

The World is Not Enough Part V: Lament for the Oppressed

I also noticed that under the sun there is evil in the courtroom. Yes, even the courts of law are corrupt! I said to myself, 'In due season God will judge everyone, both good and bad, for all their deeds.' I also thought about the human condition – how God proves to people that they are like animals. For people and animals share the same fate – both breathe and both must die. So people have no real advantage over the animals...Both go to the same place, they came from dust and they return to dust. For who can prove that the human spirit goes up and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better for people than to be happy in their work. That is our lot in life. And no one can bring us back to see what happens after we die. Again, I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, with no one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless. So I concluded that the dead are better off than the living. But most fortunate of all are those who are not yet born. For they have not seen all the evil that is done under the sun (NLT).

The Teacher, Qoheleth, has been struggling with the search for meaning, noting how, apart from God, or in his language, 'under the sun,' life seems to have none. He has explored some of his experiences along the paths many have tried in search of a life that matters apart from God, showing how each, in their way, fails to satisfy. To everything there is a season, an endless cycle of good and bad we are incapable of affecting in any permanent way, *unless* there is a sovereign God in whom we live and move and have our being, a God who directs history, a God whose love and mercy will one day move back through time and history, redeem our efforts, heal all that was broken, and bring back all that was lost. In all we have surveyed so far, the Teacher has spoken with what appears to be cynicism, but is actually a method to bring us to the point where we recognize that it is only when we find union with God, only when we connect to the ground of our being, that life finds meaning. Today, however, as he continues to survey the reality of life on earth, he turns his attention to what we all, apart from privileged, careless souls with their heads in the sand, must confront at one point or another, and that is the reality of *injustice and oppression*, a reality upon which many a person's faith has foundered and died.

Mind you, he's not talking here about minor injustices and inconveniences. He's not talking about the guy who cut you off on the highway, or how you cable

company fleeces you. He's talking real injustice: sustained and systemic oppression. The kind perpetrated by the powerful against the powerless. In verse 16, as he begins to confront this reality, he speaks of *'evil in the courtroom.'* Here we might think of the unjust judge in Luke 18 who did not fear God or care to do right, or maybe some court decision like *Plessy v. Ferguson* or *Dred Scott*, or something more recent, but the Teacher is speaking about more than courts; he's talking about what happens when the very systems that should sort out problems and make things right, become instruments of injustice. Philip Yancey tells of a young woman who had been abused repeatedly over many years by a group she would at first identify only as 'they.' She sought help from a church ministry and detailed the unspeakable things 'they' had done to her, including sexual abuse. She lamented to the church worker that no one would help her. When asked if she had gone to the police, she looked up incredulously and asked, 'who do you think 'they' are?' What do you do when the very institutions designed to help become places that hurt? When the courts, or the police, or government in general become the enemy of their people? For the Teacher, there doesn't seem much that can be done. And indeed, for all the work we might engage in to make things better, there are limits. Injustice and oppression are present in every era, and nothing ever eliminates them entirely. And so, the Teacher turns to God. *'In due season,' he says, 'God will judge everyone, both good and bad, for all their deeds.'* One day, the Teacher says, God will act. If, for everything there is a season, then perhaps one day God will step in and fix all that is broken, correct all the injustice. Surely, as Abraham said in Genesis, the judge of all the earth will do what is right (Gen. 18:25). He will punish the wicked and vindicate the oppressed. Now, some people cringe a little at the thought of God punishing anyone, but honestly, there has to be some sort of punishment in the end for those who get away with evil all their lives, don't you think? As Andrew Peterson sings in his song, *Rise Up*, 'if a thief had come to plunder when the children were alone/if he ravaged every daughter and murdered every son/would not the Father see this?/would not his anger burn?/would he not repay the tyrant in the day of his

return?’ This is the hope to which the Teacher clings in v. 17. If God is a God of justice, one day, he will address all injustice and oppression and set things to rights.

The good news then, is that God is a *God of justice*. The Biblical evidence for this is undeniable. Our reading from Isaiah 58 attests to this. As does Psalm 9:8-10: ‘Yahweh will judge the world with justice and rule the nations with fairness. Yahweh is a shelter for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, O Lord, do not abandon those who search for you.’ As does Jesus’ keynote address in the Capernaum synagogue, where he described his mission as one bringing ‘good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.’ As does, well the entire Bible. At the Juneteenth event at Oaklyn Baptist a couple weeks back, we learned about the *Slave Bible*. Anyone ever heard of that? It was a Bible slaveowners gave to their slaves, from which any connection to liberation, freedom or God’s justice was omitted. A typical Bible has 1,189 chapters. The slave Bible, cutting out all references to God’s justice, contains, anyone want to guess how many? 232. If you cut out the passages connected to God’s justice, you eliminate 90% of the Bible’s contents. Gary Haugan has said, if justice isn’t your thing, God probably isn’t your thing either, for God is a God of justice. And so, in this, the Teacher places his hope.

But the Teacher, you see, is a privileged man. He might be Solomon. Or, if not Solomon, a Teacher with access to the halls of kings. Not the sort of guy you think of when you think of the oppressed. And so, it’s kind of easy for him (and me) to speak of how the God of justice will one day set things to rights. It’s a much harder thing to believe in when its you being oppressed. Understanding this, he tries his best to *see things from their perspective* in verses 1-3 of the fourth chapter, and what he sees there is, well, heartbreaking. He looks again at the all the types of oppression that exist under the sun. He takes in the sight of a young girl being trafficked, huddled on the brothel floor, the husband sitting in the home he once shared with his wife, now burned by the invaders who carried her off, the child running through the remains of his school, the sole survivor in his class from the

latest enemy bombing raid, the mother of a son gunned down by the police officer whose threat level was elevated by the color of her boy's skin, a thousand such terrors, and hears their cry, 'how long O Lord?' Feels their pain as they wait for this so-called just God to act. And falls into despair. I know how he feels. I too have felt this despair. Some weeks ago, after watching the news regarding events in Gaza and seeing a young mother holding the body of her son, another victim of an ongoing genocide, I was moved to write a poem tying her despair to the life of Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham whom God cared for in the wilderness, a part of which I will share now: *A woman sits amidst the wreckage/of a building ravaged by American bombs/In her arms she holds the lifeless body of her son,/who mere days before played in the streets of the city./A rain falls from a grey sky as his head lurches back into her lap/The rain is nothing compared to her tears, which will not, cannot stop/She remembers her ancestor, how she left/with her son, carrying nothing but a satchel of bread,/a skin of water, and a promise from a God she named El Roi:/The God who sees.' The promise was that He would always see,/her, her son, and their descendants, be they as numerous as the stars./And she thinks, as her son's eyes/loll backwards in their dead sockets,/and the tears that will not, cannot stop,/cascade from her dark eyes, that God is surely blind.* Have you ever felt thus, when considering the plight of the oppressed? Have you ever wondered, where is God in all this? Why is he not acting? Why is he not stopping this horror?

The Teacher did, and fell into a state of mind that gives support to the view that he is a cynic and doubter. Considering such things, he proclaims that the dead are better off than the living. That it would be better in this world to not be born at all. And indeed, in the middle part of our passage, he expresses doubt that there will ever be a day when God will set things to rights. How can there be when the victims of oppression suffer and die the way they do? God surely isn't acting in the here and now, and what promise do we have that he will act in the hereafter? What proof is there of this? Perhaps, this lot of suffering is all there is. Perhaps God cares no more for us than he does for animals. Perhaps we all just die, and that's that.

Unvindicated, the oppressed go down to the grave. And unpunished, the oppressor enjoys his dominance to the very end. What proof do we have of any other ending?

The Teacher doesn't try to hazard an answer. Perhaps he dares not, from his privileged perch, speak hope to those whose oppression he can only ponder from a distance. Perhaps it is only the oppressed themselves who dare speak hope into such questions. *Munther Isaac* is a name you might remember. He is a Palestinian Lutheran Pastor in Bethlehem, in the occupied territories of the West Bank, and author of the book, *Christ in the Rubble*, which addresses the injustices and oppression of his people (and if you wish to deny them, I challenge you to read his book). From his position beside the victims of injustice and oppression, he points to the One who dares speak for the oppressed. 'We searched for God in this war,' he writes. 'We cried out to Him, and there was no answer, it seems, until we encounter[ed] the Son of God hanging on a cross, crying out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' Yes. Jesus, the crucified one, the one who himself was a victim of injustice, may dare speak for the oppressed. And Jesus is the one who offers to the oppressed the proof of a better ending. 'Christ is the Risen One,' Munther Isaac continues, 'this is the final word. The empty tomb is our hope...the last word is not death but life. Not darkness but light...the empty tomb reminds us that evil, injustice, and tyranny cannot have the last word...Despair and fear do not have the last word...We believe in the God of justice, the God of love; we believe that justice, truth, and righteousness will cover the earth as waters cover the seas.'

This is the hope of the oppressed. And it takes a lot of faith to believe it. A faith that believes that even in the midst of the most terrible evil, there is a God, and he will not forever be silent. A faith expressed by an unknown victim of injustice, in their scrawling found on a cellar wall during the Holocaust: 'I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I cannot feel it. I believe in God even when he is silent.'

This is the great faith of the oppressed. May we learn from them.

Let us pray.