

Death & Joy (PM)

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[0 : 00] And each week, the writer of the book, he hits us with just the hard realities of life. Like, you're going to die. Life is hard.

And it's like he's trying really hard to bring up all the things we don't want to talk about. And when he talks about them, he talks about them with such starkness, with such blunt force.

And this week, we have a familiar thing. And this week, again, he's saying, life just seems really unjust. How are we going to cope with a life that seems so unjust?

And he talks about two things that he finds particularly unjust. First one is death. And the second one is the randomness of misery. So first one, death.

And the second is the randomness of misery. So let's look at these two things. So the first one, the injustice of death, verses 2 to 6.

[0 : 59] You see it there. It's going to pop up on your screen here. It is the same for all. Since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked. Good, evil, the clean, the unclean.

This is an evil that is done under the sun. The same happens to all. The same is we're going to die. Verse 5. The living know they will die. It doesn't matter who you are.

You're going to die. It doesn't matter how you live. Good or bad. Clean, unclean, religious or not.

Death is coming down the pipeline. And how are you going to deal with that?

How do you live now with the knowledge of that? Knowing that it could come at any point. The second injustice is a bit more sort of general. He tries to get his head around how pain and misery and stuff just comes out of nowhere into our life.

That's verses 11 and 12. Let me remind you of it. 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.

[2 : 01] But time and chance happen to all. For man does not know his time is like fish that are taken in an evil net, like birds caught in a snare, etc.

Evil comes and it falls suddenly upon us. Folks, hard, difficult things happen to us. And sometimes they come out of nowhere.

That's what he's saying. He's saying that the preacher in Ecclesiastes is saying there's no 100% safeguard against these things. You can be fast or strong or wise, intelligent, knowledgeable.

You can be all of those things and still your life can go totally sideways. You can make really great choices about health in your life and still get cancer. You can invest wisely and lose it all.

The preacher is wanting to remind us that your tomorrow is unknown. The good life, it can't be completely safeguarded.

[3 : 02] There are no guarantees for success. Your life can be cut short quickly. Or it can be profoundly negatively impacted by something that just comes out of nowhere.

Now, of course, of course, you're thinking, but surely there's like cause and effect. Of course there's cause and effect in the universe. You know, you should eat healthy.

That's probably better for you. But the universe is not a blind machine. The universe is governed.

So whilst there is cause and effect, God can, if he wants, he can allow chaos into your life.

And mostly we don't know why this happens. But perhaps it's to remind us that we are not gods. We are mortals. And we don't have as much control over our lives as we think.

Okay, so how do we summarize everything so far? Well, how about this? To think you're in total control of your life, it's a mistake. Like, you can possess lots of wonderful attributes, beauty, strength, intellect.

[4 : 07] But these human abilities, they do not assure success. And the reason they don't assure success is because of a couple of things he mentions right at the end of verse 11 there.

All right, let me remind you of it again. I saw under the sun the races not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor the bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge. But time and chance happen to all.

Time and chance. Time, folks. If you live long enough, time always wins.

It will take your health. But time will eventually take your intellect. Time will take your beauty. For example, this might come as a shock to you, but I was actually a lot more attractive 10 years ago. Just let that sink in for a moment. Folks, time. Time always wins, right?

[5 : 16] And chance. Time and chance happen to everyone. Chance. Randomness. Your life can be going fantastic. And just something, just something happens. Unexpected.

Constrought up in the air. You know, a diagnosis. A job loss. A market crash. An accident. A breakup. A pandemic. A worldwide pandemic. A pandemic. How do you, how do you account for this?

And how do you, what do you do to stop this? I mean, look, folks, you know, if you're like 18 years old and you're watching this, the reason you can't go to your school formal list, your school ball, your school prom, is here.

The reason that can't happen, bats, bats, bat diseases. The reason you got laid off, bats. Bats crashed million dollar industries.

It's so bizarre. Life is so weird sometimes, right? A good life can be ruined in a day. A moment of bad luck. You know, a poor decision. So let's just, again, I just want to remind you, what is the preacher trying to do here?

[6 : 25] He's not trying to depress you. He's just, he's just confronting us with what, with what real life actually looks like. He is saying, this is the reality of the universe.

So, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to cope, given that that's what life actually looks like? Well, this is important here.

In terms of answering the question, how do we cope with a life that feels like a bit of a lottery? The preacher in Ecclesiastes gives us two answers. He actually gives us two answers. The ultimate answer is chapter 12.

And we're going to preach on that next week. So there's an ultimate answer, but there's also a subordinate answer. There's like a B-side answer, which we shouldn't skip over, even though it doesn't sound very spiritual.

But it's what chapter 9 talks about it. So how do we cope with the fact that we can't control the universe? We might die young. Terrible things can come out of nowhere and mess our lives up.

[7 : 28] How do we cope? Well, here's the answer that chapter 9 gives us. It's the subordinate answer. It's the B-side answer. It's verses 4 and 7 to 10.

So I'll read those. But he who is joined with all the living has hope for a living dog is better than a dead lion. So that's a good one. Okay. 7 to 10.

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 oil not be lacking on your head. Enjoy your life with a wife you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun.

Because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your heart. Do it with all your might. But there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom to which you are going.

Okay. So you're going to die, he says. So what do you do? How do you cope? Here's his advice. First, in verse 4, he says, a living dog is better than a dead lion.

[8 : 31] What does that mean? Life can be hard. Life can be really hard. But at least you're alive. You are actually alive. And that's a good thing. A lion is a very noble animal.

I've seen lions in the wild in Africa. They're incredible. A dog. It's saying here a dog. Don't think, you know, dog loving Vancouver dog. Think Middle Eastern dogs, which certainly back in the days and still somewhat to this day, they're unclean.

They're scavengers. They eat trash. In the Book of Kings and the Bible, dogs ate Jezebel. So there's a fun fact for you. In Revelation 22, dogs are lumped in with the worst of people.

In Revelation 22, verse 15, outside are. So who's outside? On the outside, there's the insiders and the outside. Outside are dogs, sorcerers, the immoral, murderers and idolaters.

So dogs aren't thought of very highly here. But a living dog is better than a dead lion. So it's saying even if your life is tough, even if you have the life of a dog, it's better to be alive than dead.

[9 : 37] And then he follows it up and saying, so if you're alive, you might as well live it up. Don't be a cynic. Don't give up on joy. Think back to verse 7 here.

It begins with the imperative. I think it's the only imperative in here. It's an order. The preacher says, go. Go do what? Go eat well. Go drink good wine.

Now, don't make this your life first, I don't think. The Bible has other things to say about wine and food. But enjoy these things. These are not guilty pleasures.

These are godly pleasures. Life can feel like a lottery. We never know when it's going to go sideways. So enjoy the goodness in your life that's right there, right in front of you, present to you right now.

Enjoy it. You know, there was a study done about the habits of people in the OECD countries about 10 years ago. They discovered the French, the French spend twice as much time eating and drinking than Canadians.

[10 : 43] And this is not something a New Zealander would normally say, but we need to be more like the French. Eat well. Drink well. What else does he mention?

Verse 8. Let your garments be always white. Let oil not be lacking on your head. It's put on your party clothes. Throw on some aftershave. Dance.

Verse 9. If you're married, make love. Enjoy each other. Verse 10. If you have a job, work hard. Do it as well as you can. How do we summarize this? Throw yourself at the task of life.

Find joy in it now. Because at the end of your life, you can't fill up your life with joy in retrospect. Life is, there's lots of beauty and this world is bountiful.

We're designed to enjoy the pleasurable things in it. So make the most of that. And you might be saying, but isn't, haven't you just described hedonism?

[11 : 45] Isn't that just hedonism? Well, it's different to hedonism. And the reason it's different to hedonism is because you know where these joys come from.

All of the goodnesses of life, we have to see them as gifts from God. And throughout Ecclesiastes, it makes sure that we know that. So verse 7 again. Go eat your bread with joy.

Drink your wine with a merry heart. For God has already approved of what you do. So if you don't do that, if you don't undergird all these experiences of joy as with the knowledge that they're actually gifts from God to you, then these joys can become gods themselves.

And that's the danger. We make these good things, these really ultimate things. We take these good gifts of God and we make them the foundations of our identity and our worth and all of that.

So our life becomes all about our job or all about our relationship or all about sensual pleasure. And that is idolatry. We know that. Now, eventually we'll discover these things just can't satisfy our souls.

[12 : 51] Which is why in Ecclesiastes, the preacher in Ecclesiastes always keeps God at the center of these joys. So let me read a few passages from Ecclesiastes.

2.24. 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. 3.13.

Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil. This is God's gift. 5.20. God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

But in today's passage, God's approved that you get joy from eating and drinking. It's great stuff, isn't it? Let me finish up. You might say, yes, but what about Jesus?

What about Jesus? Does Jesus change anything here? Well, we know that Christ has a beautiful life planned for us in eternity.

[13 : 54] We live here right now. This is where we are right now. And it can be a confusing time. But don't let the complexity of this moment of your life push you away from following the path that Jesus has for you.

Remember, Jesus knew pain. He knew agony. He knew betrayal. But you could also find him feasting. You could also find him at parties with friends. So, final thing I'll say is this.

Folks, life is bitter. It is sweet. Enjoy the sweetness. It's from God. And enjoy it with a grateful heart. Amen.