

LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY

CONFESSIONS OF A CYNIC

ECCLESIASTES 3:16–22



The Heart of the Matter

In the final paragraph of Ecclesiastes 3, we find Solomon alone with his thoughts—thoughts that are disturbing and painful. He had been active in his pursuits and projects. He had engaged the help of others in much of his activity, certainly during the extensive works of erecting buildings, planting gardens, digging reservoirs and irrigation canals, providing entertainment, and a dozen other involvements (Ecclesiastes 2:4–10). But in this passage, he pulled aside from his labor and mused. He observed and meditated and evaluated. He even talked to himself! In doing so, he admitted his disillusionment and his confusion. As he realized the inequities, the injustices, the unfair treatment, the greed and pride and beastly arrogance of people all around him, he recorded his reactions. As we shall see, he also came to some of his own “under-the-sun” conclusions.



Discovering the Way

1. General Reminders about the Book

In his journal, Solomon the cynic pounded home the certainty that life apart from God has no purpose, no meaning, no satisfaction, and no substance. So far, his perspective had been strictly horizontal and confined to “under-the-sun” realities. Solomon observed the terrible effects of injustice, affliction, and suffering, all of which lead many to shake their fists at heaven and challenge God to either straighten things out or get off the throne.



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2. Specific Comments from the Writer (Ecclesiastes 3:16–22)

King Solomon discovered a problem that sent him into his slump of cynicism. Although people long for wrongs to be righted, their desire for justice is often dashed to pieces like china on a tile floor. But Solomon proposed two solutions to the problem of injustice. First, we must realize that *injustice will have only a temporary reign*. God will judge and make all things right. Second, we must accept the fact that *injustice reveals our beastlike behavior*. But Solomon warned us about the dangerous ditches of cynicism that lie on either side of the precarious path of life. It can keep us bogged down when we should be facing head-on the ugly realities of life and enjoying the good things God has given us.



DIGGING DEEPER

Moral Law and the Law-Giver

Everybody knows when they've been treated unfairly. Our innate understanding of right and wrong sets off an internal alarm when injustice occurs. Although imperfect, limited, and often numbed by sin, our conscience waves a red flag of warning when it detects a breach of God's moral law (1 Samuel 24:5; Romans 2:14–15).

Everyone expects others to follow some moral codes. Even those who say there is no moral order demand to be treated with fairness, courtesy, and dignity. It's therefore ironic that Solomon, viewing the world from an attitude of pessimistic cynicism, pointed to the presence of injustice as evidence that humans are not better than beasts. But the fact that people can at times discern good from evil and beauty from ugliness, is an indication that humans are made greater than animals.

Depending on our perspective, we will view the obvious presence of injustice in the world as either a sign that life is meaningless, humans are beast-like (cynical), and there is no justice, or we will discern an intention for humanity that goes beyond our present experiences, orients us toward a future age of righteousness, and points to a universal Law-giver who is infinitely concerned about us.

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Starting Your Journey

Solomon does not exhort us to try to understand our unjust circumstances, to retaliate with bitterness, or retreat into our closets and suffer alone. He does suggest that we reject self-pity and revenge and seek out ways to find the advantages in our disadvantages. In short, we may not be able to alter our lot in life, but we can change our response to it. This leads to a few very personal and practical questions that can help us reorient our hopeless cynicism toward hopeful realism.

Are you wasting your life in self-pity? Or are you waiting expectantly for God to use your pain to bring glory to Him and courage to others?