Death & Joy (AM)

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] Now the great surprise of Ecclesiastes is the more we understand it, it's not a book of cynicism or it's not meant to put us in depression. I've come to see this week, it actually relieves us of our anxieties.

It helps explain why we keep searching for answers and why we always come up short. Why we expect so much out of life and why we're always disappointed.
It helps us to see why we always say if only I had a different job or a different family or a different spouse or a better education or a better opportunity, life would really be good.
But despite my best efforts, I can't control tomorrow, I can't control today. And although I may look very confident to you, I can't even make good sense of my life.
Here is the great relief at the heart of the book of Ecclesiastes. It's this. There is a God and you are not him. And it explains why life is like this.
[1:05] And it explains why the book begins and ends the same way in chapter 1 verse 2 and in chapter 12. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

Vanity of vanities, and we've looked at this. The Hebrew word for vanity is the word hevel. Remember, it's a breath, a vapour, a mist, a bubble.
What's passing? A puff of smoke after you light a candle. Beautiful. It goes out. It's real. The smoke just passes away.
Our lives and the meaning of our lives are elusive. So every search for meaning and for purpose and for satisfaction leads to a dead end.
Pleasure and self-achievement and self-improvement. All our work, all our leisure, all our investment. It's all vanity in the end. It's all hevel. And we're not wise enough to think our way through it, to fix it.
[2:08] And we hate hearing this. I'm very conscious that we'd much rather hear that we can make a different future if we just try hard enough.

That if we believe in ourselves, if we come together, we can straighten things out. That we can fix things if we put our minds to it. I think we should be so grateful to God for his word this morning and for this book.
It's only when we face the reality of vanity that God has placed on this world. It's only when we realize we're living outside the Garden of Eden and we can't save ourselves.
We can't get ourselves back in. It's only when we confess there is a God and we're not him are we ready to hear the good news. And I think this is the biggest surprise of the book of Ecclesiastes.
The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to bring us to the good news. Did you notice at the beginning of chapter 9 there is a change in tone?
[3:14] Chapter 9 is about how to have joy. Yes, it faces us with the realities of death and injustice and hevel. But chapter 9 is about how to live a life of joy now.

Did you know the Jewish rabbis describe the book of Ecclesiastes as the book of joy? And the point is that God in Ecclesiastes, God is not in heaven trying to make life as miserable as he possibly can for us.
Yes, life is full of bitterness and injustice. And he's not saying eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die. No, he's saying that God is the only true source of joy.
He wants us to live life to the full and every other course of joy is hevel. So in chapter 9, the preacher steps back from his frantic search of trying to fix life, from squeezing meaning and pleasure out of everything, and he takes a completely different angle.
You see in verse 1, he says this, chapter 9 verse 1, You see, he places us in the hand of God.

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[4:39] So it doesn't matter whether your life is a tremendous trial or tremendously joyful, you and I are in the hand of God. Not generally as we sometimes think, you know, he's got the whole world in his hands, but specifically you and me.

And that is not a basis on which to be miserable. It's a basis for joy. And you may have noticed that throughout the book, the preacher weaves into the fabric of hevel, the reality of joy.
In fact, the only other time the hand of God is mentioned in Ecclesiastes is in one of these passages. So if you have your Bible open, turn back to Ecclesiastes 2 verse 24.
There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.
For apart from him, who can eat and who can have enjoyment? To the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. But to the sinner, he has given the business of gathering and collecting only to give to the one who pleases God.
[5:55] This also is vanity and a striving after the wind. So you see, joy is not something separate from our relation with God. But when we stop living to please ourselves and we live to please God, it turns the ordinary things of life, like food and friendship and pleasure, into things that we are able to enjoy before him.

It demotes them from competing for worship, and they become instruments of joy. It's as we receive these things from the hand of God, as his gifts from his hand, and not as the meaning of life, that we're able to do good and to take pleasure in them.
And there are other joy passages in chapter 3 and chapter 5 and chapter 8. But here is the point. Joy doesn't come from grasping at gain. It comes from receiving the gift of God.
Every day you have is a gift of God. Everything you own is a gift of God. Even the capacity to enjoy today is a gift from God.
It comes from the hand of God who has made us. And so what chapter 9 does is it paints the reality of our lives in primary colours.
[7:18] The darks are very dark, which only makes the light shine more brightly. So I'm going to look quickly with you at the darks first, and then the light shining brightly.

In chapter 9, firstly, the darkness of death and injustice. And here I'm going to focus on chapter 9, verses 2 to 6.
Here is the one thing in this vain life that we are certain about, and it's this, that every single one of us are closer to our death than we were when we woke up this morning.
The same event happens to us all. Death happens to all of us. It doesn't matter who you are. And you may say, why is he on about this again?
Why does he come back to death again? Enough about death already. Well, I think the answer to that is the preacher knows how difficult this is for us.
[8:19] And each time he comes back to death and dying, you'll notice he is increasingly gentle and pastoral. Until you come to chapter 12, which we'll look at next week, which is one of the most beautiful and lyrical passages on death and dying anywhere.

And I know some of you who are listening this morning feel the approach of death getting closer. Others of you have been touched personally by the death of loved ones in recent months.
Here is the reason the preacher comes back to it. We live in almost constant denial of death. Because we can't make sense of death, we will do almost anything not to face it, to live in denial.
And of course, there are a lot of modern forms of denial. We try to domesticate death by controlling the timing of death. Or by talking about closure.
But death is not natural. It's not the way God made us in the garden. And every death is an outrage. And when it's a death of a young person, there's a special bitterness to be dealt with.
[9:32] Death is the sharpest, clearest proof that our lives are under hevel, under vanity, that we're outside the garden paradise, that we are not God.

When it comes to death, there is no such thing as closure. It's inescapable, unavoidable, unpreventable, undeniable. There is no place in the world we can hide from it.
There's no amount of money that we can spend to keep it away. There's no security against it. Once you are alive, there is only one sure thing that we can say to each other, and that is that we will all die.
And you know, believing in an afterlife doesn't solve the problem. Most religions have a picture of an afterlife. But by itself, an afterlife doesn't deal with the problem of living outside the garden.

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You could be reincarnated back into a life that's full of vanity and hevel again, only to die again. Most of our agitation and anxiety comes from suppressing the whole idea of death and dying.
[10:38] And the reason we don't believe it is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of evidence. It's not a psychological trick of the mind. It's a spiritual problem that we have with God.

Do you remember back in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent had first got his hooks into Eve? She said she shouldn't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest she die.
And the Satan says, no, you will not die. And he's been saying it ever since. He says it in our ears, day by day.
You don't need to think about that right now. You will not die. And this is part of the gift of Ecclesiastes. You and I will die.
It doesn't matter whether you're a criminal or a Christ-like person. The same event will happen to all of us. And it presses on us like a weight. But the reason he returns to this theme is not because he's got some gloomy fixation with death.
[11:44] He wants us to focus on living now. You see verse 4? He who is joined with all the living has hope. For a living dog is better than a dead lion.

A great verse for all of us who are retired. For the living know that they will die. But the dead know nothing. They have no more reward and the memory of them is forgotten.
The gift of life God gives us is an unspeakable good. And perhaps one of the most important reasons to be alive is to prepare for death. Because all the things that consume our attention now will be gone.
Jim Packer used to say, you don't know how to live well until you know how to die well. And that brings us to the other dark colour, the brush stroke of the brush in verses 11, 12.
And that is the seeming randomness of life, the seeming injustice. You know, under the sun, verse 11, he says, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligence, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance, or time and happenings, happen to them all.
[12:58] We do not know our time. You are not the master of your fate. You are not the captain of your soul. You and I, we can't predict what tomorrow brings.

We cannot control outcomes. You cannot trust your wisdom and intelligence and skill to unlock the secret of life. See, the preacher is painting in primary colours.
He's calling for just a little bit of intellectual and spiritual humility that we desperately need. We're not as wise as we think we are. We can be moving along swimmingly and suddenly we're caught up in a net, knowing nothing about.
We dream of good things and hope for them. But there's only one thing we can really put our faith in and that is God himself in whose hand we are. And I think it's on that dark background where the light of this passage shines so brightly.
Right at the heart of the passage, in verses 7 to 11, the writer of Ecclesiastes surprises us with joy. Between death and randomness, there is an urgent command in verse 7.
[14:10] Go, he says. Eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart. For God has already approved what you do. Really? Where does that come from?

Well, the answer is verse 1. Since we're in the hand of God who is above all gods, it is this God who has placed us in and our lives under hevel so that we would search for him.
And the more we join the preacher in seeing everything as in God's hands, it means we're free to enjoy the ordinary everyday gifts from his hand.
If they are the gifts of God, we don't have to be anxious about them. We certainly shouldn't worship them. But we enjoy them from his hand. I think this is a bit of a surprise for us.
The Bible is not pietistic or ascetical. A meal is not just a meal to get through so that you can get back to the other important things in life of working and trying to control things.
[15:14] It's something to be received from the hand of God in and of itself and enjoyed for its own sake. The command is not just go and eat your bread quickly.

Go and eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart. And the reason is that God's pleased with it. God takes pleasure in our pleasure of his gifts because he has given his gifts so that we don't live by gain and by grasping but by his grace and by his gifts.
This Christmas I thought very hard about a gift I could give to my wife. I consulted friends. And I came up with an idea that cost very little but I knew she would see it as genuinely from me.

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And on the day I looked forward to her opening it and when she opened it she looked across and gave me that look and I knew I'd done the right thing and she's been enjoying it ever since.
See when we get good gifts for others whom we love we want the person to enjoy it just so with God. So verse 8 the writer says put on white garments and cover your hair with oil.
[16:34] That's right. Dress up for dancing. Put on some cologne and some perfume. In those days when you're miserable or when you're facing death and disaster you put on sackcloth and ashes.

Since we're in the hand of God we can wear colour and good things and enjoy wearing them. Enjoy life. Verse 9 with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun.
Don't use each other as much as you can get away with it. Don't put up with your spouse but enjoy life. Cherish and protect your spouse. Live your life to the full.
It's God's gift. If you make anything else your God it's going to take you away from enjoyment. It's going to enslave you. I mean if you make your family your God and try and control it in a particular way for a particular result it will disappoint.
You'll become angry. Your family's not going to want to be with you anymore. But worship God and he will give you the desires of your heart. Again look at verse 10 Whatever your hand finds to do do it with your might for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol the place of the dead to which you're going.
[17:51] Here it is. Here's the advice of Ecclesiastes go for it. If God has laid something on your heart give it a try. Don't wait.

Do it now. One of the commentaries I'm using for today's work is called Living Life Backwards. How Ecclesiastes teaches us to live life in the light of the end.
Because the only way to enter into today is to know that it comes from the hand of God. Here's one of my favourite quotes. It comes from a book called When I Relax I Feel Guilty and it's by an anonymous monk and he says this near the end of his life.
If I had my life to live over again I would try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip.
I know of very few things I would take seriously. I would take more trips. I would be crazier. I would eat more ice cream and less beans.
[19:01] I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones. You see I'm one of those people who lives life prophylactically and sensibly hour by hour day after day.

Oh I've had my moments. And if I had to do it all over again I'd have more of them. That's the spirit of Ecclesiastes 9.
You know ride a bike go for a walk ring a friend write a letter listen to some music enjoy your kids plant a church give your money away.
As one of the commentators points out verses 7 to 10 is full of wedding imagery food and drink and wine and clothes and marriage. It's the Bible picture of the best life can offer a foretaste of the great wedding bank foot that is coming to all who belong to Christ.
Because if you know you're going to eat there in glory it's possible to eat here now and enjoy. What we really need is for this great and good God who's got everything in his hand to enter into our human world to take our death onto himself to defeat that death by rising again from the dead and to make a new creation where there is no hevel and to ensure a way that if we joined him despite our weaknesses and anxieties and failures of sin he has a place for us there.
[20:36] Remember in Colossians chapter 3 we learned that by faith in Jesus Christ we have died with him we have been raised with him we are now seated with him in the heavenly places.

You have died your life is hidden with Christ in God and when Christ who is your life appears you also will appear with him in glory.
It's not super spiritual or spooky this is essential to living a good life and taking joy in the ordinary things in life and because of the Lord Jesus we are in a very different place to face death because the most important thing about facing death is knowing that you are going to Christ having that conviction of the living hope through the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead.
That's why the Christian church has worked for centuries on the resources of how to die well. It's called in Latin as moriendi the art of dying.

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It doesn't mean dressing in black and closing the curtains and having a bit of a morbid think it's the opposite it's how we die into life and some of these practices teach us what to expect what the unique temptations are as you face death and dying how you feel beyond the redemption and grace of God how you need his forgiveness or how you don't need his forgiveness these practices teach us how to reaffirm our faith how to hold on to the Christ and his cross how to meditate on the promises of the blessing of being in Christ's presence what leave taking means and how to express forgiveness to others which prayers become very meaningful and resolving to die in Christ and to die well I've said this before but I when I go for walks I go through the local graveyard it's a great place to walk and there's one grave that I go by that it makes me smile every time I go by it's a she's a godly woman who it was my privilege to know and to bury there and when I last visited her as she was dying in VGH very close to the end
[22:57] I sat by a bedside and I said to her are you ready to go she said I was ready to go a month ago I'm so ready now and that night she died in the Lord so our lives they really are in God's hands every day is a gift of God to grow in love for him and love for others he doesn't owe you three score years and ten it's only because of his mercy that you are alive so the best way to prepare for a good death is to follow Christ in this life through his death and resurrection so that when it comes we'll be able to look death in the face and ask the same question the apostle asks oh death where is your victory amen now Mark is are you as Such drawings do you have me to consider the community who is so I thought in the end my dreams and I thought

I thought that when it comes to rabbit and derniers you are you you so I know if church came on this and you have

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