

"We Will not be Satisfied, Until Justice Rolls Down"

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[0 : 01] Well, I wonder if you recognize these words spoken on the 28th of August 1963 in Washington, D.C. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Those words come from a speech we know as the I Have a Dream speech, but Martin Luther King did not go that day to speak about his dream so much as he went to cry out for justice. Slavery is long gone, he said, but justice is still waiting. He peered into the House and the Senate, into the courts and the schools of America, and found himself seeing what the teacher sees in verse 16.

In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. Friends, if you hadn't guessed, the teacher confronts us this evening with something so dark and distressing.

We all believe in fairness, but life isn't fair. We all believe in right and wrong, but sometimes we find that they have switched places, not only in the world in general, but in the very places we turn to for rightness and fairness.

[1 : 34] The teacher peers into the courtroom and sees justice gagged and handcuffed and wickedness on the throne. And he walks out of the courtroom onto the street and he sees the tears of the oppressed and the power of the oppressor.

He's been on the hunt in this book for something permanent and ultimate under the sun. He's looked everywhere. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

I refused my heart, no pleasure, he says in chapter 2, verse 10, only to find that every good thing was only a breath. Trying to catch it was like chasing the wind, but now it's as if the bottom drops out of his world because he discovers that it's not only the good things that are a breath, but the right things.

I read this sentence earlier this week. Time and place are the two great coordinates of created life. And where the courtroom is not the place where justice finds its proper time, the very order of creation itself breaks down.

The very order of creation breaks down. How do we live and cope in a world where that is true? Well, in our passage tonight, the teacher sees three things and he says three things.

[3 : 01] And the things that he says are how we are meant to respond to what he sees. And the very first thing he says is that there is a time to cling to.

Verses 16 and 17, I saw something else under the sun. In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. I said to myself, God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.

He says there's a time we need to cling to, and it is a time for judgment. Now, as Christians, judgment can make us squeamish, can't it?

We don't want to be heard as sounding judgy. But when we see what the teacher sees, then we will grasp what the teacher says.

I want to give you three names tonight that will help us to see what the teacher sees. All of them have been in the news recently. You may recognize some of them. The first name is Andrew Malkinson.

[4 : 12] In 2003, Andrew Malkinson was charged with the rape and murder of a woman near where he worked. He was found guilty, and he was given a life sentence.

And he served 17 years, 4 months, and 16 days in prison. But all the while, he said he was innocent. There was no hard evidence against him, only a visual identification.

You point to the person you saw do it. This year, his conviction was overturned, 20 years on, because they re-examined the evidence and identified the real killer.

Listen to what Andrew Malkinson saw in *The Place of Justice*. When a jury finds you guilty when you are innocent, he said, reality does not change. You know you did not commit the crime.

But all the people around you start living in a false fantasy universe and treat you as if you are guilty. The police, prison officers, probation, prisoners, journalists, judges.

[5 : 21] Do you see what the teacher sees? This man does. He goes on, now I have finally been exonerated. I am left outside this court without an apology, without an explanation, jobless, homeless, expected to simply slip back into the world with no acknowledgement of the gaping black hole that they opened up in my life.

Here it is. A black hole that looms so large behind me that I fear it will swallow me up. He went to court and what did he see?

Justice? Second name I want to give you tonight is Adam Bryson, later to be known as Isla Bryson. He was charged in 2019 with two counts of rape.

The next year he began presenting as a woman, introducing himself as Isla. He did a beauty course. When he went to court, he was found guilty on both counts of rape and sentenced to eight years in prison, and he was then sent to a woman's prison.

Because in 2014, the Scottish Prison Service began a policy of allocating prisoners to male or female prisons based on their self-identification rather than biological reality.

[6 : 41] It was soon discovered that he wasn't the only or even the first male prisoner with a history of sexual violence against women being housed in a woman's prison. This time the right person was condemned, but we know even our politicians could see that justice was not being served by our institutions of justice.

Do you see what the teacher sees? The last name I hesitate to give you is Lucy Letby. She was a nurse whose job was to care for the most vulnerable newborn babies in hospital.

For one year between June 2015 and July 2016, she worked in a neonatal unit. Last month, she was found guilty of murdering eight newborns in hospital and attempting to murder ten more.

And you can read the descriptions of the cases online. I didn't get past the first one to read what happened to one family, let alone to eight. Her first victims were twins.

As her parents, as the parents were still reeling over the sudden and the inexplicable death of their baby boy, they were told to go and get some rest. And she took their little girl as well.

[8 : 04] For a whole year, parents came into that unit, hoarding their precious new children, wanting only for them to get better. They handed them over to a person they believed would help to heal them, who took their lives in wicked ways.

She was given a whole life sentence. But you and I know, and those parents know even better, don't they, that justice has not yet been done.

In a place of safety, security, healing, there was unspeakable wickedness. In the courts of justice, justice fell short.

Friends, do you see what the teacher sees? Under the sun, in the places that we look to, for rightness and fairness and justice, justice fails and falls short.

Those names are not people from long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away. We wish with all of our hearts that they were, don't we? But these have all been in the news this year.

[9 : 07] This is 2023 in the country, in the place where we live. When the courtroom is not the place where justice finds its proper time, the very order of creation itself breaks down.

In the place of justice, wickedness was there. So here's the question. When we see that, what do we say? Well, hear what the teacher says in verse 17.

I said to myself, God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.

Friends, again, he says there is a time that we need to cling to, and it is a time for judgment. It's a rare moment in Ecclesiastes where the clouds break, and an array of the sun's brightness and warmth shines down into the shadows.

It's a glimpse of eternity under the sun. Last time, Donald showed us there is a time for everything. Life happens to us.

[10 : 13] In all of its breadth and its complexity, the pendulum swings backwards and forwards, but friends, the teacher says, one day the pendulum will stop. And on that day, the just judge of all the

world will call to account every deed.

He will meet the world with blazing justice, justice with a capital J. No wrong will go unrighted. No wickedness will go unpunished that has not been paid for on the cross of Christ.

I wonder if you can imagine standing on that day and watching as history is judged, every deed by God. What will we say on that day?

Will it be hard for us to watch? No, we, on that day, we will say, praise the just judge of all the earth whose verdict is righteous, who only does what is right.

Brothers and sisters, some of you carry in your hearts wounds and scars that have not had their day in court, that the courts of this world would not know what to do with.

[11 : 25] The only way to live with those wrongs, says the teacher, is to cling to the day when God says he will settle it. Verse 15 ends, God will call the past to account.

Literally, it says, God will chase what has been driven away. You can destroy yourself chasing the wind and trying to grab and to hold on to justice here and now.

It can consume us, that search, the need for a righteous verdict. But the teacher says, listen, it doesn't matter how far away the wind has blown those wrongs or for how long, because one day, God himself will come looking for them and collect them together and pile them up and work through them one by one by one.

How do we know that will happen? For he has set the day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. That is what Andrew Malkinson needs to hear to live with his gaping black hole.

[12 : 40] That is what those parents need to hear to live with the loss of their precious children. That is what you and I need to hear to bear with the injustices that the huge, great big ones that crush us and the little ones that silently eat away at us.

the injustices that we go through and that we see out there in the world. We do not need to go chasing a final verdict here and now because there will be a time when Jesus will come again to judge every deed.

And friends, if we feel squeamish about that day, it's probably because we're not seeing the world yet for what it really is. If we could see what the teacher sees, we would say what the teacher says. If we see what is really out there, we would wholeheartedly long for Jesus, the just judge, to come and put it all right. Our world cries out for justice. God promises a day of justice.

When every person will look and see a glorious sight in the place of justice, justice is there. What a day.

[13 : 57] When the place of justice and the time of justice come together, then what happens? Our creation is put back together and made new. That is a time for us to cling to with all the strength of our heart, friends.

But the teacher doesn't end there. He says something else about what he sees in verse 18. That there is also a test for us to learn from.

I also said to myself, as for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Now, the sun clouds over again. The teacher brings us back down to earth because now he's set that day in our hearts.

He wants us to learn how to live now between this day and that day, in the in-between there. And this is where it gets a bit uncomfortable for us.

Because as Christians, we get told human beings we're nothing more than animals. And we want to say, don't we, no, no, no, human beings are unique.

[15 : 01] We are created in the image of God. We are special creatures with intrinsic dignity and worth. Now, nothing the teacher says contradicts that. But he does say that in one big way we are like the animals.

And that is in verse 19. What way? Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both as one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath.

Humans have no advantage over animals. Now, that might sound like our world speaking, but actually, okay, if we peel back the layers, we'll see that it flies straight in the face of our world's ideology.

Because our world tells us, right, that as human beings, we are special because we do have an advantage over the animals. We're adapted to survive wherever we live.

If it's too hot, we cool it. If it's too cold, we heat it up. If we don't have any food, we import it. If we get sick, we create medicines. We're the dominant species in our world, says our world, because we have a survival advantage.

[16:10] But then it says, therefore, we have a responsibility to make sure everything else survives too. So, we do conservation and environmentalism, and we have zoos, and we keep pets, and we go vegan, because really, who are we to have an advantage over the animals?

So that in our strange kind of guilt over being so privileged and advantaged as a species, our world has elevated animals to the status of human beings and said, none of us must die.

Extinction rebellion. It's in the name. We are in rebellion against death. But the teacher says, you've forgotten one thing. What percentage of dogs and orangutans and polar bears and human beings do die?

80 percent? 90 percent? 100 percent? All of us. All come from dust, and to dust, all return.

Extinction rebellion.

Who do we think we are? What advantage do we have? We live longer than most animals, not even all animals. But then what? As one dies, so dies the other.

[17:32] Our world has forgotten that humming in the background of all life on earth is death. So much so that we can't even handle the thought an animal is dying.

I was on a counseling website this week, and one of the services offered was a pet bereavement service. It's sad when your pet dies, but is it worth 60 pounds a session?

We live in a world that is in death denial, humans and animals alike. We've lost the wisdom to recognize, verse 19, that everything is a breath.

Every living thing is alive for a second, and then it's gone. The blink of light between two great expanses of darkness. And the teacher is saying that injustice is a test that teaches us that.

Now, justice turned to injustice is a wicked thing, but it also has a way of pressing reset on our worldview. How is that? Well, what is it that we think is unique about us, human beings?

[18:43] Is it that we're in control of our environment? Well, then we see pictures of tanks rolling through the streets of Ukraine, and we think, well, no, that can't be it.

We're not in control of our environment. Is it that we think we can stop ourselves from dying, but then a killer comes along, a careless driver, terminal illness, and we remember, no, that can't be it either.

We can't stop ourselves from dying, or even control when or how we die. So what is special? What is unique? The teacher doesn't say. Okay, he's putting that to one side.

That's not his interest here. He's only telling us what is not special, what is not unique. That's the point of verse 21, I think, if you just look down, he's not denying heaven and hell.

He's just setting it aside. It's not relevant for a minute. Just let's think about life here and now, how it works, he says, and learn the lesson that in a world where injustice is so often the rule, we are not in control, we're not immune, and we are not immortal.

[19:55] It doesn't matter how careful and law-abiding a driver you are, it only takes one careless and lawless driver to end it all. It doesn't matter how careful a saver you are, and you lock the doors of your house of your house.

Every night, you could still be broken into and your bank account drained. You could work hard your whole life, grow old, and pay to be cared for in your own home or in a lovely care home and still be taken advantage of and still be neglected by those caring for you.

Let us be clear that all of those things are wicked and wrong, but under the sun, brothers and sisters, they all happen.

And in a world where unjust things happen, says the teacher, the best thing that we can do is learn that we have no advantage. We're not in control, we're not immune, and we're not immortal.

Our lives are but a breath. And so, verse 22, learn to live for today. Now, it almost comes out of nowhere, doesn't it?

[21:13] Verse 22, I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work because that is their lot. But what's he saying? In a world that is often unfair, learn that tomorrow is not guaranteed and enjoy today.

while you're able to work, enjoy it. While you're able to study, embrace it. Whatever it is that you're set to do tomorrow, get the most out of it that you can.

While you're able to live life, live it, because who knows what comes next? You know, I'm guessing that the night that Andrew Malkinson was arrested, he thought that it would all be sorted out at the police station.

I'm guessing that he didn't think he would need to spend the next 20 years of his life trying to clear his name of a crime that he hadn't committed. And I hope that all his days wrongfully spent in prison, he had lots and lots and lots of days behind him that he had thoroughly enjoyed.

I hope that he found his work worthwhile. I hope that he had friends who he could have a laugh with. I hope that he loved his life and had so many happy memories to look back on after life had all gone wrong.

[22 : 35] Friends, if you knew that was going to happen to you tomorrow, that your life was about to come undone in some unpredictable and unfair way as it very well could do, wouldn't you want for every single day up until then to be filled with as much happiness and enjoyment as it possibly could be?

The teacher says, do what you do every day, whatever that is under the sun, even at work, whatever it is that you do. He's not saying change what you do necessarily, but in what you do, do it as if it was your last day before it changes or it ends forever because we live in an unfair world and it could.

Don't miss the present, he says, in your rush towards a future that you can't guarantee and that you're not in control of. I don't normally read the acknowledgements in books, but David Gibson's book on Ecclesiastes is so good that even the acknowledgements are worth reading.

He writes to his children, you are the ones who help me hear the teacher of Ecclesiastes laughing as he shows how shoulders are meant for abundance and mayhem not the weight of the world.

You've always been laughing and now we're in on the joke together. I can't remember ever not being so tired or ever so happy. Wouldn't you want to be able to say that, friends, the day before life changes forever?

[24 : 11] The teacher says that injustice teaches us it could be tomorrow, it could be next week. so can you say that? I can't remember ever being so happy.

If you can't, remember, remember, you might not get tomorrow to make it true. So while we long for a day of judgment, says the teacher, live for today's enjoyment.

That's the test to learn from. But he still has one more thing to say to us in chapter 4, verse 2, and if this point was uncomfortable at times, the next point is crushing.

We need to recognize that. But it is necessary for us to hear, to complete our response to what the teacher sees, because he ends with all the tears to lament over.

Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter.

[25 : 21] And I declared, here's the last thing he says, that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

It's a staggering thing to read in the Bible, isn't it? Unbelievable. He's given us two truths to help us navigate life in a world of injustice, but in the end he says, better never to have lived to see it.

Now to live through what? Oppression certainly, to cry and cry and cry tears and there be no answer and no solution and no comforter.

Think of the millions caught up in the transatlantic slave trade, stripped of their dignity and freedom, stolen from their homes, forced to work day and night, day and night with no comforter.

Think of the victims of the Holocaust, taken from their homes to be worked or gassed to death in prison camps. History is wet with the tears of the oppressed, isn't it?

[26 : 36] What about the tears that no one will ever write about, tears cried behind closed doors, tears cried day and night, men, women and children in the street, in our city, in our communities, tears that we know nothing about that are cried day and night with no one to comfort.

But it's not only oppression, but notice even being the oppressor, see that, the oppressed have no comforter and the oppressors have no comforter.

They oppress and oppress and they're still not satisfied. What they're getting, there's still not enough, there's still no answer, there's still no solution under the sun.

The Bible knows we are all stuck in the cycle of sin and its consequences. Oppression and the oppressed is a problem that none of us have found a way out of and there is no comforter. And it's that that makes the teacher say in verses two and three what he says. Now let me be really clear, he's not doing ethics. Okay, let none of us think that what he's saying is endorsing euthanasia or suicide.

[27 : 49] He's not. Let none of us think what he's doing in verse three is endorsing abortion. He is not. He is simply laying down a crushing verdict on life in the world that he sees in front of him.

But in a world where we cannot escape the cycle of oppression and injustice, the dead are happier than the living. Now think about that for a minute, partly because they're not living through it anymore, but for those who've died with their hope in a day of judgment, for those who have died with their trust in the just judge, partly because they are one stage closer to that time that they have clung to.

For the righteous, there is a happiness in death that comes from being in the presence of the great king and judge and ruler of all the world, being at perfect peace with him and knowing for certain that he is going to put it all to rest.

The sun breaks through again, doesn't it, in verse two, in a way we didn't expect. There is an end to the cycle of sin and its consequences. There is a happiness we can have once life in the world under the sun is done for us.

Friends, in the face of all the tears, all the tears, cling to that day. Cling to that day. But that is not where he leaves us, is it?

[29 : 23] And it is important that we let this sit for a minute. In a world where we can't escape oppression and injustice, he says, still better are those who have never been born.

Can he really say that? Can we really say that? It's impossible for us to fully imagine, isn't it? Impossible. But if I try to think myself into the grief of the parents of Lucy Lettley's victims, I think there are times of sadness and pain, guilt so deep, that I might come to a point where I would wish that those children had never come into the world, than to suffer in the way that they did at her hands.

That I might come to a point where I might wish that I had never had children, rather than live through what I'm living through now. Job says in chapter three, as he sat in the ashes of his own life, why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?

Friends, there is injustice out there that is so great and so deep that if we thought about it for long enough or suffered through it for ourselves, I think that we would feel and we would say with the teacher, better never to have seen the evil that is done under the sun.

It is such an unsanitary thought, isn't it? And we don't want to think it, but it is a deeply unsanitary world that we live in.

[31 : 05] And we pretend, don't we, when we come in through those doors, that we leave that outside and in here is sanitized and clean. But each of us knows, don't we, that it's not.

Because into our church we bring, don't we, our wounds, our scars, our troubles, our tears. And it's all in here, isn't it?

And we know it. We are scarred and stained, aren't we, by the world in which we live. We have been oppressed and we have damaged others, haven't we? We are part of the world in which we live.

And tonight the teacher just leaves that gaping wound open and it is so ugly for us to look at. We don't want to look, but he simply invites us to see what he sees and tonight to weep with those who weep.

God's got the whole world in his hands, hasn't he? But tonight the teacher just lets the weight of the world down on our shoulders, just a little bit heavier, doesn't he? Why does he do that?

[32 : 17] So that we will come to the point where we ourselves will say, listen, we will not be satisfied. We will not be satisfied in this world until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Until we come to the point where we will recognize that we will not find ultimate justice or a permanent solution and we will not be satisfied until Jesus returns in his glory to put it all right and to renew and to restore the created order.

And so until that day, friends, how do we fear the Lord? We cling to the time that he will judge. We live as if each day was our last and we weep over the wickedness and oppression in our world.

It's important that we take that and I don't want us to move on too quickly from that. So in a moment, I'm just going to leave a minute or two where in the silence we can grieve before God and then I'll lead us in prayer together.

So let's take a moment now in silence to bring our grief and our lament to God over the brokenness of our world under the sun and set our hope on Christ our Savior. Thank you, Teresa. So let's pray.
[33 : 43] care Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[35 : 40] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. your throne, to weep, Lord, and to set our hope on you. For we ask and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.