

"Death"

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me once again to the book of Ecclesiastes. We are looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 8 and 9 today, and that's page 522 in most of the Pew Bibles.

Now, we've seen that this middle section of Ecclesiastes, roughly chapters 6 through 10, kind of moves in a very elliptical way. In other words, Ecclesiastes will raise a topic and then sort of leave it and then return to it again and then raise a different topic and then leave that one and return to it later. The organization is a bit more like the book of Proverbs here, where the sayings aren't necessarily neatly structured or arranged, but they're kind of juxtaposed together to sort of make an overall effect.

In Proverbs, you know, those different wisdom sayings are juxtaposed as if to say that a truly wise life weaves together all the strands of wisdom into a whole. A wise person is an integrated person. The wise life is a single life, a whole, one whole thing, and at the center is the fear of God.

Now, Ecclesiastes also is sort of weaving observations together for an overall effect, and what's that overall sense that Ecclesiastes wants to give us? Well, seems to be that...to say that a life considered merely under the sun is a life characterized by contradictions.

Life is fleeting. We can't grasp it. Just when we think we get a purchase on it, just when we think we'll make our mark, it slips through our hands. And wisdom for Ecclesiastes means coming to grips with that aspect of reality. Now, in the first part of chapter 8, turning to our text today, in the first part of chapter 8, Ecclesiastes returns to a theme that we've seen before, the theme of justice and injustice and of living in the midst of imperfect and even at times unjust authorities. So, rather than revisit that theme again this morning, I want to sort of leave that and go a little later in the chapter and pick up at verse 14. And from verse 14 of chapter 8, we're going to continue through the end of the section, chapter 9, verse 10. So, let me pray, and then we'll read, picking up at verse 14. Father, we do ask that You'd be with us now as we consider these words that were written so long ago and yet strike us with such poignancy and relevance and feel so contemporary to today. Lord, help us to understand these things, to ponder them, to wrestle with them, to grow in wisdom, and to see how ultimately they push us and lead us to the deeper truths of You and of Your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray this in His name. Amen. All right, Ecclesiastes chapter 8, picking up in verse 14. The writer says this,

[3:07] There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. 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, 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 in 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. Their love and their hate and their envy have 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. 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 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. Have a great Sunday, everybody.

So Ecclesiastes seems to be making two interrelated observations about life under the sun in this passage. On the one hand, there is no guarantee how your life will go. And on the other hand, there is a guarantee how your life will end. On the one hand, life is very uncertain. But on the other hand, death is very certain indeed. So let's consider both of those things. Consider the uncertainty of life. In chapter 8, verse 14, he says, there's a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. Ask yourself, will living a righteous life guarantee that you experience no suffering? Will living a righteous life mean that you experience no harm, no trial, no heartache? No, says Ecclesiastes. There are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. There are righteous people who are slandered, persecuted, fired from their jobs, wrongly convicted, and sentenced. Living a righteous life is no guarantee of a trouble-free life. And at the same time, Ecclesiastes says, and don't expect that wicked people will always get what their evil deeds deserve in this life. There will be wicked people who are exalted, who are praised, who are put in positions of influence, who live long, trouble-free lives.

[7:34] In a fallen world under the sun, there are no guarantees. Now, maybe today you're feeling discouraged because you've been trying to live a good life, a righteous life. You've been trying to please God with what you think and say and do, but troubles and heartache seem to be unending. And you look around you and you see classmates or colleagues or co-workers who you know are kind of bending the rules or shading the truth or acting selfishly or even maliciously, and it seems like nothing ever goes wrong for them. They seem happy, healthy, healthy, prosperous, and your heart is heavy. Does God see you? Does God care? Why is all this bad stuff happening to you and not to them? Well, in verses 16 and 18 of chapter 8, Ecclesiastes admits that often we can't figure out why God allows it like this. Look again at 16 and 17, when I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that's done on earth, how neither day nor night do ones I sleep. Then I saw all the work of God that man cannot find out the work that's done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out.

And even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. Sometimes the circumstances and ways of God in this life are inscrutable. It would be very easy to be like Job's friends, right, and say, well, bad things are happening to you because God is actually upset at you, and wicked people always get what they deserve in this life. It'd be very easy to trot out those easy truths, right? But the truth is, that's not how it goes always, is it? Ecclesiastes says, I saw all the work of God, and we can't figure it out. But then in response to all that, Ecclesiastes' advice in response to that is pretty surprising. Look at verse 15.

He says, And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat, drink, and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. There are no guarantees in this life. The righteous will sometimes get what the wicked deserve. The wicked will sometimes get what the righteous deserve. And what does Ecclesiastes commend in response? He says, eat, drink, be joyful. In other words, in the midst of life's

uncertainties, make it a practice not to fret but to feast.

Can you feast? Can you feast when life doesn't give you what you think you deserve?

When your toil doesn't amount to what you think it should? When your life doesn't work in a straight line but takes a crooked turn, can you feast? It's easy to fret, isn't it? To get angry, to get bitter, to despair, and then to keep grinding over those same disappointments, the way in which life didn't give you what you think it should have given you. It's easy to see the wicked, the proud, the self-centered, the thankless, getting all the things they deserve, and it's easy to see then complain.

[11:36] But Ecclesiastes comes alongside of us and says, I see it too, the uncertainty of life, the crooked line where it should be straight. But in the midst of that uncertainty, I recommend that you make a practice of feasting. Eat, drink, yes, be joyful.

And this counterintuitive advice shows up in the second point of our passage too. Let's look at that briefly as well in chapter 9, verses 1 through 10. We move from the uncertainty of life to the very real certainty of death. It's the same for all, verse 2 says in chapter 9.

Since the same event happens, and listen, 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.

And as the good one is, so is the sinner. And he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. That is, those who keep their promises end up in the same place as those who break their promises.

Death is the universal equalizer, good or bad, religious or irreligious, your earthly life will end and there's no escaping it. And that is a bit troubling to Ecclesiastes. Look again at verse 3.

[13:03] He says, this is an evil in all that's done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. The hearts of the children of man are full of evil. Now, what he means by that word evil there probably means troubles, strife. He's not saying, your heart's desperately wicked, you're morally depraved. No, I think he's saying, our hearts are full of trouble and turmoil. And then he says, madness, foolishness is in our hearts while we live. We carry all these burdens and after that, we go to the dead.

And from where Ecclesiastes stands, death is a shadow beyond which he cannot see much hope from his perspective. Verse 10 ends with, there's no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, that is the grave, to which you are going. Verses 5 and 6 say, the dead know nothing.

They have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate, their envy have already perished. And forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

So from where Ecclesiastes sits, there's a shadow. And then in light of the certainty of death, Ecclesiastes again, somewhat surprisingly says, go, eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a merry heart, for God's already approved what you do. Let your garments be white, let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life, your fleeting life that He's given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Sounds a bit like resignation, doesn't it? Death's inevitable, so you might as well live as joyful a life as you can. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Carpe diem.

You can sort of hear Robin Williams, can't you? Come in, boys. Carpe. If you've never seen Dead Poets Society, shame on you. Go get it out of the library, get it on Netflix, one of the greatest movies of all time. There's a sense in which Ecclesiastes is a bit resigned here. Remember, this book does not give us all the answers. It wants us to think about deep questions.

[16:05] And note that key phrase at the end of verse 6. What does it say at the end of verse 6? Under the sun. Under the sun. If your life is lived, if my life is lived, merely from a perspective under the sun. Then death is the end. If time and chance and matter and those material, imminent things is all that there is, if we're just living life under the sun, then maybe the best you can do is raise a glass in resignation. Light a bonfire on the beach, party with your friends until the tidal wave of oblivion comes and washes us all away. But is that all there is?

On the one hand, life is uncertain. On the other hand, death is incredibly certain. So, we might as well make the best of it and push those harsh realities out of our minds as best we can. Is that all there is to say? Feasting as an act of just resignation? Is that it?

You know, it's very interesting that during His earthly ministry, Jesus was regularly feasting. In fact, He got quite a bit of criticism for this. People would come to Him and say, you know, the Pharisees fast and the disciples of John the Baptist fast. Why don't you and your disciples fast? Why are you always eating and drinking? It's not what religious people are supposed to do. And at another point, Jesus is talking to the crowds and He says, John the Baptist came eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, he has a demon.

The Son of Man, referring to Himself, the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, look at Him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is saying, this is the criticism you're giving me. Jesus was criticized because He ate, and He drank, and He rejoiced. He didn't fast and look gloomy like the Pharisees.

[18:42] He gathered His friends, a ragtag crew to be sure, and He even gathered some folks who were commonly viewed as sinners and outsiders, definitely not good religious folk. And He sat down with them, and they feasted. And you remember, don't you? You remember what Jesus' first miracle was?

You know, when He sort of says, okay, here it is. I'm ready to make a public statement. It's at a wedding. It's at a feast. It's to keep the party going at the feast.

What's going on? What's going on in the life of Jesus? Was Jesus simply teaching us to eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die? Was He saying, gather round, boys. Carpe diem.

Was His ministry one great act of resignation in the face of life's uncertainties and death's all-too-certainty? Or was it something else?

Well, how does Jesus answer His critics? Jesus the Pharisees fast, and the disciples of John the Baptist fast. Why don't your disciples fast, Jesus, and how does He respond? Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? Do you take new fabric and sew it onto old clothes? Do you take new wine and pour it into old wineskins? What is Jesus saying? New wine, new clothes, a wedding feast.

[20:47] A groom. This isn't the language of resignation. This is the language of reclamation.

God had come to reclaim His lost creation. The groom had come to reclaim His lost bride. She had wandered into the far country. She had forgotten the name of her beloved. Life for her was now just existence under the sun.

With the false freedom of an imminent frame pressing down. And under the curse of sin, creation was subject to death and decay and loss. But in Christ, God has come. In the midst of sadness and death and uncertainty, in a world where the righteous sometimes get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked deserve, that sorrow and injustice are not what is ultimate in reality, that reality is more than just life under the sun. And at the end of the sun. And at the end of His earthly ministry, when Jesus gathered His disciples for the last time, what did He do? He actually taught them how to have a feast. He said, take bread and take wine and break it and eat it and pour it out and drink it. Why? Because that feast would always remind us and always make present to us, always make present to us through creaturely elements just how the groom reclaimed His bride. Just how the Creator reclaimed His fallen creation.

This bread is My body broken for you, Jesus said. This cup is My blood shed for you. You see, when Jesus went to the cross, God was taking the crooked line and making it straight.

At the cross, you know, the only truly righteous one to have ever lived got what the wicked deserve, God's wrath against sin. Jesus died in the place of sinners so that sinners who trust in Him could receive what the righteous deserve, acceptance with God and eternal life.

[23:50] And on the third day, Jesus rose from the grave. His body that had gone down into death came through death into indestructible life. Do you see how significant the resurrection is? Jesus, God incarnate, took our human nature through death into life everlasting. Jesus defeated death in our very humanity so that humans united to Him might also walk through death's door and not be scathed and so that one day death will be no more.

What happened on Easter morning was the great proclamation creation. That death will die and the grave will be empty and creation will be healed.

Not just sort of whisking us away from the material creation, but healing it from the inside out. Healing the very material of it in His bodily resurrection.

creation. Because Jesus, the King of creation, is risen indeed. Creation has been reclaimed. And so, as Christians, we take material things and we feast.

Do you remember the scene near the end of the line, the witch in the wardrobe? When Aslan is on the move and the snow is beginning to melt and the witch is kind of driving her sleigh with difficulty through the slush and the mud. And then she comes upon this little group of creatures, these little woodland creatures, and she stops. She says, what are you doing? And she demands that they stop what they're doing. And do you remember what they're doing?

[25:51] They're feasting. Why? Because Aslan is on the move. Winter is broken and spring has come.

They're feasting because something more true has arrived than the witch's tyranny in the winter of her reign. They're feasting, not as an act of resignation, but as an act of rebellion.

I think it was Kathy Keller who said, their feasting was an act of war. An act of war in the name of the true king. An act of war against death and all of his friends.

Brothers and sisters, life is uncertain.

There will be trials, disappointments, and troubles. And until the king returns, physical death will still be how our earthly sojourn ends.

[27:09] But death is not the end. In the face of these uncertainties and certainties, let us be a feasting people.

Let resilient joy be our theme because Christ is risen and God has won and he will make all manner of things well.

And let our feasting tell the world what is true. That we are not building bonfires on the shore of oblivion, but sin has been defeated and death has been conquered and the king is on the throne and God has reclaimed his creation for good.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the sobering reflections of the book of Ecclesiastes. Lord, that helps us not to just glide through life glibly, taking things for granted. God, thank you for how it lifts our eyes to deeper questions, pushes us towards the deeper answers that your gospel provides.

[28:36] Jesus, thank you for showing us what it really means to feast and why. Help us to be a people, your people, who know what it means to drink this new wine, to wear these new clothes, to know that we are loved by the bridegroom and that your kingdom will know no end.

We pray this in your mighty name, Jesus. Amen.