

Facing Reality to Live with Joy

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Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0:00] And about a year ago, our oldest daughter got away for a long weekend for her 10th birthday. When she got home, she was understandably a bit sad that this trip that she had been looking forward to, this trip that she had really enjoyed so much was over. It finished.

And we were trying as best as we could to make this into some sort of parenting moment, this some sort of time of growth. And we were explaining to her, well, one of the hard things about life is that good things come to an end.

And at that point, her little sister, obviously sensing her sadness and her vulnerability at this moment, piped up and she said, and one day, Emily, you'll come to an end.

Which was not quite the line of encouragement or comfort we'd planned on heading down. But actually, you'll know if you've been with us through this series in Ecclesiastes, that the preacher, whose words we have in this great book, the preacher is a big fan of that line of argument.

The preacher has regularly called us to face up to the reality of our mortality. We're going to see that in our passage again this morning, that the heading in the Church Bible, at least, as Shona said at the start of chapter 9, death comes to all.

[1:23] That might well make you think that we're not going to be having the most cheerful time looking at this this morning. But actually, I hope that as we read through this, as we work our way through this, we'll see that the kind of the outbox here, the destination, really is a picture of joy and celebration in life.

A deep, deep joy. And yet, to get to that point, we need to face up to some truths of what is going to happen both in life and in death.

So that's the path that this passage takes us on this morning. We're going to see the uncertainty of life, the certainty of death, and then living with joy in the present.

So let's have a look at those together. First, the uncertainty of life. And really, the subheading here would be to say this, accept that you are not in control.

Accept that you are not in control. The uncertainty of life. This is really the beginning and the end of the passage. Chapter 9 begins, verse 1, But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

[2:42] Whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Both are before him. Here's the question then, the righteous person, the wise person, the kind of person Ecclesiastes has been trying to form us into.

What will happen to that person? How will life pan out for that person? And the answer we see here is, well, nobody knows. The person who listens well and takes Ecclesiastes to heart, as I hope we've been doing over the last couple of months, what will their life contain?

It will contain, as it will for everyone, a bit of everything. Love and hate, as it says here, which I think in these verses encompasses kind of more widely, kind of good and bad, the things that we desire and the things that we don't.

Love and hate are both before him. Both will come into our lives. We'll have seasons of life where we feel on top of the world, where we think things couldn't get any better, where we think, well, this is what life is supposed to be like.

And there will be those times where we think, well, where did it all go wrong? Where we think things couldn't get any worse, where we wonder how we'll carry on. And there will be people here this morning towards both ends of that spectrum.

[4 : 08] Again, the book of Ecclesiastes tells us that is what life is like. We cannot predict what will happen next.

We cannot control the outcome. We see that in verses 11 and 12 as well. This idea of uncertainty kind of brackets this passage.

Do have a look at verse 11. Read there. Again, I saw under the sun, the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge.

But time and chance happen to all of them. We are not in control of our world, but we cannot predict our world. And so the swift will often win the race.

The strong are often victorious. We don't live in a completely random world. And yet, you know, just when we think we've got a handle on that, lest the city win the Premier League.

[5 : 10] Or, you know, the person who seems to have everything going for them is suddenly blindsided with immense hardship. Or the person who's really done nothing seems to end up in the right place at the right time and have everything.

Verse 12 there says, we're like fish in the sea. One day we're swimming along and everything is good. And then suddenly, like finding Nemo, we are kind of caught in a net and everything changes. And we cannot predict how and we cannot predict when.

Life is uncertain and we need to accept that we are not in control. Now you might be thinking, you know, we've already said this. This is not the first time Ecclesiastes has mentioned this.

Why are we back here? Well, I think it's mentioned repeatedly because it is such a hard approach to life for us to shake. We're so used to kind of machinery where this input brings this output.

We're so used to trying to work out what we can do to get the thing we want. We're so used to trying to tame and control things. But the preacher says, if we try and control our life, if we try and work out a technique that will ensure that we always get what we want, always the love and never the hate, always the good and never the bad, if we try and walk through life in that way, if that is our view of kind of the good life, a life where we're in control and we get to work out what boxes we want ticked and we get them ticked exactly when we want to, if that is what we are aiming for or expecting, Ecclesiastes says, we'll be constantly disappointed and frustrated.

[6 : 54] And I think that's especially important for us to hear as Christians. We've said before, there's a way of kind of misunderstanding, I think, Ecclesiastes, as if that refrain of life under the sun means a life without God or a life apart from God, a life with no relation to God.

And I think actually that, you know, the truth is, the reality, isn't it, that we all live under the sun. This passage says, the life of the righteous, the wise is just as out of control, that the life of the Christian is just as uncertain day to day.

There's a huge danger for us this morning and throughout our Christian lives to think that Christianity or religion is here to take away the uncertainty. But actually the Bible says Christianity does not take away that uncertainty, rather it enables us to face up to that uncertainty.

And one of the key messages of Christianity is to remind us time and time again, you are not God. You do not know what will happen, whether for good or for bad. Again, as we've heard in Ecclesiastes before, you're not in control.

We can't achieve everything we've ever dreamed of. Things won't always go just the way that we want them to go. And sometimes things will come from nowhere and just knock us for six.

[8:17] Those things happen to people who aren't Christians and those things happen to people who are Christians. Faith will not protect us from that. And there are countless faithful people who can vouch for that fact.

So then what difference does faith make? Well, it makes all the difference in the world when these things come. Because as verse one says, the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

Again, we are not in control, but God is. We are not God, but God is. To be in the hand of God then doesn't mean ease or comfort, as we might often like to think.

But to be in the hand of God recognizes that there is one who is in control. When things are hard or confusing, when we get the things we didn't want unexpectedly, that is not a sign God has left us.

Rather, it's exactly what the Bible has told us to be prepared for. And the author Dale, Ralph Davis, writes, sometimes the clearest evidence that God has not deserted you is not that you are successfully past your trial, but that you are still on your feet in the middle of it.

[9:33] Wisdom teaches us we are not in control, and pretending we are or need to be will exhaust us and frustrate us that God is in control.

And even in hard times, we can trust in his goodness. So that's first, the uncertainty of life. But then the second thing, as we've said, that we see here, that the one certainty that the preacher is happy to grant us is this, the certainty of death.

We don't know when that's going to happen, but we do know at some point our lives will end. The uncertainty of life, the certainty of death. And again, if you've been with us over the last couple of months in Ecclesiastes, this will not be a surprise to you to hear the preacher addressing this head on, speaking about this topic, which in so many ways is taboo.

It's kind of avoided at all costs in our society, perhaps especially for younger people. It's a topic we steer away from. But Ecclesiastes is here to remind us that we won't make sense of life without first facing up to death.

And just like in the uncertainty of life, the preacher's point is that this doesn't change depending on the kind of person we are, depending on how righteous we are. That's verse two. It is the same for all, since the same event, that event being the moment of our death, happens to the righteous and the wicked.

[11:05] And then he continues, do have a look at those verses, to the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, the one who sacrifices, and to the one who doesn't, to the good and the sinner. Here is the certainty, whoever you are, however you live, whatever your relation to God is like, that one day death will come.

And as verse six makes clear, that will sweep away everything with it. That their love and their hate and their envy have already perished. And forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

I remember that great question from Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author, really getting to the heart of this book of Ecclesiastes. In his autobiography, he wrote this, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

And Ecclesiastes is here to say that from an earthly point of view, the answer to that question is no. Under the sun, there is nothing that our inevitable death awaiting us does not destroy.

All the things that can seem so important today, the things I love, the things I hate, the things I desire, the things I'm looking to get hold of and build up and keep.

[12:30] Ecclesiastes says, death will wash all of those away. In a way, realizing that is part of the antidote actually to the uncertainty of life, of trying to control a life where we're not ultimately in control.

Because the preacher is saying, look, even if you could, even if we got everything we ever wanted and whether we got those through fair means or foul, still, one day death will come and all that we have under the sun will be gone.

Even if we had managed to control everything just as we wanted. To be wise, then, is to recognize that. That is why Jesus says to his followers, don't build up treasure on earth, but build up treasure in heaven.

Don't slave away for things which even if you get them, you can't ultimately keep hold of. Instead, invest your life in that which is eternal. Live wisely by taking seriously the reality of death.

I think here is another place where if we get hold of Ecclesiastes, if we really kind of live it out, if we allow our minds and our lives to be molded by this truth and this wisdom that the preacher is sharing with us and that we've spent this time looking through together, if we're really shaped by that, this is such a great opportunity to be a witness to the world around us.

[13:54] To be able to be a people who are able to deal with uncertainty in life because we know that we are in the hands of a certain God. And to be able to be a people who are realistic about the one certain thing there is of death, not having to hide away from that or pretend it will never happen to people like us, but being willing to face that head on.

And we're able to do that because the Bible tells us that there is more than just life under the sun. That our earthly death isn't the end of us. We can't take anything with us, but rather God has far more and far better in store for his people.

That although death comes to all righteous, wicked, good, evil to everyone, for those who trust in Jesus, for those who are made righteous through him, for those who trust in the forgiveness that he offers, that he has won at the cross, there is eternal life.

And we're going to come back to that in a moment, but I think it's important to highlight that now. Death is something that comes to all of us, and yet for the Christian, that truth hits home in a very different way than for the person who has no hope beyond death.

And it's seeing death through that lens, that lens of the gospel and what Jesus has done, which allows us to change how our lives are lived in the present. And that's the key focus, excuse me, that's the main focus, that's our final focus in this passage this morning, the uncertainty of life, the certainty of death.

[15:30] Thirdly, finally, the preacher's conclusions from these truths. His application of all that he has been saying is this, so live with joy in the present.

Live with joy in the present. I know we've been talking about death again here in Ecclesiastes, but I do want us to see that the point of this passage is joy. I'm going to read verses 7 to 10 again.

Amazing verses, such joy-filled verses, but I want us to remember before I read them how we got to this point. Because this is not naive, wishful thinking from the preacher.

This is not something where we can just say, well, that's easy for you to say. These are words that the preacher has been able to get to by taking seriously our unpredictable and often painful world.

Has been able to get to by looking death in the eye and knowing that it takes away so much of what we treasure in life. And yet, having done that, now he is able to say these great words, these great words to us.

[16:39] He writes, go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white.

Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain. That means that a fleeting life that he has given you under the sun because that is your portion in life and in all your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol to which you are going. what does a really holy person, a godly person, a person shaped by the wisdom and truth of God's word look like?

Is it a very austere person? Is it someone who is quite detached? Is it the kind of person you don't see smile very much for whom kind of day-to-day life is just a bit trivial and beneath them kind of person to say, you know, why waste time reading a book unless it's a really thick theology book?

You know, perhaps that's often our picture of if we were really holy that's what we would be aspiring toward and yet that's not the Bible's picture. The Bible's picture of the person shaped by biblical wisdom, the person approaching life in a wise way is a picture of a person full of joy, enjoying, as we read there, enjoying what they eat, enjoying what they drink, enjoying celebrations with friends, enjoying their relationships.

[18:25] As I was looking at this this week I saw a little packet in the kitchen at home which said on the side of it life is too short for bad food, enjoy every bite.

The preacher here in Ecclesiastes would completely agree with that statement. It was on the side of some sort of health food so I read it and then ate a biscuit which I thought was a good balance. The preacher is instructing us this morning that life is short and life is uncertain so do good things.

Celebrate. Rejoice with people. Read good books. Watch good films. Enjoy relationships. Verse 10 whatever your hand finds to do do it with your might.

Do your very best. Christians would be people as the old Pepsi adverts used to say living life to the max. Or more importantly as Jesus said that he had come that we might have life to the full.

Live with joy in the present the preacher says. And you can add into that list the things that you enjoy the things that bring you joy.

[19:37] But here is the really important thing for us to get straight having said that and before we finish and perhaps some people have been wondering this already well actually how is this approach to life any different from what the world around us presents?

You know that attitude that surrounds us that we see on TV and invites us in just eat drink party or just seek entertainment or throw yourself into work every waking hour that's what it's all about.

The kind of question is have we almost come full circle and ended up back where we started? Is this no different really from what everyone else would say? But there is a key difference which makes all the difference which is that God is in the picture.

Verse 7 For God has already approved what you do. Verse 9 All the days of your vain life your breath of a life your fleeting life which he that is God has given you under the sun.

The point is that all of these things these good things are gifts from God and not substitutes for God. When these things find their right place under God that is when we are able to truly enjoy them and find joy in them.

[20:57] David Gibson whose book on Ecclesiastes I've mentioned before can't recommend that enough he puts it this way In the created world you can only truly enjoy what you do not worship.

Saying that if we try and make anything under the sun the ultimate thing the thing of most importance the thing where we find our meaning or our security the thing where we think if I have that then everything will be okay if our worship literally the thing we think is worth the most is directed to any earthly thing we will strip away all of the joy from that even if that's a really good thing whether it's family or food or entertainment or relationships these things we've been speaking about but if we make them the main thing we will put so much pressure on them to fulfill us to bring us gain to use that Ecclesiastes word and those things won't be able to hold that weight those things will let us down in the uncertainty of life they will come and they will go and in the certainty of death they will be over and yet it's for those who know that both in life and death they are in God's hands who are truly able to enjoy the good things of this world as great gifts from him as gifts pointing back to him as the giver the many gifts in life that we can take so easily for granted but which the bible calls us to rejoice in and find joy in and give glory to God through this is such a joyful passage

I think despite the heading but it is a challenging passage isn't it because so often this joy is not our default state I think I perhaps noticed that more in myself this week with these verses on my mind how often people will ask how are you doing or how is your week going or are we thinking about the day ahead and what that will include and how often my natural reaction is to talk about busyness or sigh a little or find my mind to go to the challenges that are coming up the things I'd rather avoid and Ecclesiastes absolutely doesn't make light of the difficult things in life but I found it a challenge but a really joyful challenge a good challenge to try and respond with joy when asked or when thinking about those things to let my mind focus on the many many good gifts God has given to each of us to be deliberate in trying to enjoy those things and invest in those things to be a thankful person a grateful person in some ways we could almost say couldn't we in this passage that joy is a command we have one of the values of our church to be a joyful community it's something that we want to strive after not just hope will happen to us even though we're not doing anything about it that joy in part comes from recognizing all the good that God has given us in this world all the good things that come from him and are to be enjoyed for his glory to live with joy in the present and we can do that fully and we can do that far more than anyone else if we know God through Jesus because we know there that that joy we experience here and now is pointing forward to the far greater joy we have when Jesus returns contrary to the kind of the stereotypes or the kind of miserable picture of church

Christianity does not squash joy Christianity enables joy because it points us to the source and destination of all joy in the gospel and in the eternal life we have with Jesus C.S. Lewis the great author writes all joy reminds it is never a possession always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still about to be he talks about how our joy now is simply an anticipation of a foretaste of the far greater joy that awaits and is still to be that if we try and find that joy in any earthly thing it will evaporate before us and yet when we allow that to be a pointer toward our eternal home with God that is when we are able to enjoy fully the things of life in their right place and that means that the greater our joy here on earth the more we long for the fulfillment of that joy still to come that means that as we enjoy things in day to day life that they are able to point us to Jesus point us to the sacrifice he has made the forgiveness that he brings the eternal life that he promises where joy will be perfect and where death will not put an end to that but will rather be the doorway into that in the meantime in our uncertain worlds the gospel enables us to live with joy a joy of gratitude to God for all he's given a joy that points others to him and a joy that will one day be fully satisfied in him let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that you have given us so much in our world in which we can find joy we thank you that although our world is fallen is tainted by sin that still there is beauty still there is enjoyment still there is good company still there is meaning and purpose and value we ask now that you would forgive us for when we so easily take all of that for granted when we forget the good things that are all around us or also rather than them pointing us to you where we put those good things in your place rather

Lord would we enjoy all of these things in their right places good gifts from a loving heavenly father might that move us to give you the praise and the glory that you deserve I want to pray particularly this morning for those going through difficult times and hardship for those for whom even speaking about joy and hearing about that this morning is a struggle Lord we thank you that you know our hardships as we go through the uncertainties of life and yet we pray that you would encourage us and help us to remember that even through that we remain always in your hands and we pray that as we go through dark times that you would open our eyes even to the glimpses of joy among the sorrows and that they would point us forward to the perfect joy in store for your people which will truly satisfy and which will never end Lord we ask for all of us as we live in light of that joy that we might be grateful to you in the present and that our lives might point others to the joy that is found in you that even as we go through an uncertain life and even as we face up to the certainty of death still we can find joy because of an eternal

[28 : 34] God who has promised eternal life for all those who trust in Jesus Lord we pray that you would help us to keep our eyes fixed upon him fixed upon our earthly and our heavenly and our eternal home and through that be able to live with joy in the present as your people giving glory and gratitude to you and pray all these things in Jesus name amen