

"Your Best Life Now?"

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[0:00] You know, it's amazing that a little sleepy seaside town in New Haven has the privilege of! having people like Kalou and Gigi be a part of our congregation. I just want to affirm and say we are! you are so welcome to be a part of us and it is a blessing to us to have you with us. So thank you.

And we give thanks to the Lord this morning for that. I want to ask you a question as we begin our exploration this morning into God's Word.

Do you often dream of living a more rewarding life? Do you aspire to a better job, a stronger marriage, a happier home? Do you wish for more gratifying relationships with your family and friends? Perhaps you simply want to accomplish more and leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

How do you break out and experience the full potential that God intended you to have? These are the questions that are on the inside flap of a famous book by Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*. He promises seven easy steps to attitude adjustment to achieve this life. I don't recommend Joel Osteen's answers. You may be surprised by that, but I'll just say it really bluntly. I don't believe he brings a biblical perspective even though he is a pastor. But he raises a question, does he not, that is deep in our own hearts.

[1:50] Don't we want a better life? How do you respond to those questions? Do they resonate with your heart desires? And when we look around the world, wouldn't we say, yeah, we all want that. We all want a better life somehow.

This is a common human desire. We see it, its fingerprints in every aspect of our culture. Think about the social movements that we've experienced in the last six years. Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Greta Thunberg's Fridays for the Future. They're all seeking to say, can't we have a better world than we do now with regard to sexism or racism or environmental and climate change? And you don't have to agree with anything they say or promote to know that you can see that their heart is still the same. A desire for a better world. If you go to Barnes and Noble and go to this help self-help section, you might find *12 Rules for Life* by Jordan Peterson, *Limitless* by Jim Quick, or *Build the Life You Want* by Arthur Brooks and Oprah Winfrey. I think if you look at our political landscape today, you see on both sides, right and left, a desire for a better world. Divergent, even conflicting visions, but the same desire. Can't we have a better world than this?

Even to the point of impatience and frustration and anger that we can't achieve these desired goals. I was thinking about just the prevalence of gyms in our city. You could go to Orange Theory, you can go to circuit training, you can go to Peloton, you can do all on the goodness or badness of any of the particular targets of these things. There may be lots of common grace, goodness, and all of these things. But what I want you to see is all of us, societally and individually, are prone to have this desire. We want a better life now. In our modern progressive world, we have deep expectations that life can get better, that we can work for a better tomorrow. And we need to say it, this hasn't always been true in humanity. There are other cultures and other world views that don't actually believe that life will get better. They don't actually think that there's a better tomorrow.

But we do. And some of that comes from the Christian story, does it not? We understand where this longing comes from. Because the Bible tells us that humanity was created to live in Eden in fellowship with God. We were meant to live in the best of all possible worlds with God providing everything we needed. A world of surpassing goodness that we can't even imagine.

But the reality is that we don't live in that, do we? Instead, we live exiled from it, estranged from God and from His plan and His goodness. And so, we live with this desire for what was lost and a hope

that it might be regained.

[5:19] So, the Bible actually explains why we have this desire. The question is, what do we do with it? And this is actually, I believe, what the author in Ecclesiastes chapter 7 is going to give us.

Answers, I don't know if answers is the right word. Ecclesiastes is hard, and this chapter is particularly hard. I'll just tell you up front. Commentators are all over the place on how to structure it and what the theme is.

So, but we're going to explore it this morning. We're going to go on a journey. Because if you remember, we're in our series in Ecclesiastes, and the writer of Ecclesiastes is exploring what does life look like under the sun that is without reference to God? What does our human experience actually look like, and how do we navigate it? If you want to turn in your pew Bibles, we'll be looking at it in just a minute.

In page 521, we're looking at Ecclesiastes 7. And what he says about this desire for a better life is something I think will surprise and challenge us this morning. So, if you pray with me before we look at God's Word, that'd be great. Let's pray. Lord, we come to You this morning, and I ask that by Your Holy Spirit, Your Word would speak to us. Lord, that You would help us navigate. We confess these desires are true and real. And Lord, we know that in some ways they come from You, and yet we also know that we don't always handle it well. So, Lord, we ask for You to work in us. Lord, I pray that we would sit under Your Word, and I pray for Your help. Lord, that I might speak as I ought. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, I want to begin this morning by actually looking at the middle of the chapter. Verses 13 and 14, I think, in some ways, are the crux of the question that the writer is asking as he looks at this.

[7:37] And so, I'm going to read those two verses and reflect on them for a minute and see the big idea, and then we'll zoom back out and look at the whole chapter in light of that. So, verses 13 and 14 of Ecclesiastes 7 says this, The writer of Ecclesiastes wants us to see this, that our search for the best life now will be a futile and fruitless one. How's that for good news, right? You ready for this?

Here we go. Ecclesiastes. We'll get there in the end because we'll look at the... we'll look at the gospel hope. But what Ecclesiastes is saying is futility and fruitlessness is what we will see.

In verse 13, he asks us to consider. Consider what God has done. It's... the writer is writing with an assumption that there is a God, that He has created the world, and that He is sovereign over everything that happens. And he says, life under the sun is crooked, and God has allowed it or made it that way, and can we change what God has done?

It exposes the cry of our hearts. We want the crooked to be made straight. But if God's sovereign creator God has allowed it to be otherwise, then what do we do with that?

Only God could set it straight, and He hasn't. This is what life under the sun seems to look like. And then in verse 14, he goes on again, and he says, consider again what God has done. He says, hey, if you've had a great day, if you have a day of prosperity, be joyful, be thankful.

[9:39] Take it all in and say, wow, I'm so glad I had a good day. But recognize that in the day of adversity, God has given us both. God has given not what we expect, and not what we want, and certainly not our formulation of our best life now. And he's done this so that we can't always grasp. The end of verse 14 is really interesting. So that man may not find out anything that will be after him. So that we can't grasp, control, somehow manipulate our life in order to get our best life now.

We can't predict it. We can't understand it. And we are confounded in our search for our best life now. So I think this is the core of what he's saying in this passage.

Let's look at the rest of it to expand this, and then we're going to, I promise you at the end, we're going to look at the bigger answer that the Bible gives to this not very encouraging word.

So in verses 1 through 12, we'll see that the writer exposes the futility of seeking a best life now. And in verses 15 through 28, we'll see the futility in seeking to understand what God is doing. And then we'll look at the gospel to speak into this longing. So this is what we're going to do. Verses 1 through 12, let's look at it together. Let's read it as we explore it this morning.

Ecclesiastes 7.1, a good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the

end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness the face of the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. This also is vanity. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools. Say not, where were the former days better than these? Or why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage for those who see the sun, for the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

[12:43] So, in this section, the writer shifts gears in his literary genre. You see that right from the start. What he's written before is sort of an argumentation. He's giving his observations in a more narrative form, and the formatting in the ESV points out, hey, we've just changed formats, right? He's now writing not as narrative of teaching, but as proverbs. And the overall theme of this is the better than principle, right? This is better than that. Six times in ten verses we see...in the first ten verses we see this pattern. And the overall point is that our expectations for a better life in the way that we typically formulate it is vain. Because what he says is what is actually better is far more sobering and not pleasant than what we want. So, he says it's not birth that's better, but death. It's not feasting that's better, but mourning. It's not laughter that's better, but sorrow. It's not mirth, but mourning.

Why does he say this is better? I think he says this because our expectation of the better life, the sense that laughter and life and mourning is really what we all should expect and look for and experience in an unceasing way, it is not reality. It denies the reality of our lives under the sun. This is why verse 3 says that the sadness of heart will make...or the sadness of the...let's look at it. For it is better to hear...nope, that's not the right verse. Here we go. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. What a weird statement in the Bible.

But he says this to say living in reality that includes sorrow is better than living in some utopian, everything's going to be fine, everything's going to turn out kind of way. He says when we live like that, we're like fools. We're like thorns under a cook pot. Now, I didn't know what this meant either, but I think what it means is thorns burn fast, and when they burn, they pop and they crackle. They don't create heat. They don't create the fire you need to cook anything from. So, there...it's just lots of noise and brief pleasure, but no actual substance or usefulness. It's meaningless. It's vanity, which is what we've seen in the book of Ecclesiastes over and over again. It says this is what our pursuit of the Joel Osteen best life now is like. It's fluff. It's not reality. Life under the sun isn't like that. And some of you are feeling relief right now because you've lived under the pressure. You've felt that everyone else is saying, this is what we should be going. This is what our lives should look like. And you just think, my life doesn't look like that. My marriage is falling apart. My children are estranged. My physical suffering has prevented me from pursuing my dreams.

[16:09] Death and loss have been more milestones in my life than success and joy. This is life under the sun. And the writer says, this is the better life, to acknowledge the reality that life under the sun is not our best life now. It is actually difficult. Verses 7 through 12 then go on and explain what happens in our hearts as we face this failure of our best life now to give us what we want.

Verse 7 talks about the corruption, how even the wise can be corrupted by the power of money. Verse 8 says that our insistence on having things now is an empty and futile one. And verses 9 talks about frustration and anger. When we can't get what we want, we become more and more impatient and demanding and judgmental and angry because we want to grasp and take hold of this thing that we desire so much. This hope for a better life now betrays us and it reveals all sorts of ugliness in our hearts.

It's like Anna in Frozen meeting Hans. Do you remember Hans the prince? For the first time in forever, I'm going to have who knows what, the best life ever, right? Spoiler alert, he was using her. He betrayed her and left her to die in the end saying, if only there were someone out there who loved you. The broken promise of a better life is such a bitter betrayal that it makes us cynical and angry and despairing and frustrated people. And the writer of Ecclesiastes wants us to say it is better for us to live in reality than to live with this empty dream that then twists and destroys our souls.

Our life is in a crooked world. And we do cry out, God, can even you change this? We don't understand what's going on. And that's actually what leads us to the second half of this chapter. Because in verses 15 through 18, we see him explain the futility of actually trying to understand what God is going on. What is wisdom? And what good is wisdom in the world?

[18:53] And overall, while he says, look, wisdom is not terrible. There is goodness in wisdom. He's saying wisdom is extremely limited. And his focus on it is actually in its vanity, that even wisdom cannot give us a better life now. And if you remember, as we've looked at the biography or the supposed biography of the writer of the... He's experienced it all. He's explored the best life now in all sorts of different ways, in pleasure, in power, in religion, in wealth. He's explored it, and he's seen that it's empty. And he thinks maybe wisdom... And he's reflecting that even wisdom has not brought what he wanted again. When you look at verses 15, 16, and 17, you see that the pursuit of wisdom didn't produce anything. Though it's good, the wise and the foolish, what happens? They both die. As a matter of fact, he says, sometimes the wisdom... The wise person dies early, and the foolish person flourishes for a while. But in the end, they all die. Nothing good comes out of it. Oh, we forgot to read the passage. Let's read this passage together, and then we can talk about it more. Verse 15,

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourselves too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in the city. Surely there's not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself, you have yourself cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which has been is far off and deep, very deep. Who can find it out?

I turned in my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness, and I find something more bitter than death.

The woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, said the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.

One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

[22:04] The first half was hard. This one's harder. I'll just say it, but I think there's a theme here. Let's see if we can explore it. Wisdom is not the answer to the better life, right? Verse 15 says that.

Verse 16 and 17 talks about. It's weird, right? He says, don't be too righteous. I think what he's saying is if you think that by being wise or by being righteous, you will be able to control the outcome of your life, it won't. You can't do it. And foolishness, which is still no good, it's going to lead to destruction. So both of them are going to lead in the end to a crushing life by pursuing this better life now through these means. And so he's saying, don't pursue them. He goes on in verse 20, and he says, you know, even the wise are not going to be righteous. In verse 23, he summarizes by saying, all this wisdom, it's beyond us. We can't, it's too deep. It's too much. God is

great, and we are, and we cannot do it. We cannot grasp onto it. And then in verses 25 through 28, which is sort of a shocking passage that strikes our ears as incredibly sexist, but I think it's actually, here's what he's doing. He's saying, I sought to understand the scheme of things. Did you see that phrase? It's like four times in those four verses. The scheme of things is, I want to know how things work so I can figure out how to manipulate this for my own good. I think that's what he's saying. He's saying, this is the desire for the best life now. And he uses the imagery, my temptation to pursue that was so compelling. It's like a man in the face of a woman who seeks to entrap him through sexual temptation.

And he's using a common image in the day, writing as a man. He's not speaking about people of all everywhere. And he's using a common, I think what would be a common image in the ancient world that we probably wouldn't use in the same way today to help us see. This was a driving force for him to understand the scheme so that he can control it. It was like the power of sexual temptation in his heart. But in the end, it was fruitless. And it produced nothing. Because sinners fall into the trap. And then he says, and I look for a righteous man. And he uses these phrases, right? One in a thousand or none at all. One in a thousand in men and none in women.

But I think what he's really saying is, what we would say today is, that's like one in a billion. It basically means it's statistically inconsequential. Nobody will do this. And the reason why I think that's what he's saying is because that's what verse 29 says. Verse 29 says, God made man upright.

That is, God made human beings to walk with him. But we have all fallen. Men and women. We have all failed to live rightly before God. And this is critical for us because it's not only that we failed to understand the scheme of things, but it has created this problem of, if we're pursuing the best right life now, and yet all of us are sinful, this is doomed from the start.

[25:43] We will never get to what we want. We will never be able to accomplish it. He says, this is the vanity. This is the vanity of our pursuit of our best life now.

There's some wisdom here. Life is best lived facing this reality. Understanding that life includes pain, sorrow, and death. Understanding that we can't control or manipulate our outcome. Even wisdom cannot give it to us. And that this problem isn't just by our finite creatureliness. It is not simply because we are human and weak, but it is because we are rebellious and sinful. Because in our heart of hearts, we reject God and seek to gain our best life now with our own parameters, our own schemes, our own ideas of how to do this. We have rejected God's way, and thus we live in the crookedness of life under the sun. Thanks for coming. It's been great to be here. Let's go.

What do we do? Do we abandon our pursuit of the best life now? Well, yes and no. Here's what the rest of the Bible says. Yes. Yes, we need to abandon our Joel Osteen approach of seven attitude adjustments to get you to your best life now. Or all of the other things that we talked about at the beginning that we tend to put our hope in and think, if we can do these, if we can get these right, then we will get our best life now. Whether it be our social movements or our political movements. And look, this doesn't mean we can't still do good in the world and love our neighbors, but we need to abandon the hope that this is going to create a utopia, that this is going to get us to our best life now.

It won't. So we need to abandon it. We need to abandon the idea that we can be righteous enough to accomplish all these things. We need to abandon our rosy but ungrounded optimism.

And we need to admit the danger of our insistent utopianism. So yes, we need to abandon our project. But no, we don't need to abandon hope because the rest of the Bible tells us of a better story.

[28:23] Because God is not under the sun. God is the sovereign. He is the one over all. And we look to Him for a life that we long for but cannot achieve on our own. And we look to Him for a better world that we cannot create. And we look to Him for a hope that will fill the void of our futility.

And friends, the good news of the rest of the Bible is that God has acted so that we might not be completely overwhelmed by this emptiness and this vanity, but by what He has done, there is something better. The Bible is a storyline of God's redeeming the world from its brokenness. In Luke chapter 3, verses 4 through 6, he's describing what John the Baptist was announcing about the coming of Jesus. And he said this, As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

God has not abandoned this world to its crookedness forever. We do not need to give in to despair and cynicism because Jesus has come to make the crooked places straight again. The redemption of the world will come because Jesus has come to set the world right. And He has done it in two important ways that leave us in the now and the not yet of our life under the sun, but it's important to get these right. The first one is referring to the passage that Sophia read earlier in Romans. I'm just going to shorten it a little bit and look at Romans chapter 3, verses 21 through 25a. I'm going to read this for you and just talk about it briefly. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith. So, Paul says, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Ecclesiastes says, there is no one righteous, not one. We're in agreement. The problem is the same. Human sinfulness, our rejection of God, we are under God's judgment and condemnation because of that. And there is no best life now in the fallen world. Yet God has come to make that straight, to justify us. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but do you...because we read this word in Romans and we think theological categories, but do you ever think about where else you use justify, right? You justify your intentions when your friends ask, why did you do that? I want to show that it was right, you know? Or in your word processor, it has a justify. I want to line everything up according to a certain margin. So, I'm going to justify everything on the right or on the left or in the middle, you know, whatever. So, what justification means is showing and demonstrating that something is made right.

This is what the blood of Jesus does for sinners like you and me. It justifies us. That is, by paying the penalty, the judgment for our sin, which is death. Jesus takes that death for us and then gives us instead His righteousness, the righteousness that's apart from our performance, apart from the works of the law, according to Romans 3, apart from anything that we do, a righteousness that is Jesus' righteousness in His perfect obedience that is then given to us when by faith we abandon all of our other salvation plans and say, Jesus, You alone can make me right with God. You alone can fix this crooked heart by forgiving me of my sin, by renewing in me a new heart and a new spirit that can actually love and worship God. This is what Jesus has done in His justifying work. He has made something crooked straight, and His primary work right now is doing that in the hearts of men and women. And this is the most important thing. He doesn't make all of our lives uncrooked. We all continue to live under the sun where suffering and death will be a part of it. We can bless the world as much as we can, and it will never become Eden again in our power or in our work.

[33:45] Right? So the first thing that Jesus does, He justifies the hearts of humanity. But then He goes on and He says that He's going to justify the whole world. That is, He's going to make the whole world right again. Romans 8 verses 18 through 21 says this, For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revelation or for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subject to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

So do you see what Paul is saying here? The world was subject to futility, vanity. This is what Ecclesiastes has been saying. Paul agrees. The world is subject to this now. But one day, because God has subjected it to that, it also will then, like us in our hearts, the world along with us will be redeemed.

And you know that the story ends in the book of Revelation where it says that God is going to remake the heavens and the earth. And He's going to take away all of the futility. And do you know what it will be?

It will be our best life forever. Because it will be with God. And there will be no more sin. And no more sickness. And no more sorrow. And no more death. And no more rebellion. No more of the ugliness of our own sinful hearts. And no more of the ugliness in a fallen, broken world. But Jesus has come to redeem it all.

[35:44] And in the end, He will do it. And friends, this is our hope. And this is why a best life now can be a terrible promise and tease if we try to make it happen on our own right now.

But if we see the long view, if we know what God has done, then this changes everything. It means that we can be free from cynicism and despair as we experience the disappointment of living in a fallen world.

The reality of what it looks like. It means that we will not give in to the utopian idealism that is rampant in our world today.

Saying we must now impose our idea of how we're going to make it all right today. Because God is being gracious with this world as well.

He is being gracious with us. And He is being gracious with the world. He has not chosen to come and make everything right. Because when He makes everything right, it will be the end.

[36:51] And in the meantime, what is He doing? He is rescuing more of us from the crookedness of our own hearts. saving us, justifying us, and planting in us the seed, the beginning of our best life forever that is ours with Jesus.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for this Word. Lord, we thank You for Jesus.

Without Him, Lord, this world would be such a difficult, challenging, frustrating, and ultimately despairing place.

Lord, where else do we have to go? You alone have the words of eternal life. Thank You, Lord, for this hope.

Thank You, Lord, that You have come to rescue us from our crooked hearts. And thank You for the promise that You will make straight this crooked world one day.

[38:04] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.