

# Certainty, Opportunity, Striving After Wind

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I think today, isn't today like the closing ceremony of the Rio Olympics? Do I have that right? I've only been half paying attention, so I don't know. Several really amazing superstars in the Olympics, even for someone half paying attention like me, I know the names, names like Usain Bolt, Michael Phelps, Simone Biles, these individuals who really, I mean, there's lots, obviously lots of gold medals to give out, but these individuals just seem like they just cannot fail, right?

They're individuals who just excel above and beyond their peers. There are a handful of Olympians who have spent years training for this moment, right?

But not everyone succeeds like that. There are some individuals who are going to utterly fail on the international stage. So here's one, Ilya Zakharov is a Russian diver on the men's three-meter springboard.

Now, four years ago in the 2012 London Olympics, this man won the gold medal. So you'd think expectations are high going into 2016. Well, it turns out he struggled a little bit, just barely made it into the semifinals.

But, you know, this is a professional diver, someone who has done this all of his life. And so let's suppose you're sitting, you were sitting on your couch this week, you're watching the diving semifinals, and Zakharov has had several successful dives, is preparing for round four of the semifinals.

[ 1 : 25 ] And let's suppose you've got a friend of yours sitting on the couch next to you, and your friend says, hey, I'll bet you \$100 that this Olympic gold medalist is going to totally fail at his dive to the point he isn't even going to enter the water headfirst.

Now, you take that bet any day of the week, right? You'd think a gold medalist would be able to handle that. Well, if you did, you'd be out \$100. Because in round four of the semifinals, Ilya Zakharov made just the slightest error on the run-up to his dive.

He mistimed his jump, his knees buckled, and he ended his forward two-and-a-half somersault two twists with a spectacular belly flop into the diving pool. Zakharov was eliminated effectively from the competition by this when the judges awarded his dive a score of 0.00.

So this certain thing, this guaranteed thing, failed to take place. Now, this might surprise us. This doesn't happen a lot.

But really, this would not surprise at all the man who wrote most of the words in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. This is a man who refers to himself as the preacher or the teacher, depending on your translation.

[ 2 : 35 ] And this is an individual who's been asking the question of how we can find the good life, how we can get ahead in life. Is there some sort of guaranteed way of getting lasting gain, lasting success, that cannot be taken away from us?

And the preacher, what he has been doing over the course of the book is he has been deconstructing every promise of lasting gain, every offer of the good life that our world, that our culture has been marketing to us and has been selling us?

We have much less control over our own success than we like to think that we do. What we're going to find in Ecclesiastes chapter 9 is this, that the good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future.

The good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future. So here's how the preacher warns us in chapter 9, verses 1 through 12.

So Ecclesiastes chapter 9, verses 1 through 12, about midway through your Bibles. He writes, 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.

[ 3 : 50 ] Whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Both are before him. 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 and him who does not sacrifice.

As the good one is, so is the sinner. And he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil, and all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

Also the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live. And after that, they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion, for the living know that they will die.

But the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten, and 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. Go. Eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

[ 4 : 57 ] 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 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 your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol to which you are going. 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 them all.

For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time when it suddenly falls upon them.

This is the word of the Lord. So what we see here is that the good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future. You and I encounter this reality almost immediately, and we encounter when we read verse 1.

All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God, whether it is love or hate, man does not know, both are before him.

[ 6 : 16 ] So just a few minutes ago, we were singing about our God. We were singing the words, before the dawn of time you spoke and all creation came to be. Your power is unequalled.

And the preacher, he agrees. He agrees that not only does God possess the unequalled power to create the universe, to create everything that we see, everything under the sun, so to speak, but that God also has final and ultimate authority over everything that takes place in his creation.

So we see, in verse 1, the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. They are under his ultimate authority and control. We like to think that we are the ones who have control over the future.

That by being especially unusually righteous, by meeting God's expectations of what my relationships should look like, by meeting other human beings' expectations of what my relationships should look like, that by being especially wise, skillful, with good judgment, we like to think that if we do all of that, if we plan our financial future effectively, that we're going to have money in our retirement accounts for sure.

We're going to enjoy a long and happy time in our golden years. We like to think that if we say or do the right things, that we behave in our relationships the right way, that our boss or our neighbor or our parents or our children or our spouse, that they're going to approve of us.

[ 7 : 43 ] That they're going to love us. But it is God, it is not our righteousness, it is not our wisdom, that ultimately determines the outcomes of our efforts.

Verse 1 he says, whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Both are before him. So there are many possible outcomes to our actions.

And you and I, we have no way of guaranteeing what outcome is going to happen. We have no guarantee of knowing what tomorrow is going to bring. Will our efforts produce love and approval and success for us?

Or will they only produce hatred, criticism, failure for us? We face multiple possibilities. But we don't know which are going to come to pass.

Last week we were reminded in Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verses 6 and 7 that man's trouble lies heavy on him for he does not know what is to be.

[ 8 : 51 ] For who can tell him how it will be? The preacher is reminding us once again, there is no certain and guaranteed outcome in your life and in my life except for one thing.

There is one exception to this rule. Verse 2. 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 and him who does not sacrifice.

As the good one is, so is the sinner and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. So regardless of how righteous or wicked you are, regardless of how good or how bad you are, regardless of how religious or irreligious you are, regardless of how honest or dishonest you are, regardless of what you and I think that we deserve, there is exactly one certain, one guaranteed outcome awaiting you and me.

And this singular outcome brings ruin. It brings ruin to everything and to everyone. It is so bad that human beings like you and me, we will do and we will say just about anything to cope with it. Our most common response? Denial. We pretend like it's never going to happen. We never talk about it. Avoid the subject. To look this outcome in the face is to be overwhelmed with grief, overwhelmed with despair.

[10:30] Sometimes we even abandon a good and moral life and just throw ourselves indulging in evil behavior just like the preacher writes in verse 3. This is an evil and all that is done under the sun that the same event happens to all.

Also the hearts of the children of man are full of evil and madness is in their hearts while they live and after that they go to the dead. This one certain, one guaranteed outcome is death.

The good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future because death is the only event that we can safely predict and death short circuits all the good outcomes that we wanted to produce.

Benjamin Franklin is famous for saying in this world nothing is certain except death and taxes.

Right? Five months after he wrote that in a letter to his friends Benjamin Franklin no longer had to pay taxes.

Even that opportunity to pay taxes was denied to him by death. And that's what makes death so difficult for you and for me to bear. Death brings an end to life's opportunities.

[11:42] Death brings an end to life's opportunities. Death brings an end to the hope that comes when opportunities for good are laid out before us. We like having our options available to us, don't we?

I mean, especially in our culture we like having options. Death brings an end to every option. The preacher writes in verses 4 to 5, he who is joined with all the living has hope for a living dog is better than a dead lion for the living know that they will die.

So why, it's a funny expression, why is a living dog better than a dead lion? Right? And what's really odd is his answer for the living know that they will die. It's kind of funny, it seems strange, this awareness of death somehow makes life better for us.

Right? If that seems very, very strange to you, well, go get on our website and listen to the last few weeks of sermons because this is something we've been talking about, how this awareness, how this recognition of death is necessary for wisdom.

It's necessary to live wisely and well in this life. Our opportunities in life, our hope in life are maximized when we are willing to look death in the face, when we see and understand and take to heart that death is coming.

[13:05] That helps us here and now. But, when death finally does come, it doesn't help us anymore. It destroys that advantage that we gained in life because death ends that time of opportunity that we have in this present life.

It brings it all to an end. In verse 5, we read this, The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. And they have no more reward for the memory of them is forgotten.

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. Now, one thing we have to keep in mind is the place of this book in the history of God's work of salvation in the world.

This book was written several hundred years before our Lord Jesus Christ came to the earth as a human being. The preacher is writing before Christ came and he's writing about what to expect after death in that time.

And what we're going to learn in a few minutes is that the preacher has never been given much more hope beyond a shadowy, gloomy existence on the other side of death. And it makes sense.

[14:18] I mean, we in our culture, people, we love to tell one another just so stories in our culture. We hear people say things like, you know, oh, you know, so and so is in a better place now. My old

man's looking down at me from heaven.

But why do we believe any of that? We have no basis for believing any of that apart from God telling us, apart from God's word of revelation. But we tell ourselves just so stories because we're living in denial.

But if we look at this world around us under the sun, we can't draw any conclusions about what's going to happen after death. All we know is our awareness of this world and its activity. We have no reason to think it's going to go on. The preacher expects to no longer be a participant in anything that takes place on earth. He has no more reward for his efforts. He will no longer be remembered by those who come after him. Within a couple generations, his memory is extinguished. He's going to be cut off from the world of the living.

[ 15 : 28 ] He has no more share in all that is done under the sun. Death brings an end to life's opportunities. Death is the one certain outcome in life. It is the one that brings ruin to all other outcomes.

It brings ruin to every attempt to find the good life. So the good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future. Instead, the good life is received by embracing our God-given opportunities in the present.

The good life is received by embracing our God-given opportunities in the present. The preacher writes, beginning in verse 7, 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 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 your might for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol to which you are going. So, verse 7, if you're, for all you foodies out there, this might be your life verse here, right?

[ 16 : 45 ] Eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart, right? You know, enjoy food and drink. You've been given an opportunity to savor them. God has given you an opportunity to enjoy them. God wants you to seize that opportunity.

It's not going to last long. God wants you to take full advantage of that. For all of you who love, maybe you're the kind of person, you're sort of into fashion, into clothing, or maybe you're like all about your health and your appearance and the preacher says, you know what, go for it.

Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy that. This too is a God-given opportunity that we are meant to enjoy. For those of you who are married, the preacher says, you know what, enjoy that too.

Embrace that romance, embrace the sexuality in your marriage, embrace the life of love that you have together. Work for it, cultivate it, enjoy it while it lasts.

Because, as he points out, all the days of your vain life, all the days of your life that is fleeting, that is evaporating away, no marriage lasts forever. You know, that's the meaning of that traditional phrase in the wedding vows, till death do us part.

[ 17 : 56 ] because built into these traditional vows is the reminder that one day you will be separated from your spouse by death. Your marriage is going to dissolve. The preacher says that food and drink, clothing, beauty and health, even your marriage, they are your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

It is a momentary portion given to you during your life. It is an allotment that is soon going to evaporate in death. And so the preacher responds in verse 10 by telling us to embrace, to embrace our momentary opportunities for joy.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom and shield to which you are going. Now, if you look in the inside of your bulletin you'll find there we've got sort of, one of our weekly features is this theological vocabulary section and the word of the day for that is, is this word sheol.

Now, if you were to look in dictionaries such as the New Bible Dictionary, you'd see sheol defined as the word used in the Old Testament for the place of the dead. You know, the meaning of sheol moves between the ideas of the grave, the underworld, the state of death.

Some of your translations will just directly translate it as grave a lot of times. The people of Israel in Old Testament times, they hadn't been given at that point a clear revelation of what to expect

beyond the grave.

[ 19 : 28 ] All they knew is this shadowy world in which your soul remained. Now you're cut off from the world of the living, from the relationships and the opportunities that once gave you hope. Now those opportunities are gone.

Gone with them is the work or thought or knowledge or wisdom that you used to pursue those opportunities. So while we remain in the world of the living, the preacher tells you and me, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.

Carpe diem is sort of the idea here. Seize the day. What he's doing is he's encouraging you and me to evaluate our lives and to consider what opportunities has God given me that I should be acting on right now?

Are there things that I've been putting off? Are there things that I know I should be doing deep down and I've just been kind of procrastinating, putting them off for some sort of nebulous later time when I'll just do it later?

What task has God given for you to do right now to no longer put off to some other time? Now, maybe the Holy Spirit has been working in your heart over the last week, maybe this very morning, maybe there's something that immediately springs to mind.

[ 20 : 51 ] If so, maybe you should be doing just do it. What's stopping you? Do it. Maybe nothing is springing to mind or you're like not quite sure what to do.

so the good news is the Holy Spirit is happy to provide you with a few opportunities for action, for action right here, right now. And so if you were to search the scriptures for verses in which the Holy Spirit is speaking to God's people and encouraging them to seize the day, encouraging them to take action right here, right now, here's some things that you're going to find.

So we're going to do a survey of a few verses. Isaiah chapter 55, verses 6 through 7 is going to be on the screen here. And here the Holy Spirit tells you and me, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

So while we still have the opportunity, we are told to seek, to seek out, to look for the wisdom and words of the Lord. We're told to call on him, to pray to him.

[ 22 : 04 ] We're told to turn away from wrong behavior, from evil thoughts. We won't have the opportunity to do that for much longer. But if we do, the Lord is eager to pardon us of our sin.

The Lord is eager to forgive us for our rebellion against his good and his compassionate authority. Now, if you truly see your rebellion against God the way that he sees it, and if you truly long for justice and a right response the way that he does, you're probably wondering, how can God pardon rebels like me who deserve punishment?

And that's what the Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. He tells us how. He writes, we implore you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And that's wonderful news for us.

God is calling you be reconciled to him. Jesus Christ was the God-man, 100% God, 100% human. He lived a perfect and righteous life, a life of perfect love.

[ 23 : 22 ] And he did it on our behalf. He knew no sin. Not even once. There was not a speck of evil in him. And yet he chose to die on the Roman cross.

And he did that on our behalf to take the punishment that we deserve. That's how God made him to be sin. He was punished for our sins on our behalf, on behalf of all those who are united to him in faith.

And so if you are united to Jesus Christ in faith, if you believe in Jesus Christ, there is no punishment left for you. It's all been taken out on him.

And so when God looks at you, he sees his own righteous son, the righteousness of God himself, and he says, you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, I am pleased with you.

And Jesus Christ, not only did he die on our behalf, but three days later, he rose from the dead in victory so that he can give you new life. And that spells the end of Sheol.

[ 24 : 27 ] That spells the end of the grave for all who believe in Jesus Christ. There is life waiting on the other side of the grave. And in fact, you can even experience that good life.

You can experience a piece of that good life here and now by taking these opportunities. That's why Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 5. He writes, working together with him then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

For he says, in a favorable time, I listened to you. And in a day of salvation, I have helped you. Behold, now is the favorable time.

Behold, now is the day of salvation. If you have put thought into placing your faith in Jesus Christ, if you've put thought into becoming a Christian, if you have counted the cost of following Jesus Christ, now is the day.

Now is the day of salvation. Now is the favorable time to believe. Do not put it off. If not now, when is it going to be? What more does God have to do for you?

[ 25 : 33 ] Has he failed to provide you with something? He has not. He has given you all that you need. You've been given an opportunity to seize what really is the good life. Something that can never be taken away from you.

An opportunity for joy. And for you and I who do believe, the Apostle Paul challenges us in Romans chapter 13. You know the time that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone. The day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Let us walk properly as in the daytime. Not in orgies and drunkenness. Not in sexual immorality and sensuality. Not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

believers. Your time of opportunity is coming to a close. Day is at hand. The day of Jesus Christ's return when he comes to judge the world. When he comes to bring in the new heavens and the new earth where all things are going to be made right.

[ 26 : 50 ] It is time to embrace that good life. It is time to embrace the eternal life that we will experience in the presence of Jesus Christ. Christ. So if we look at this list that Paul gives us, he challenges us.

Are you caught up in a lifestyle of wild partying? Are you caught up in alcohol that you need to get through each and every day? Are you addicted to pornography? Are you engaged in engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage?

Do you often fly into a rage against your family members or friends? Do you resent other people for their success? Do you ridicule them or speak against them behind their backs? It is time to end these things.

It is time to starve off all of these sins. It is time to stop feeding them any longer. It is time to find another believer, someone who is wise, someone who is trustworthy, and to speak with them, ask for help, to ask for regular daily, weekly warning, encouragement, so that you can partner together, so that you at last can make war against those sinful desires which are aiming to destroy you.

Maybe you know of a brother or sister in Christ who is entangled in sinful behavior or sinful habits. Maybe you know a brother or sister in Christ who is failing to do something that they ought to be doing.

[ 28 : 17 ] Well, the Holy Spirit tells you and he tells me in Hebrews chapter 3, exhort one another every day. That means to urge or encourage one another every day. As long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Now is the time. Now is the time to urge one another to obedience. Now, before sin hardens your brother and sister in Christ, before sin deceives them and strangles the life out of them.

Seize the day as long as it is called today. the good life is received by embracing these God given opportunities. God has given these opportunities to you and me.

He hasn't given these commands to you and me to guilt us into doing what we should be doing.

He's given them to us because he wants our joy. He wants you to have the good life. He wants you to have joy here and now and forever.

These opportunities will not be available for long. The window is closing already. The preacher has told you and me to embrace our God given momentary opportunities for joy.

[ 29 : 34 ] And in Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verses 11 through 12 he also tells us this. The flip side of the coin. Disregard any guarantees of success. Disregard any guarantees of success.

Because all these guarantees of success that our friends give us, that our family gives us, that our colleagues and our financial advisors and all those talking heads on TV. All of these guarantees of

success are only going to distract us, they are only going to draw us away from the good life of embracing the opportunities that God has given us.

Verses 11 and 12 we read, 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 them all.

For man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare. So the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

So all of these advantages that we work hard for in life, all these advantages of wisdom, of skill, of effort, are thwarted, they are derailed by unexpected events.

[ 30 : 53 ] Events that seem like chance. That Russian diver, Ilya Zakharov, was thwarted, all his Olympic dreams were derailed by this unexpected, almost chance, unpredictable error.

Are there not, think through the moments of crisis in your life, when your life changed, so many of those moments came when we least expected it, when we could not have predicted it.

In a single moment, all of our plans, all of our progress, are brought to ruin. These events are hidden, they are unknowable, we cannot prepare for them, we certainly can't prepare for all of them, any more than a fish can prepare to escape itself from a dragnet, any more than a bird can prepare itself to avoid a bird trap, you can't do it.

You don't have the ability, the foresight, the wisdom. And that greatest, most certain event of all is death. It is a fate that you and I are completely unable to avoid.

So disregard any guarantees of success. The Apostle James warned us against our certainty, against our confidence in the future. He wrote in James chapter 4, come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

[ 32 : 17 ] Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You, for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance.

All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Now that last sentence, that last verse is something that I've read in James many times in the past and really up until this week, up until studying Ecclesiastes chapter 9, I always felt that it seemed so out of place.

It's like, what does that have to do with what he just said? What's wonderful is that God's word, it helps us to interpret the rest of his word. Ecclesiastes 9 sheds on this verse the light that we need because you and I are warned not to rely on uncertain plans because the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

Instead, we're told we need to hold our plans with an open hand. If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. We're willing to let them go, to let our plans go, to let our guarantees for success go because we know that man does not know his time.

[ 33 : 42 ] Death may snatch all of our uncertainties, all of our guarantees out of our hands, which is why we need to act now, to seize the day, to do what we know we are meant to do, to do it now.

It is not only foolish, James says, it is not only foolish to miss the opportunities for joy, joy, but it is sinful to miss the opportunities for joy that God has given to you and to me.

Do not miss out on the good life that God wants for you. The good life is not gained by constructing a certain and guaranteed future. The good life is received by embracing our God-given opportunities in the present.

God, our Father. Father.