

“Enjoy Your Life,” Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 (November 6, 2016)

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. 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

PRAY

We are in the book of Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings this fall. And in chapter nine his message is this: enjoy your life. Enjoy life with your wife, enjoy your food and drink, enjoy the work you have to do.

Now my guess is that’s a part of the Christian message few of us have heard at all. That’s not the reputation Christianity has in our culture. Christians are thought of as sour people, judgmental people, repressed people. Most of them are hypocrites, publicly calling for moral living but privately engaging in those very sins. Or, for the few that are sincere, they’re constantly worried about doing something wrong and making the “big guy upstairs” mad at them. So they are walking on eggshells all the time.

But, almost nobody typically thinks Christians are called in the Bible to enjoy the basic things in life. But we are. And in these verses there are three things the Preacher (the author of Ecclesiastes) says we must know if we are going to enjoy our lives: first, we must know our enemy, our hope, and our responsibility.

First, our enemy. Verses 3a: “*This is an evil* in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.” What is the evil that happens to every single one of us under the sun? Death.

The greatest evil in your life, the Preacher says, is that one day you will die. And while it’s implied in Ecclesiastes 9 in Hebrews 2:15 we are told explicitly that all of us are subject to lifelong slavery because of our fear of death.

Death is the greatest evil in our lives and therefore the greatest fear of our lives. But, probably, as you walked in here this morning, it didn’t feel that way. It doesn’t feel that way to me. You would think that whatever your greatest fear is, whatever the greatest evil is you face, you’d wake every morning thinking about it. You’d expect that you couldn’t get it out of your mind. But that’s not the case with our fear of death.

Instead, everyone came in here with our extra hour of sleep worried or afraid of something else. Maybe it’s about money: will I have enough money? Can I make my payments? Will I have enough for retirement? Or, will my health hold up? Will I get married? How will my kids turn out? Will I make it through college and get that first job? All kinds of worries.

We’ve got all these different fears, but those fears all comes down to this: *we are afraid that our lives will not turn out well.* We are afraid that the good things we hope for won’t happen, and we are afraid that the good things we currently have will one day be taken away from us. We are afraid our lives will be ruined.

But don’t you see the Preacher’s point? One day *death is will come, and when it comes all your hopes will be destroyed, and when it comes every good thing you have will be forever taken away from you and your life as you know it will be ruined.* So all these fears we are conscious of about our lives not turning out well are *just mini-fears, just expressions and projections, of our mega-fear – our fear of death.*

Death is the ultimate enemy. One of my favorite movies, certainly my favorite Western, is *Unforgiven*, with Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman. At one point Eastwood’s character and another character have just killed some bad guys. And Eastwood’s character says, “It’s a funny thing, killing a man. You take away all he’s got and all he’s every going to have.” His partner says, “Yeah, but they had it coming.” But what does Eastwood say to that? He says, “We all have it coming.”

Death is the ultimate enemy because it will take from you everything that you have and everything you’re ever going to have, *and we all have it coming.* Nor do we know the time. Ecclesiastes 9:12: “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.”

Further, the Preacher says that if you don't live in light of death, *if you refuse to think about death while you are alive, if you try to distract yourself from the death that inevitably lies ahead of you, you are a fool.* All through the book of Ecclesiastes we are called to examine our lives and think, think about our lives with the end in mind.

And that is not just a Christian notion. Ernest Becker, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a trained psychologist and anthropologist and was a secular, non-believing person, wrote a book published in 1974 called *The Denial of Death*. He wrote it while he was dying of cancer and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for it posthumously. He too said that the great fear of all people was death, and that any attempt to live without reference to death was foolish. "I think that taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything [that's our approaching death]. Otherwise it is false ... Modern man [however] is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing." *Denial of Death*, 283-84.

Death is our enemy, it is our greatest fear. But before I move on I feel like I have to point out here that it is possible to get so depressed, so sick, so despairing, that death can stop feeling like an enemy and start to feel like a friend and preferable to life. But the Preacher makes it clear that is never the case. "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.⁶ 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." Ecclesiastes 9:5-6. *Death is never the relief of pain to the Preacher.* Rather, it is the end of **all hope**, because you know and have nothing, and one day even the way you live on in the memory of those around you will end.

So, the Preacher says, "But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion." Ecclesiastes 9:4.

When you and I think of dogs today, we think of Snoopy, or Scooby-Doo, or Winn Dixie, or Nana [NAH-nuh]/Benji/Airbud/Beethoven/Marley, or your favorite pet from when you were a kid. We love dogs. Some of us wouldn't mind being a dog. However, ancient Jews did not feel the same way.

To them dogs were filthy, wild scavengers who ate garbage. When the wicked King Ahab of Israel died, we read in 1 Kings 22 that dogs licked up his blood. That was not just gross but it was an insult to his memory, because dogs were considered so repugnant. Yet, still, better to be a live dog than a dead lion. No matter how noble a lion is, once it is dead it has no hope. *Death is coming, and it is the enemy.*

Second, our hope. In the entire history of the world there have basically only been three approaches to life in light of death. First, there is the approach of eastern religions, like Buddhism, or the approach of Stoicism. They say the only hope we have in light of death is non-attachment: "Since death is coming, do not get attached to anything on earth.

Death is coming, you can't stop it, and if you allow yourself to get attached to someone, you will suffer when they die. Do not get attached."

Now, there is wisdom in that. We all will die, and to love someone is to be open the possibility of pain in your life when they suffer. But if you don't get attached to others, what does that mean? It means you can't really love anyone! It means you can never be really intimate with anyone, because if you open up too much you'll risk getting hurt. You can't get too close. I have and we should all have great respect for these philosophies, yet to close our hearts to others does not seem a legitimate answer.

Second, there is the approach of secularism. Secularism says that all there is to life is what is "under the sun." There is no God; this life is all there is. So what is their hope? Luc Ferry is a secular philosopher at the University of Paris, he does not believe in God, and he says the hope of secular philosophy in light of death is to develop what he calls the "wisdom of love." Instead of refusing to get attached to others, he says our only hope is forming the strongest possible relationships before you die. For example, he says, "We [must] ... be reconciled with our parents before they die, whatever the tensions of that relationship. Because later, whatever Christianity may say, is too late." He finishes with this: "We can learn how to live and love as adults, even if this means thinking of death every day. Not out of morbidity, but to discover what needs doing, here and now, with those whom we love and whom we shall lose, unless they lose us first." Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought*, 263-64. In his view, that is secular philosophy's "crowning achievement."

Now, again, there is wisdom in that. We should have strong relationships with others. But is there really any hope in that? We have this important conversation with our parents – *yet we still lose forever the most important people in our lives. And then we die, and eventually all record or memory of our existence is forgotten. There's no hope there.*

But, then, there is the third approach – the Christian hope. The Christian hope says that death does not have the final say. Death will not take everything away. It says not only that there is a God in control of everything, but that God became a man in Jesus Christ. Fully God, but also fully man. And in his humanity, Jesus died. He stopped breathing. His heart stopped pumping. He brain function was zero. *But he did not stay that way. Death could not hold him. The grave could not keep him.* Three days later, he was raised from the dead, he was resurrected, and **in doing so he destroyed the power of death over us.** Paul puts it like this in 1 Corinthians 15 – because of the resurrection of Jesus, death has lost its sting.

Now, what does that mean? "Death has lost its sting"? It means this: friends, all of us have a pair of invisible walls in our lives – one wall on this side, and one wall on the other side. And they are closing in. Slowly, but surely, it's happening. And when those walls meet, we will be crushed.

But, as C.S. Lewis puts it in his sermon *The Weight of Glory*, in Jesus Christ “a hole has been opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside.” In the resurrection Jesus Christ smashed a hole in those walls, and he reaches his hand out to us through that hole and says, “Grab on. I may not save you from death, but one day I will save you *through* death. Death may hold onto you for a time, like it did me, but I will raise you up. I’ll give you a body that cannot get sick, cannot wear out, cannot die, and you and everyone else who knows me will love and laugh and dance and sing and worship in the new heavens and new earth forever. *Just take my hand*, because death has lost its sting.” In Jesus Christ, therefore, death is no longer your enemy, but your friend.

The Preacher, obviously, did not know this. But while he could not have known Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection, he did clearly know that no one would survive death or somehow overcome death on their own. No one would survive death by living a really good, exemplary life. In verse 2 he writes, “It is the same for all, since the same event [death] 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.”

And very memorably the Preacher says this in verse 11: “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.” It does not matter how fast you are, you can’t outrun death. It doesn’t matter how strong you are, you can’t out-wrestle death. It doesn’t matter how wise or smart you are, you can’t outwit death.

So while the Preacher did not know about the possibility of resurrection, he would have totally agreed with the New Testament’s emphasis on grace. You will not defeat death on your own. The only way you will survive death is by trusting Jesus. Grabbing onto Jesus’ hand and trusting him with your life and death – that’s our ultimate hope.

You can’t do anything on your own to overcome death in your life, but if you see Jesus as your all-sufficient, glorious, loving hope, then by his sheer grace you will overcome death. All you must do is believe in him. “[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9.

Now, here’s the question: if you know death is coming, but Jesus has overcome it, how does that make it possible for you to really, truly, deeply enjoy your life?

Third, our responsibility. In light of what God has done for us in Christ, our job, our responsibility in life, ***is to enjoy this life God has given us.*** Just be satisfied with the life God has given us. Hebrews 13:5-6: ⁵Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” ⁶So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

That's our responsibility. The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 9:8: "Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head." In that culture, that basically meant always be ready for a celebration – have your best clothes ready, do your hair, put on your makeup. Be ready to enjoy.

But because the Preacher doesn't know about resurrection he can't tell you *how* to enjoy your life. If death is the end of our story, if death means the end of our existence, *then life can't have any real meaning*. He actually says at the end of Ecclesiastes 9:10: "[T]here is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [Hebrew: "the grave"] to which you are going."

We cannot live without meaning. It's impossible. We are hard-wired for purpose. But here's the problem: when you feel like your life has no meaning, you feel forced to constantly making everything about you. *And you can't enjoy your life when everything is about you.*

What do I mean when I say "you make life all about you"? The Preacher gives us three areas where we are to enjoy life, and I'll show you how we all too easily make them about us: *food and drink, family, and work*.

The Preacher says we are to enjoy food. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart ..." Ecclesiastes 9:7a. But do we enjoy the food we eat? You say, "Of course I enjoy food – I love food." Do you really? A lot of us look at a plate of food and instead of enjoying food for its sake – for the work put into growing it and preparing it into a meal and arranging it on a plate in a pleasing way – we *make it about us*. We keep going back to the same foods in our cabinets over and over again and we eat them not because we are hungry but because we need something when we are sad, or lonely, or stressed. Or we look at that plate of food and we dare not touch it because we will only feel like we have value if we are a size two. Or we just scarf it down while playing our phones just because we know we need the calories. A lot of us find we can't enjoy food, and in similar ways can't enjoy a glass of wine. We don't enjoy it, we just drink it down to self-medicate and numb the pain of a hard day. We make it about us.

The Preacher says we are to enjoy our family. Verse 9: "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." But do we enjoy life with our wives? Or do we make our wives about us?

For example, I read last week about one particular marriage where the husband and the wife were in the kitchen cooking, and the wife was trying to open a can of beans but she couldn't. Then she said, "This can opener is a piece of junk." Now, the husband bought the can opener, and this is what he heard (this is not what she said but this is what he heard), "This can opener is a piece of junk, and you bought it, so you must be some kind of idiot for buying a can opener like that."

Now do you see what he did? Instead of enjoying life with his wife, *he made life with his wife about him.*

All of us are guilty of saying, “I’m unhappy, and it’s my spouse’s fault, and if he or she would just change or not do this or start doing that everything would be okay.” Now, there are abusive relationships, for sure. But the vast majority of the time, do you know what we’re really saying? We’re saying, “My spouse is the source of my happiness. I can’t be happy unless my spouse makes me happy.” But friends, *no single human being can handle the responsibility of making you happy*, and so long as you look to them for that you will never enjoy life with your wife or anyone else. You’ll feel consistently hurt, let down, depressed, neglected. In other words, you’ll continually say *this marriage, these children, my parents are all about me and my needs, not about enjoying this other human being made by God, formed in his image and precious in his sight, that God has so graciously placed in my life.* It’s about you, so you can’t enjoy it.

One last one: the Preacher says we are to enjoy our work. Ecclesiastes 9:10a: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might ...”

Instead of finding work that we take pleasure in, work that we actually find satisfying in and of itself, in the actual doing of it, we choose jobs instead because of how good we’ll look to others because, look, I’m the kind of person who does this kind of job, and this kind of job is impressive. Or, we choose jobs for the amount of money we can make, and that will make us feel important, then we will know we matter. *That is making work about you, and that’s a recipe for hating your life.* All the money in the world and all the prestige the most impressive jobs can bring can’t make you enjoy your work.

There’s only really one way to truly enjoy your life: you must believe that God loves you, and he loves you enough to send his son to die for you and adopt you into his family, and that’s it’s all done not because you are swift or strong or wise or knowledgeable or intelligent but instead it’s done by sheer grace, *then you can enjoy life.* *Because then the pressure is off.* “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, *for God has already approved what you do.*” Ecclesiastes 9:7.

Do you know that? There is nothing more important in the world to know. If you take Jesus’ hand and trust that one day he will lead you through death, then you must know that right now God has already approved what you do. *So you can relax, and enjoy life,* because the approval you are so desperately seeking from the food and the wine and the wife and the work *you already have in Jesus.*

You can enjoy life with your wife, and you don’t have to make how your marriage is doing into this referendum on your self-worth because God already approves of you in Jesus. And when your spouse (or anyone else) hurts your feelings and lets you down (and they will), it won’t ruin your life. Your life is in God’s hands, and he will take care of it.

You can find work that you enjoy. You don't have to stay in a job you don't love because of the money you make, and you can take time off to rest and have time to eat a meal with your family and play with them and enjoy them, because God has already approved of you. You are righteous in his sight. Work can just be about work, instead of the way you feel good about yourself as a human being.

And of course if you know God approves of you, then you can sit down at a plate of food and eat what you want, and not eat too much because you're trying to self-medicate, and not eat too little because you're trying to fit into a dress.

Friends, because Jesus died for you and is the firstfruits of your resurrection, then no matter what happens your life is going to turn out just fine. You don't have to worry, you don't have to make everything about you: you can relax and enjoy your life.

One last thing: "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Matthew 16:24-25. Of course, that means we can't let anything get in the way of us and Jesus. Nothing – whatever might hinder our relationship with him we must crucify.

Yet, he doesn't mean that Jesus is pleased with self-denial for the sake of self-denial. A lot of people have thought that if they just made themselves miserable enough God would have to be happy with them. *That's a lie.* Nowhere in the Scriptures are we told that God wants us miserable.

We may have to deny ourselves a great many things in order to follow Jesus, but one thing we cannot (and dare not) deny ourselves is joy. Don't you dare do that, and don't you dare think some other Christian is less spiritual than you just because they seem happy and you are not. Our God is a God of joy and he wants his children full of joy as well. Psalm 98:4: "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!" God has given you a life here on earth: will you trust God enough to not make it all about you but instead enjoy it, for your good and his great glory? AMEN.