust your own family. Maybe that's how you feel right now.

What should you do? In Micah 7-7 But as for me I will look to the Lord. I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.

Your Redeemer lives. The blood of Abel cried out for justice and it was answered with the blood of Jesus that cries out for salvation. Jesus will one day come back and vengeance will be his.

[ 25 : 05 ] And when he's done taking out his wrath on evil those who suffer will once and for all be comforted by him. The end of the book Revelation 21 3-5 says And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying Behold the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. Who's he with? He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away and he who was seated on the throne said Behold I am making all things new.

Amen to that. This is a promise to all who weep all who mourn suffer hurt or are oppressed. He will one day make all of that the past.

He will one day make all things new. He will one day be with us dwelling with us forever. What does that guarantee? That no one could ever hurt us again?

[ 26 : 14 ] That's the fear that oppressed! That's the fear that oppressed people live with. They're going to be hurt again. When is he coming back? But Jesus promises that he will never have to fear again.

That we will never have to fear again. Scripture refers to this as our blessed hope. Titus 2:11 says For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation for all people training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled upright and godly lives in the present age waiting for our blessed hope the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Lastly, what does this blessed hope cause us to do? Be zealous for good works. How does that apply? Be eager. We should be eager to be a source of comfort for the oppressed.

We've historically been better at waiting for our blessed hope than being zealous for good works. We are a people who are both looking forward to him returning and are seeking to live like he's shown us how.

We often pray these words, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are zealous to do good works now so people see heaven.

[ 27 : 41 ] Matthew 5, 16 says, in the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. We typically do good works so that we get in heaven.

We are so prone to fall back on earning our salvation, keeping our salvation. I sinned so I must do X, Y, and Z to return back into the favor or grace of God.

I've had that conversation with myself I don't know a thousand times maybe more but that's not what Jesus said. It's his good works not our good works that get us into heaven.

sadly for many people hearing that can and slash will cause apathy. If good works aren't going to get me in well I'm going to party.

No, your good works don't get you in but they help others get in. They point others around you to your Father in heaven. One of the most overlooked ways we can do that is by being a source of comfort for them who are oppressed.

[ 28 : 48 ] This part keeps sticking out to me and there was no one to comfort them like that is a separate evil altogether. Not enough that they are going through this they are going through this alone without any comfort.

We cannot fix everything but we can do our best to comfort those who are oppressed. We should be people zealous to do these kinds of things. why do I volunteer as a chaplain for the Newport Fire Department?

To help comfort the oppressed. Why do so many in our church foster parents? To comfort the oppressed. Why do so many help women who have been battered? Why do we partner to rescue those in human trafficking?

Why do we support local ministries to the poor? Why do people in our church do Meals on Wheels? Why do people in our church visit the sick and bedridden? Why do we care about racial inequality? Why does this pastor head into East Syria? Where do we get all this comfort? Well I assure you it better be from him. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father of mercies and God of all comforts who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

[ 30 : 19 ] If it's not you and I if it's not you and I will find ourselves crushed by the weight if we're trying to do this on our own strength we'll be crushed. We will start to buckle under the pressure.

We will be running on fumes. Instead of his endless supply one of the values to times like this is getting recharged with reminder after reminder of how great he is. We get filled up on his comfort so we can go and be a source of comfort.

As the band comes up and if you're here and not yet a Christian my prayer is I hope today was helpful for you. I hope this message helps you realize your need for Jesus.

Nothing, nothing will fill that desire, that hole in your life like Jesus. He is the one and only thing that can and will fulfill every need, every need, every desire, every hope you could ever imagine.

Jesse and I would be honored to speak with you about this after the service. If you're here and already a Christian, man this is a great reminder to realign ourselves, our desires, our hearts with the one that paid the price, the one that earned your life, your life, your dreams, your hopes, he earned it, he earned it.

[ 31 : 47 ] If you find yourself trying to keep up with the Joneses, trying to pour yourself into anything but Jesus, let this be a time where we repent and realign our hearts fully committed to him who is

worthy.

One of the ways we do this is by taking communion every week, as Jesse alluded to, and it helps us realign our hearts back to him. It is so easy with the pressures of this world, being out in the world, being constantly bombarded with the things of this world, the things that promise will fill that hole in our lives.

Whatever it is, it's going to fall short. We need to come back and remember the sacrifice symbolized by the bread and the juice here, by his broken body and his shed blood, that covered all of those things.

Reminded that he is the one we need to lay our lives down for. Come remember the one who suffered for you, who gave up everything, who gave up absolute perfection to come here and live a life and die an absolutely terrible death, to pay the price that you and I can never pay.

Come and ask that he fills you again with his comfort. You will never suffer for your sins. You will one day never fear. God, we are thankful that you did pay the price for us, that you left perfection, willingly came to earth, lived a perfect life and died an absolutely horrible death so that we can call you Lord and Savior and we can have hope for tomorrow, for forever, for spending eternity with you.

[ 33 : 30 ] That one day those who are oppressed will no longer be oppressed, those who have been abused, those who live lives of fear will never experience that again. God, I pray if that is a person in this room today or listening in the future, man, that you would just speak to them right where they are, that you would wrap just wrap your loving arms of grace around them right where they are.

Have your way in our lives today. God, I pray that when we leave here today, we would be a people who are zealous to bring comfort to those who are in need and I assure you they are everywhere.

You don't have to look hard to find those who need comfort.

Open your eyes, see the oppressed, be zealous to bring them comfort, be zealous to share with them the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ will forever change our lives.

Thank you so much, God, for who you are, for what you bring to the table. We love you. In your name we pray, amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.