

The Limits of Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you have your Bibles, perhaps you can turn with me to the book of Ecclesiastes, this Old Testament wisdom book that we're working our way through. Maybe as you're turning there, wasn't it good in God's wonderful wisdom and timing that Ian got to lead us and share of what God had done for him 68 years ago? God's timing is perfect. Ecclesiastes chapter 9, we're going to read the first 12 verses together. So, let's hear God's Word. So, I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful. As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.

This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished. Never again will they ever part in anything that happens under the sun. Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun, all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life, and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom. I have seen something else under the sun.

The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favor to the learned. But time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come, as fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare. So people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. Amen. So if you keep your Bible open there, here is our next lesson from our preacher, and it's this. Enjoy life in this unpredictable world.

The 21st of October, 2015, was a big day, and I wonder if anybody knows why. You'd have to be a real film buff to know why. It was the future day, from Back to the Future 2. And so people got really excited back in 2015 trying to see, well, what predictions from 1989 actually came to pass.

[3 : 3 7] Some were spot on. If you watch the movie, you'll see people making video calls. And there were smart watches. And Nike even made self-tying shoes for one year only. But of course, some were wildly wrong. There are still no hoverboards. There are still no flying cars. And we don't have super accurate, up to the second weather reports that guarantee anything. People like making predictions.

And as people make predictions, often we tie it with the idea of control. We can very easily imagine our lives operate like a closed system. If I do X, then Y will certainly happen, as if it's as straightforward as if I flick the switch, the lights come on. So we watch a weather report, and we plan for a lovely day in the sunshine. And how many of us have taken a soaking as a result?

Far more significantly, perhaps, we can think about Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister in the 1930s, announcing after meeting with Hitler, peace in our time. Little did he realize he could not control or predict Hitler's evil actions. Or maybe personally, we have found ourselves making five-year plans, ten-year plans, retirement plans, only they've been impacted by redundancy or ill health or failures and disappointments. And so Ecclesiastes 9 is going to explore this problem for us, and it's also going to present a solution to us. So our preacher has been looking at this head on, and he continues to engage with the idea that life is unpredictable, that there are so many outcomes that are not clear to us. As Burns and Steinbeck appreciated, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. And as we reflect on that, and as we experience that, often it stirs up emotions for us.

Perhaps it causes us to ask questions. We have frustration or sadness or despair. We can ask ourselves, what's the point? How do I please God in the chaos that is my life or this world?

And our preacher is going to say to us this evening, very honestly, yes, life is predictably unpredictable.

[6 : 13] So what we should do is trust in God, the only one who knows and controls. And for us living when we do, we should trust the God who sent His Son to guarantee an eternal future.

Our preacher is going to say to us, yes, you may very well feel surrounded by fear and uncertainty, but still each day fight for joy and enjoy life's good things when they come to you.

So let's think about this first big idea that we see at the beginning and the end, that life is predictably unpredictable. So if you look at chapter 9, verses 1 to 6, the preacher begins, here are some things that you can count on in life, though these are not things that we would instinctively choose for ourselves.

In verse 1, he says to us that everyone is going to have a mixed experience of life. Life is going to come with ups and downs.

The righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows where their love or hate awaits them.

[7 : 28] The righteous and the wise have learned to trust God and to know that their times are in God's hands, they're living God's way, but their future could be love or hate.

In other words, it could be positive or negative. There is no fixed rule. God is God and we are not. And we're being invited to recognize that faith and good planning, living by God's wisdom, does not shelter us from the troubles in life.

Boys and girls, again, to go to movies, you probably have never heard of the film Forrest Gump, but Forrest Gump, the main character, once said that life is like a box of chocolates. Life, actually, you know those jelly bean packets that you get where you never know what flavor you're going to get?

They could be really good ones, they could be awful ones, those Harry Potter ones. Life is a bit more like that, according to our preacher. You never know what any day is going to bring. It could be good, it could be bad.

Only God knows. So we can count on knowing ups and downs in life. Something else we can count on is this. Everybody shares the same destiny.

[8 : 42] In the end, we all die. And the author makes plain, we all die regardless of how we have chosen to live. Whether we have chosen to live a wild and reckless life, whether we've fallen into all kinds of sin and addiction and troubles, or whether we've lived an upright life, all will die.

There's that series of contrasts. The good and the bad, the clean and the unclean. Whether we make oaths or whether we feel in our conscience we can never make an oath, no one escapes.

Now, our preacher recognizes this is a hard truth. It's always a hard truth to consider. Indeed, in verse 3, he calls it an evil. He also points to another reality.

That most people in the life that they have choose the way of madness and folly. Biblically, living without God. But at the end of the day, we will all face death.

Our life and our death are in God's hands. Our preacher wants to remind us of that. Something else that we can recognize with our preacher, verses 4 to 6, everyone knows and chooses to believe that life is better than death.

[10 : 09] Verse 4 says, anyone who is among the living has hope. Sounds a lot like our popular phrase, where there is life, there is hope. Doctors will tell us that hope is important for recovery.

And then there's that proverb. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. Better a living street dog than a dead king of beasts. Life is better than death.

There's a set of comparisons there in verses 5 and 6. The living have knowledge, but the dead know nothing. While we're alive, we can gain rewards, but not when we're dead.

The living experience intense emotions. Even if it's love and hate and jealousy, for the dead, those have vanished. To be alive is to have a part to play in what's going on in the world.

But for the dead, our preacher says, never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Now I hope, I hope at this stage we're asking, what about resurrection?

[11 : 19] What about eternal life? We're absolutely going to get there. But we need to remember that our preacher is often taking the viewpoint of, imagine all there is is life under the sun.

There is no God. That's why he so often talks about life being meaningless. So he's taking that point of view. But also we have to remember this is the Old Testament. This is Old Testament where they didn't yet know in full view the glory of the resurrection.

But they did know in the Old Testament that God is in control, that life is a gift and life is a good thing, that life is better than death in this world. But it leaves us with a tension.

What is predictable? According to our preacher, ups and downs in life and death. And then we go to the end of the section. Now where again he's coming back to life being unpredictable.

Verse 11, we can be surprised by the outcomes that we see in life. Life isn't as straightforward as input X and guarantee Y comes out.

[12 : 25] Sometimes the race is not to the swift. Sometimes the tortoise beats the hare. Sometimes the best candidate misses out. Sometimes the battle is not to the strong.

The Goliaths are beaten by David. Lester can win the premiership. Sometimes food doesn't come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned.

Sometimes talent and genius goes unrecognized and unrewarded. Think of Van Gogh. Maybe the most famous painter in the world, but he died penniless.

Only sold one painting in his entire life. Why is that? Why is it that we can be surprised by outcomes? End of verse 11. Because time and chance happen to them all.

Because we are not in control. And our predictions and our plans don't always come to pass. And he's going to push us further in that direction in verse 12 to say, We can be surprised by the hour of our day.

[13 : 33] Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come. So he uses these different images of a fish or a bird that's caught in a net.

You know, no fish wakes up thinking, Today I'm going to get caught. I'm going to end up fish supper. It just happens. Nets and traps work on the basis of surprise.

And our preacher says, People are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. Don't we know that?

Terrible news. Painful events. The loss of loved ones. We can feel trapped by those evil times. And ultimately, by the day of our own death.

And so our preacher here, the preacher in Ecclesiastes, He keeps bringing us back to these realities. Why? It's obviously something that's really important for us to be aware of.

[14 : 32] Maybe especially in times like these where it's very seldom that people are considering the big realities of life and death. Our preacher can help us to be prepared.

Because if we want to live well, we need to be ready to die well. To know that we are trusting in Jesus. That we're ready to meet with our Creator.

That we know and we are glad that our times are in God's hands. Just before we move from this topic, some particular lessons to take note of.

Firstly, to recognize, and I'm sure we see it in life, that there's no direct connection between living by faith and living the good life. And the Bible is full of these examples.

Think about Job. God recognized Job as righteous, but Job lost it all and suffered greatly. Think about the Apostle Paul. We just heard from one of his letters.

[15 : 39] Paul, as he served Christ faithfully, suffered for Christ hugely. Think about the Lord Jesus Himself. Had no place to call home.

Was betrayed by His friends. Rejected by those He came to save. And ultimately was killed. But Jesus was the man of faith. There is no straight line connection between living by faith and the good life.

It's also a reminder that there is no guarantee that our plans, even our godly plans and ambitions, will work out. That none of us has that level of control or certainty.

And there is no way for us to escape our common destiny. As hard as we might try, as hard as scientists and genetic engineers might try, 100% of us will die unless Jesus comes back first.

Life is predictably unpredictable. So what should we do? And how should we live when life is so predictably unpredictable, when it sometimes seems so cruel?

[16 : 52] And that takes us to our central section here, to verses 7 to 10, where we have this simple but hard-to-appreciate wisdom.

We should enjoy life when we can. Trusting that God knows, that God is good, that God is faithful. We trust Him. We trust that He is a generous God.

And we enjoy life. So verse 7, Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart.

For God has already approved what you do. To know God's smile is a freedom to enjoy God's goodness, to enjoy food and drink, to enjoy our Sunday supper, to enjoy a family meal, to enjoy a nice cup of coffee.

Just like the Lord Jesus, who was often found feasting, who provided a meal in the desert, and who shared meals with His disciples.

- [18 : 04] When we share food and drink with others, we put aside our tasks and our responsibilities, and we sit face to face, and we spend time, and that's a gift.
- So we're called to enjoy our food and our drink. We're called to enjoy our relationships. Verse 9, Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love.
- Here that represents any of our loved ones. To enjoy spending time, to make time. How often we find that we are time poor. There is so many demands on us.
- But here is this wisdom. Enjoy our relationships, our family and our friends, and our church family. And again, Jesus shows us that way.
- Jesus, who was wonderfully busy about His Father's work, but built strong friendships among His disciples, and loved people well.
- [19 : 04] I was thinking that perhaps, thinking about the sadness and the heartbreak and the death that's in chapter 9, maybe we felt the temptation, maybe after grief, that one way to avoid heartbreak is by not getting too close to anyone.
- You know, that we can protect ourselves by keeping our hearts in a box. I think this preacher would counsel us against that. Made me think of Lord Tennyson's famous line, it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.
- Our relationships matter. There's a lot of stuff that don't matter, but our relationships really do. And then in verse 10, enjoy our tasks. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.
- In light of the fact that we are going to die, we should be glad that we have work to do today. We have tasks to do, we have opportunities to do today.
- So in our calling, in our responsibilities, in our workplaces, in our education, whatever our hand finds to do, enjoy it while we can, work hard and work well, knowing it's a gift from our God.
- [20 : 30] Again, it's so interesting that he chooses to give us this positive instruction in the middle of, you know, the unpredictability and then the sadness of death, still in the midst of that for the person who trusts in God, there is the possibility for joy.
- And we should fight for joy and learn to enjoy these everyday gifts. But what I think we need to do as we finish is to remember that we're not Old Testament believers, we're New Testament people, and there's gospel advice that we need to hear as well.
- That just as we're called to enjoy life by our preacher here, Jesus would call us to find joy in resurrection life ultimately.
- Our preacher here has real faith. He really does trust God and who really is looking to enjoy the life that God has given him.
- But our New Testament faith is different because our hope is greater, because Jesus has died in our place for our sin, and because Jesus has risen and is alive again.
- [21 : 46] That His sacrifice on our behalf has been accepted, that His victory over death and evil has been won, that eternal life has been secured for everybody who puts their trust in Jesus as Savior.
- And so that gives us a strong basis for joy, not temporary joy, but eternal joy. Perhaps as we finish, we can compare perspectives, looking at verses 5 and 6.
- Now for the person who has eternal life, how different this is. It says, you know, the living know that they will die. That's, there's a level of knowledge there.
- But the dead know nothing. But those with resurrection life have a far greater knowledge, perfect knowledge of our great God and Savior.
- The promise that we will be made like Him, that we will see Him face to face, that we will enjoy the glory of our God and Savior forever.

[22 : 58] forever. In verse 5, the living have reward, the dead, says, have no further reward. But for the person with faith in Jesus, as Paul reminded us, we have eternal reward.

There is an eternal weight of glory that is ours. For the person who's trusting in Jesus, perfect life forever is certainly coming in a new creation.

In verse 6, the dead have no emotions. In verse 6, the living have intense emotions. Some of them are good and some of them are bad. There's love, there's hate, there's jealousy.

The emotional life that we will have in heaven will be absolutely perfect. There'll be no hate there. There'll be no jealousy there.

There'll be no despair or sorrow there. We will live in a world of perfect love and joy and peace when our trust is in the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 09] So Jesus is saying to you and to me today, enjoy life now absolutely and trust me for eternal life.

Our preacher in Ecclesiastes, he is right. Life is better than death. But Jesus takes us further because resurrection life is better by far. And so we take heart in that as unpredictable as life is, as certain as the destiny of death is, we also have eternal hope in Jesus, our God and Savior, so that even in the midst of hardships we still have the capacity and reason to have great joy.

So we can pray with thankfulness. Let's do that now. Lord our God, again we thank you for how wonderfully honest the Bible is and the book of Ecclesiastes is.

it's very rare in our times to discuss the significant matters of life and death. And so we thank you that the preacher brings it before us.

Lord, we thank you that there is joy to be found because you are a generous God, you're a merciful God. And so we pray that you'd help us to strip away the stuff that often doesn't matter that bogs us down.

[25 : 41] help us to enjoy our family and our friends. Help us to enjoy the simple pleasures of food and drink. Help us to be able to see our work and our responsibilities as challenging as they can be as gifts from you, as opportunities to serve you and to serve others.

And Lord, above all that, may you help us always to be placing our trust in the Lord Jesus so that we would have the sure promise of eternal life, that there is another destiny that is certain for the believer.

It is certain that when we die we will go to be with our God and our Savior forever, where all sadness and tears and death will be no more, and love and joy and fellowship with our God will belong to us forever.

So help us to remember that as we look to fight for joy in order to glorify you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Okay, we're going to sing a hymn as we close that helps us to keep going with that theme, Christ, our hope in life and death. And let's stand together so that we can sing.

[27 : 07] what is our hope in life and death?

Christ alone, Christ alone, what is our only confidence? that our souls to Him belong?

Who holds our days within His hand? What comes apart from His command?

And what will keep us to the end? The love of Christ in which we stand.

O sing hallelujah, our hope springs eternal.

[28 : 09] O sing hallelujah, now and ever we confess Christ, our hope in life and death.

what truth can come the troubled soul?

God is good, God is good, where is His grace and goodness known? In our great Redeemer's blood, who holds our faith when fears are right, who stands above the stormy trials, who sends the waves that bring us nigh unto the shore the rock of Christ.

O sing hallelujah, our hope springs eternal.

O sing hallelujah, now and ever we confess Christ, our hope in life and death.

[29 : 35] unto the grave what shall we sing?

Christ, He lives, Christ, He lives, and what reward will heaven bring? Everlasting life with Him, there we will rise to meet the Lord, when sin and death will be destroyed, and we will feast in endless joy, when Christ is ours forevermore.

O sing hallelujah, our hope springs eternal. O sing hallelujah, now and ever we confess Christ, our hope in life and death.

Now and ever we confess Christ, our hope in life and death. our closing prayer comes from Romans chapter 15 and verse 13.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 21] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[33 : 35] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[36 : 05] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[38 : 35] Thank you.