

Joyful, Joyful: Knowing Enjoyment

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[0 : 00] I really love the Rocky movies. Just love them. Except for Rocky V, of course, which, as we all know, was a complete abomination. But the last movie, Rocky VI, was actually pretty good.

It was called Balboa. And there's a scene, so you've got this aging Rocky. Do we know at all what I'm talking about now? The Rocky movie, Sylvester Stallone. Fantastic. Yeah, it's great stuff. So there's an aging Rocky, and he's about to begin his training for one last fight against a much younger world champion.

And the trainer sits Rocky down, and let me just quote what the trainer says to him to begin the training session. He says this, You know all there is to know about fighting, so there's no sense in us going down that same old road again.

To beat this guy, you need speed. You don't have it. And your knees can't take the pounding, so hard running is out. And you've got arthritis in your neck, and you've got calcium deposits on most of your joints, so sparring is out.

So what we'll be calling upon is good old-fashioned blunt force trauma. Horsepower. Heavy-duty cast-iron pile-driving punches that will have to hurt so much they rattle his ancestors.

[1 : 16] Every time you hit him with a shot, it's got to feel like he tried kissing the express train. When I read Ecclesiastes chapter 9 this week, and actually the other chapters as well, I thought about this scene in the Rocky movies.

I love this scene. Because it feels like every week, the preacher in Ecclesiastes, whose technical name is Kohileth, he hits us hard with the very harsh realities of life.

He wants us to think about death, and he wants us to think about pain, and he wants us to think about the seeming meaninglessness of it. The stuff we don't like to think about, but Kohileth does not let us tune this stuff out.

He doesn't want us to ignore these realities, and that's why each chapter, he comes out swinging with very confronting words. And this week again, he says, life is so unjust.

Life seems so unjust. And he's basically doing that because he's trying to ask us the question, how are you going to cope with that? What's your strategy for dealing with the unjustness of life? And he gives two examples.

[2 : 23] He talks specifically about the injustice of death, and then later more generally, the injustice of chance and time. So just to get the ball rolling, let's look at those two.

First, the injustice of death. And let me remind you of verses two to six here. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices, him who does not.

As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil. For the living know that they all die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them has forgotten their love, their hate, their envy.

They have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun. It doesn't matter who you are, you're going to die. No matter how you've lived, clean, unclean, good, bad, death awaits us all.

And you'll be forgotten. We talked about it the first week, chapter one, didn't we? In a hundred years, no one will probably know your name. Your grandkids, I don't know the names of my great-grandparents.

[3 : 33] Your great-grandchildren won't know your name if you have them. Fifty years later, your children's names probably won't be remembered. They'll be gone. Verse six is very interesting, don't you think?

Your love, hate, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, envy, amen. Now remember, this is life under the sun, his perspective, life under the sun from a very horizontal perspective.

So Kehilleth here, the preacher says this is a great evil and it confronts all of us and he asks us, how are you dealing with it now? The second injustice is a bit more general.

He tries to get his head around what can seem like in his mind some quite random misery in life. Verses 11 and 12, that's what that's about there.

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not 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.

[4 : 39] For man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like a bird that is caught up in a snare. So the children of man are snared in an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

As I was writing this this week, I read that, and I opened up the CNN app on my phone, and I read the headlines. Let me tell you what they were.

Gunman kills self in on-air slang, after on-air slang. 9-11 survivor known as Dust Lady dies of cancer. Holmes sentenced to 3,000 years in prison for theater shooting.

White House jumper killed after pulling knife in court. Five high-profile hypocrites. Amelia Robinson, civil rights leader, dies. Josh Duggar enters rehab. Echoes of Katrina impact Louisiana.

ISIS wants to erase history. Folks, terrible things happen. Terrible things happen all the time, constantly.

[5 : 39] Echo Hillith says, this is what he wants to get across. There's no 100% safeguard against these terrible things. For him, life under the sun, it feels like a lottery.

Look at verse 11 again. You can be fast, and strong, and wise, and intelligent, and knowledgeable. You can be all of these things, and your life can go completely sideways.

You can make fantastic choices about your health, and get cancer. You can invest really well, and lose it all. Your tomorrow, folks, is unknown.

Your life can't be safeguarded against it, and there are no guarantees of your success. No matter how privileged you are, your life can be shut. It can be cut short very quickly.

So how's everyone doing this morning? Everyone's all right, then? Good? Happy to be here? Isn't it great to be in church, eh? Fantastic stuff.

[6 : 40] So how do I summarize? How do I summarize what he's been saying here? Well, how about this? How about this as a summary? To think you're in total control of your life? That's a fallacy. It's a mistake.

You can possess lots of wonderful attributes, beauty, and strength, and intellect. But no, these human abilities are no assurance of success. Because of two things. Two things he mentions that you cannot escape.

Verse 11. I'll read it to you again, in case you didn't pick it up. Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, the battle to the strong, bread to the wise, riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge. But time and chance happen to all of them.

Time and chance. Time, if you live long enough, folks, time will always win. Time will take your health. It'll take your intellect. It'll take your beauty. Chance, life can be going swimmingly.

And something unexpected is just thrown up. It just throws your life up in the air. Despite your planning, a diagnosis, or a job loss, or a market crash, or an accident, or a broken relationship can throw everything into disarray.

[7 : 44] A good life can be ruined in a day through, maybe it's a poor decision. Or maybe it seems like just really bad luck. Now remember what Kohilleth is trying to do here.

Kohilleth is trying to do. He is confronting us with what? Real life. He's confronting us with what a real life actually looks like, and he says, what are you going to do about it?

How will you cope with this very real life? That's the end of part one, part two. In terms of answering the question, how do we cope with the lottery of life, he gives two answers.

There is an ultimate answer, but that doesn't come until chapter 12, and I believe Dr. Packer is speaking on that next week. So there's an ultimate answer that's hinted at in this passage, and I'll come to that.

There's an ultimate answer, but there is also a subordinate answer, and we shouldn't skip over that subordinate answer. So let's have a look at that subordinate answer, sort of like it's the B-side answer.

[8 : 46] This is verses 4, and in 7 to 10, let me remind you of what they are. Verse 4, But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

In 7, 8, and 9, Go, eat your bread with joy, 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 your wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that you've been given under the sun, because this is your portion of life, and you're tall at which you toil under the sun. Whatever you find your hands to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom and shield to which you're going. Let's look at verse 4 first. A living dog is better than a dead lion.

Life is hard, but if you're alive, that's a good thing. It's good to be alive this morning, people. A living dog is better than a dead lion.

A lion, a very noble animal, back in the days, ancient nearest, regarded as very noble. Still today, you go to the zoo, the lion enclosure tends to be a bit of a highlight. A dog, better than a living dog, better than a dead lion.

[9 : 56] Don't think, when you read this passage, don't think fun-loving, dog-loving Vancouver here. Think dog-hating ancient nearest, and still, I used to live with a Muslim guy, and we talked about pets one day.

He couldn't stand the idea of a dog in the house. He said there was this whole regime you went through if a dog touched a plate. I can't quite remember, but it involved putting it in dirt twice, and rubbing it with dirt twice, and then cleaning it three times or something.

I just thought they couldn't get his head around the fact that Vancouverites had dogs in their homes. So back in the Middle East, the dogs unclean, scavengers, they eat dead things.

Second Kings, if you remember, dogs ate Jezebel when she died. In Revelation 22, dogs are lumped in with the worst of humanity. 22 verse 15, outside, it says in this passage, outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves practicing falsehood. better than a living dog and a dead lion. So he's saying, if you're alive, even if your life is really tough, even if you have the life of a dog, it's still better than being dead.

[11 : 09] A living Aaron Roberts is better than a dead Frank Sinatra. Better than any cool person you can think of that's dead. Now remember, his perspective here is life under the sun.

It's life lived quite horizontally. So if you're alive here this morning, well done. And he says, live it up. Don't be a cynic.

Don't give up on joy. So this is the subordinate answer to the ultimate answer of how we cope with the lottery of life. Verse seven begins with an order, you see. An imperative. It says, go.

Go do something. And what does it say? Go and do? It says, go eat well. Drink good wine.

Obviously, don't make this your life verse. The Bible has other things to say about wine and food. But do enjoy these things. You know what these things are? Good wine and good food. These are not guilty pleasures. These are godly pleasures.

[12 : 10] Life can feel like a lottery, he says. You never know when it can all go sideways. So enjoy the goodness that there is in life. They did a study, OECD countries, about who ate, spent the most time eating and drinking and the most time sleeping.

Any ideas on who the number one country was? France. French. They spend more time sleeping than any other country in the OECD.

And eating and drinking time? Twice as much time per day than Canadians. This is not something a New Zealander would normally say.

But we need to be more like the French. So, folks, eat and drink well. What else does he mention? Eight.

First eight. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. This is, put on your party clothes. Put on some nice aftershave and some perfume and dance.

[13 : 11] Verse nine. If you're married, make love. Enjoy each other. Verse 10. If you have a job, work hard and do it with all you can. Let me just jump on Facebook for one second to give you an example of this.

Okay, here we go. So a friend of mine, Ryan Cook, he actually was an intern at this church. He posted this on Facebook just last night. Let me read it to you. Because thinking this morning about a wonderful man I met last night at the pub.

He was a tradesman, almost 50 years old, and has been a plasterer that makes plaster designs of walls and ceilings for 29 years. He absolutely loved his work, and for him it was an art form.

He poured his heart and soul into making spaces look beautiful. It was such a lovely thing to see a man who never worked a day in his life because he so deeply loved his trade.

He had the sense that his work was more than putting plaster on walls. It was about beauty. So if you have a job, work hard. Do it as well as you can.

[14:14] So how do we summarize all this part here? Well, folks, throw yourself at the task of life with energy and confidence because in the end you can't fill that life with joy in retrospect.

You know, you can't fill it up in retrospect. This is a beautiful and bountiful world. We're designed to enjoy its pleasures, make the most of it. Now, of course, there is a danger in this, and the danger is that we make these good things, these good things that God has given us, we make them ultimate things.

We take the good things that God has given us, and we make them the foundation of our identity and our self-worth. And, of course, this is a trap of 21st century West. Our life becomes all about our job, or this one relationship or sensual pleasure, and, of course, that's idolatry.

And eventually you'll discover that these good things, good things but not ultimate things, you'll discover that they can't satisfy your soul. They can't bear the weight of ultimate things.

Only God can be the ultimate thing in your life. And these pretenders, these good things, will actually turn on you. If you make your career the ultimate thing in your life, and you fail it, that career can't forgive you.

[15:33] It's not like your heavenly Father can forgive you. No, that good thing, that you've made an ultimate thing, that will haunt you. It will not let you go, and it will make you feel guilty for failing.

This is why the enjoyment passages in Ecclesiastes, and there's lots of them, the enjoyment passages in Ecclesiastes, when he says, go, enjoy your life, they always keep God at the center. So it's not joy, uncoupled from the giver of joy. Let me read a few examples to you. Ecclesiastes 2, 24. There is nothing better for a person, that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil, for this is from the hand of God.

Chapter 3, 13. Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure, and all his toil. This is God's gift to man. 520. God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

And 9, what we just read, God has approved, see the interesting word, God has approved that you get joy from eating and drinking. Folks, life is bitter, and life is sweet.

[16:45] Enjoy the sweetness. It's from God. And enjoy it with a grateful heart, and make sure it has its right place in your heart though. So, life is short, and it can feel random, and it's riddled with suffering.

How do we cope? Kohelet says, enjoy the stuff you can. It's good. It's good practical advice, isn't it? It's wonderful advice. But it is a subordinate answer.

It's not the big answer. Now, the big answer comes in chapter 12. You'll hear about that next week. But our passage does hint at it though. Have a look at verses 14 to 16 here.

Kohelet tells a little story. It's a very interesting story. There was a little city with a few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it, but there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city.

Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might. Through the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. So the preacher of Ecclesiastes tells a story.

[17:55] A little city is being overrun by this huge king, and this man in the city saves it miraculously, saves the city, and he is forgotten. He is ignored. And the passage uses the word despised.

This man is intentionally forgotten, intentionally pushed aside. Now the story doesn't tell us why this guy was sidelined. I can guess it was something to do with people not wanting to give up power, lose power.

Now the story here, it's not a prophecy, but it is a shadow of the ultimate answer to life's hardships. Here's what I mean. Let me put it this way.

Whose name comes to mind when you hear of a good man, full of wisdom, who became a savior, but whose life and teaching were rejected? Again, this is not a prophecy of Jesus. But there is an echo, isn't there? It is a pattern that points forward to the ultimate answer to what is a seemingly meaningless life.

[18 : 57] Meaningless life. So as New Testament Christians, we know there is a savior who can rescue us from the meaninglessness of life, who can walk with us through the darkness of trials, who can save us from the ultimate indecency of death, a savior who the world rejects, who the world chooses to forget about.

And why would they do that? Because we love the temporary over the permanent. But the good news is, folks, and I'm finishing here. The good news is, on the cross, our sin of forgetfulness, God poured it out on Jesus, and he paid the price for our forgetfulness, for our rejection, so that we could know forgiveness, so we could know comfort from pain in life, so we could enjoy life's sweetness, we could enjoy the good gifts of God, but not let them overtake our hearts, so we could live under the sun and experience the hardness of life under the sun, but have the eternal perspective as well. Have the eternal perspective over all of that. And no peace and no contentment in the midst of life, which can be very unpredictable. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[20 : 47] Amen.