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The World's Broken Systems

More Vanities — Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16

♦ Justice — The Word That Never Delivers What It Promises

In **1955**, **Emmett Till**, a **14-year-old Black boy** from **Chicago**, was murdered in **Mississippi**. His killers were acquitted by **an all-white jury** in **67 minutes**.

His mother, **Mamie Till**, insisted on an open casket — *'I want the world to see what they did to my son.'*

100,000 people filed past his body.

The acquitted killers later admitted their guilt in a magazine interview, immune from further prosecution.

Mamie Till lived until 2003 without seeing legal justice for her son's murder. The system designed to deliver justice had served only to protect the unjust.

Ecclesiastes 3:16, *'In the place of judgment, wickedness was there.'*

Three thousand years ago.

Still true in 1955.

Still true today. And the Preacher's response is neither passive acceptance nor revolutionary rage. It is the most powerful response available to anyone who believes in God: the appeal to a higher court.

I. Injustice in the courts —The appeal to a Higher Court.

Ecclesiastes 3:16–17, "Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there. ¹⁷I said in my heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."

The corruption of justice is not a modern problem. The Preacher observes it in the ancient Near East's most sophisticated legal system and records it with a precision that echoes through every century since.

- Where judgment is supposed to be dispensed it was wickedness.
- Where righteousness is supposed to be upheld it was iniquity.

The Preacher's response is not protest or despair.

It is theology: *'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.'*

He appeals immediately above the corrupted human court to the divine court that cannot be corrupted.

This is not escapism!

It is the most morally serious response available to someone who actually believes that God is real and just.

Romans 12:17–19, *Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."*

Paul's instruction to the Romans is the New Testament application of **Ecclesiastes 3:17**.

'Do not avenge yourselves' is only possible if you genuinely believe that divine vengeance is real and reliable.

The appeal to God's justice is not passive but it is the most active possible response to injustice, because it requires you to release the matter entirely to a Judge whose verdict is perfect.

The fear of God is the foundation of genuine justice, not its alternative. The person who truly fears God, who lives in the awareness that 'God shall judge' is the person most motivated to do justice in the present, because they know that every act of justice and injustice will stand before the ultimate court.

The fear of God does not make you passive about human injustice. It makes you urgent about it.

Micah 6:8, *"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

II. Death & Dignity — The challenge to Human Pride

Ecclesiastes 3:18–22, "I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." ¹⁹For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. ²¹Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? ²²So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"

The Preacher's most provocative passage. He compares the death of humans to the death of animals and concludes that, from a purely physical perspective, there is no difference. Here he is purely looking at under the sun, a man of ignorance.

Both are dust.

Both return to dust.

This is not materialism.

It is a surgical attack on human pride.

The person who lives as though they are the measure of all things, whose universe revolves around their own

ambitions, pleasures, and achievements has, in the Preacher's analysis, no advantage over the beast that lives and dies by instinct.

The same preacher talks about what happens when you die. **Ecclesiastes 12:7**, *Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.*

Here Solomon poses the question who knows? Pretending to be ignorant.

Proverbs 15:24, *The way of life winds upward for the wise, That he may turn away from hell below.*

Psalm 8:3–6, *"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, 4 What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? 5 For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honour. 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet,"*

Psalm 8 is the complement to Ecclesiastes 3.

The Psalmist asks the same question 'what is man?'

But from the perspective of God's attention rather than the perspective of death's equalising.

- Man is small — 'little lower than the angels.'
- Man is significant — 'crowned with glory and honour.'

Both are true.

The Bible teaches that all die and go into the grave.

However, because Jesus died for us, mankind will be resurrected from death.

1 Corinthians 15:22, "*As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,*"

The myth that some part of man goes up to God at death goes back to **Satan's lie** in the Garden of Eden.

Satan told Eve **Genesis 3:4**, "***You shall not surely die***"

God made the opposite statement in **Genesis 2:17**, "*from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it **dying you will die.***"

Death is the punishment for sin.

The Preacher is correcting the human tendency to claim the significance without acknowledging the smallness.

Concludes with **verse 22**, *So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"*

III. The Social vanities — 4 failures of Human community.

A. Oppression without Comfort — 4:1-3

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, *Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter—On the side of their oppressors there is power, But they have no comforter. ² Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, More than the living who are still alive. ³ Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.*

'They have no comforter' **twice repeated.**

The repetition is not accidental.

The first repetition describes the physical condition: no one with power is on their side.

The second is the deeper wound: *no one to comfort.*

Power may be unavailable but comfort the human gesture of solidarity with suffering has also been withdrawn.

Matthew 5:4, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."*

Jesus' second Beatitude is a direct response to the double lack of *Ecclesiastes 4:1*.

The mourner who has no human comforter is promised the divine Comforter. The God who mourns with those who mourn (**Romans 12:15**).

The church that takes this seriously becomes what the world cannot provide: a community of comforters to those the world has abandoned.

2 Corinthians 1:3–4, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."*

Paul's description of the 'God of all comfort' is the Christian answer to the Preacher's lament.

The human community cannot produce comforters reliably, but God can, and does, and equips those He has comforted to comfort others.

The church becomes the answer to Ecclesiastes 4:1 when it operates as the people of the God of all comfort.

B. The Envy Machine — 4:4–6

Ecclesiastes 4:4, *"Again, I saw that for all toil and every skilful work a man is envied by his neighbour. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. 5 The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh. 6 Better a*

handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.

The Preacher makes a startling claim:

The primary driver of human industry is not necessity or creativity or the desire to serve, but it is envy of the neighbour.

He is not saying that all work is motivated by envy, but that envy is the invisible engine beneath much of the world's competitive achievement.

Galatians 5:19–21,26, *"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies... Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."*

Paul lists envy among the works of the flesh — not as a minor irritant but as a community-destroying force.

The culture of comparison that social media has amplified is not a new problem, but it is the ancient problem of **Ecclesiastes 4:4**, given a global platform.

The antidote is not competition but calling.

The person who knows why they are doing what they are doing is free from the tyranny of the neighbour's achievements.

C. The Loneliness of Ambition — 4:7–8

Ecclesiastes 4:7–8, *Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: There is one alone, without companion: he has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labour, nor is his eye satisfied with riches, but he never asks, ‘For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?’ This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.*

The Preacher moves from envy that compares itself to a neighbour (4:4–6) to a vanity that has run past comparison entirely.

This man has no neighbour left to envy.

No son, no brother, no companion of any kind but only labour, endlessly renewed, and eyes that riches never satisfy.

The most piercing line is the one he never speaks. He does not ask the question. A person can build an entire life of accumulation and never once stop to audit why.

That silence, not the loneliness itself, is the real vanity.

The cure for solitary accumulation is not merely companionship, although 4:9–12 will say that too. It is a change of ownership.

Everything held as stewardship before God, rather than as private hoard, stops being vanity, because it is no longer being toiled for no one.

D. The Wisdom of Two — 4:9–12

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, *"Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labour. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. ¹¹ Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken."*

The Preacher's most positive social observation.

Genuine community is not merely pleasant, but it is structurally necessary for human flourishing.

Three illustrations:

- Falling (recovery requires a companion),
- Cold (warmth requires another body),
- Attack (defence requires united strength).

The famous 'threefold cord' has been applied in innumerable contexts.

Marriage, friendship, Christian community.

In each application, the principle holds:

Human strength in isolation is vulnerable in ways that human strength in community is not.

The cord that is 'not quickly broken' is not two human relationships but it is the relationship between two people and the God who binds them together.

Hebrews 10:24–25, *"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."*

The New Testament community is built on the principle of **Ecclesiastes 4:9–12**.

- *'Let us consider one another'* — the deliberate, active practice of mutual strengthening.
- *'Not forsaking the assembling'* — the cord requires presence.

The church is not a gathering of individuals who happen to share beliefs.

It is a threefold cord:

believers bound to each other and to God, specifically designed to be 'not quickly broken.'

IV. The Vanity of Popularity — 4:13–16

A. The Fickle Crowd

Ecclesiastes 4:13–16, *Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. ¹⁴ For he comes out of prison to be king, although he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who walk under the sun, they were with the second youth who stands in his place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

The Preacher closes chapter 4 with political power itself under the microscope.

An old king, too entrenched to take correction, is eventually displaced by a poor but wise youth whose star rises fast ‘*no end of all the people*’ gather to him.

But the final line collapses the triumph before it can be enjoyed.

‘Those who come afterward will not rejoice in him.’

The very crowd that made him king is already looking past him. **Popularity is not only fragile, but Ecclesiastes says its expiry date is guaranteed the moment it begins.**

The pattern is not confined to ancient courts.

It is the same crowd that spread palm branches and shouted ‘Hosanna’ on a Sunday and, days later, shouted for a insurrectionist to be released and Jesus to be crucified.

The applause and the abandonment came from the same mouths.

Jesus, unlike the youth of **Ecclesiastes 4**, was never surprised by this.

John 2:24–25, *But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵ and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.*

He built nothing on the crowd's opinion, because He knew exactly how long it would last.

1 Corinthians 4:3–5, *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.*

Paul's freedom from the court of public opinion is the Christian answer to **Ecclesiastes 4:13–16**.

If even the delight of crowds curdles into indifference within a generation, then a life built for human applause is a life built on wind.

The believer's verdict is deferred to a more reliable Judge, the same Judge appealed to back in 3:17 which frees us

equally from the anxiety of being overlooked and the intoxication of being celebrated.

- What the crowd gives, the crowd takes back.
- What God gives stays given.

Conclusion.

♦ The Two Who Survived — The Unbroken Cord

On **January 16, 2018**, two hikers were caught in an avalanche in the **Swiss Alps**.

They were roped together — standard practice.

The avalanche carried them hundreds of meters down the mountain.

One was buried; the other was not.

The one who was not buried dug the other out, kept him warm, sent the emergency signal, and stayed with him through the night until rescue arrived.

Both survived. Neither would have survived alone.

The first would have died in the snow.

The second — the uninjured one — would almost certainly have developed hypothermia waiting alone for rescue.

Ecclesiastes 4:10, *'Woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.'*

The cord held.

The companion survived because there was another.

The church exists to be the roped team — bound together not merely by shared beliefs but by the commitment to dig each other out, to keep each other warm, to stay through the night.

Who in your community is currently buried?

Who has the rope?

Questions?

Question	Focus
The Preacher says 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked' (3:17). How does the certainty of divine judgment change how you respond to injustice — both the injustice done to you and the injustice done by you?	The fear of God as both comfort and conviction.
Envy drives more of our economic activity than we admit (4:4). Where in your professional or ministry life is comparison with others driving you? What would change if it were replaced by calling?	The transition from competition to vocation.
Paul says God comforts us 'so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble' (2 Cor 1:4). Who in your life is in the position of Ecclesiastes 4:1	The community application of divine comfort.

Question	Focus
— the oppressed with no comforter? How can you be that comforter?	
The threefold cord requires presence — not just intention. Are you genuinely present with your community of faith, or are you maintaining a cord by text message?	The discipline of presence in community.
Ecclesiastes 3:19 says humans and animals share the same death. Psalm 8 says humans are crowned with glory. How do you hold both truths simultaneously — and what does that balance look like in practice?	The dignity and humility of the human condition.
The rich fool in Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 never asks who his labour is for. Jesus' rich fool in Luke 12 never asks either — until it's too late. What would it look like this week to actually ask that question about your own time and money?	Stewardship versus solitary accumulation.
The crowd in Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 abandons the king it once celebrated — the same pattern as Palm	Building on God's verdict rather than the crowd's.

Question	Focus
Sunday and Good Friday. Where are you tempted to build your sense of worth on approval that can turn overnight?	