

**“THE GIFT OF LIFE”**

We have seen repeatedly that the Preacher is relentless in forcing us to face up to the difficulties that confront us in this life that we live under the sun. He is definitely not the kind of person who is always looking for the silver lining on every cloud. But neither is he the kind of person who sees only misery in this life. He does not deny the reality of evil, but he does not deny the goodness of God’s creation either. He is not given to the extreme of sentimentalism or the extreme of cynicism. The sentimentalist goes through this life in denial of death. It is not that he does not believe in the reality of death. He simply refuses to face up to the true nature of death. He prefers to avoid thinking about death at all, but when he does he invents his own comforting ideas about the afterlife. The cynic, on the other hand, goes through this life in denial of life. He sees nothing that is truly good or worthwhile or meaningful in this world. The one denies the badness of death, while the other denies the goodness of life. As I said, the Preacher is neither a sentimentalist nor a cynic. He is a man who is trying to come to a realistic understanding of the nature of life in this present age. He sees that there are a great many things wrong with this world, but he also sees a number of things that are good about it. He faces up to the inevitability of death, but he also affirms life. These two ideas are at the heart of the passage that we are studying today. Its message can be summed up in these words:

*despite the fact that there is much in this world that is beyond our understanding and control, life is still to be enjoyed as a good gift from God.*

The passage begins with the Preacher addressing a problem that he has raised before: the fact that virtue is not always rewarded in this life. There are times when righteous people have to endure many hardships in this life, and there are times when wicked people find a great deal of happiness in this life. This is a reality that has perplexed the people of God down through the ages. And the reason why it perplexes us is because the Bible tells us that God is in sovereign control over everything that happens in this world. If God truly is in control, then why does it sometimes seem that he opposes those who fear him and approves of those who do not fear him?

We find the answer to this problem in the recurrence of the most important word in the book of Ecclesiastes: the word “vanity.” Notice that verse 14 is bracketed by the Preacher’s pronouncement that the reality that he is describing in this verse is a vanity. He says it at the beginning of the verse, and he says it again at the end of the verse. And what he means by this is that the inequity that he mentions in verse 14 is something that is vaporous and fleeting. Things will not remain this way forever. It will not always be the case that the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Like a fog that is burned off by the rays of the sun, this inequity will one day pass away. In the words of Charles Bridges, “In the other world good is given to the good, and evil to the evil.” [205] This is exactly what the Preacher said in the preceding paragraph. Ultimately, it will not be well with the wicked, but it will most certainly be well with those who fear God.

For this reason, the Preacher counsels us to find joy in the simple pleasures of life. And he will return to this theme again at the end of this passage. Enjoy the food you eat,

the wine you drink, and the work that you do. These things are not merely utilitarian. God has made us so that we can find pleasure in our food, our drink, and our work. One of life's ordinary joys is to sit down to a well-prepared meal. I am glad to say that we find a great deal of joy in this area in our home. It is not uncommon for someone to ask at our breakfast table, "So what are we having for dinner tonight?" Food is good. It is a good gift from God. And it is right and good for us to enjoy it.

The same thing can be said about work. We were not made to fritter away our time on frivolous and trivial things. We were meant to do something of significance with our lives. We were made to take care of this world, to cultivate it and use our creativity to make it fruitful, to use the gifts and abilities that God has given us to serve our fellow man. To be sure, work can be frustrating and toilsome in our post-fall world, but it can also bring us a great deal of satisfaction.

Of course, the Preacher is not advocating a hedonistic or idolatrous lifestyle. He is not saying that we should all be gluttons and drunkards and workaholics. He is simply saying that the best way to deal with our perplexity over life's inequities is to find satisfaction and contentment in the ordinary pleasures that the Lord provides for us during our days on this earth.

We turn now to the point that the Preacher makes in verses 16-17. He tells us that we have to accept the limits of human knowledge and understanding. As much as we try to make sense of this world and the things that take place in it, we will never be able to fully understand it. Though there is much that we can know and understand, life is ultimately

unpredictable and beyond our control. It is not, however, beyond God's control. We see this in verse 17, where we find another affirmation of the doctrine of divine providence, a theme that comes up a number of times in this book. The Preacher refers to all of the work that is done under the sun as "the work of God." The ordering of the affairs of this world is the work of God. It is important that we keep this at the forefront of our thinking, because doing so helps to prevent us from falling into despair over the things that puzzle us about life. As David VanDrunen writes, "Just because we do not know the answers to everything does not mean that God does not know them." [*Bioethics and the Christian Life*, 64] God is the only one who has all of the answers, and he has not chosen to make all of those answers known to us. As we see in the book of Job, God never answers the questions that Job raises in the first part of the book. The book does not end with Job saying, "Now I understand." Instead, he says, "now my eye sees you." God himself is the answer, and when Job sees this, he lays his hand over his mouth. We need to remember that the secret things belong to the Lord (see Deut. 29:29). But when we listen to what God has chosen to reveal to us, we will see him with the eyes of faith, and that will be enough for us.

In the first three verses of chapter 9, the Preacher turns his attention to the fact that death awaits us all. Our lives are in God's hand, and God disposes of both the righteous and the wicked in the same way. The good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice - all of them meet the same fate. We all die. The fact that we all meet the same fate can be puzzling for us. It can cause us

to wonder if God is for us or against us. This is what the Preacher means when he says, “Whether it is love or hate, man does not know.” How is God disposed towards us? Does he love us, or does he hate us? Our experiences themselves do not provide a satisfactory answer to this question. In fact, life’s inequities can open us up to the temptation of thinking that God is indifferent. As Derek Kidner writes,

“The things that are supposed to matter most to [God] turn out to make no difference – or none that anyone can see – to the way we are disposed of in the end. Moral or immoral, religious or profane, we are all mown down alike.” [*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 82]

Our perplexity over this can cause us to wonder if it is worth it to live our lives in the fear of the Lord. Have we kept our hearts pure in vain? As creatures made in God’s image we have an innate sense of justice. And, as the Preacher says in verse 3, our disillusionment over the inequities that confront us in this life can drive us mad if we allow it to do so.

But this is where we need to remember what the Preacher has said in the preceding paragraphs. For one thing, the apparent injustices in this life will not remain forever. In the end, it will be well with those who fear the Lord, and it will not be well with the wicked. There will be a day of reckoning. In addition, we need to remember what the Preacher said back in chapter 7: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does

good and never sins.” He says it again here in verse 3: “the hearts of the children of man are full of evil.” This is why the only people who are truly righteous before God are those who are counted righteous by their faith in God’s covenant promise. We cannot obtain a righteous standing before God by our works. The righteous deeds that are done by God’s people do not earn us anything from God. This passage reminds us that we cannot control God by living the right kind of life. As commentator Duane Garrett observes: “No one by even righteous deeds can gain control over God and coerce blessing from him.” [330]

While all human beings come to the same end in this life, we still need to remember that death is an enemy. Despite what people sometimes say, death is not natural. Death is an evil. It is a result of the fall. We do have to accept the reality of death, but this does not mean that we should see it as something good. This is what the Preacher is saying in verses 4-6. Life is better than death.

This might seem to contradict what the Preacher said back in chapter 4. He exclaimed, “And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.” In that passage, he said that the dead are better off than the living, but here he says that the living are better off than the dead. It might seem like he is contradicting himself, but we need to be careful to interpret these sayings in the larger context in which they appear. In chapter 4, the Preacher is focusing upon the fact that there is something deeply wrong with this world. He is saying that things are so askew in this life that it might almost seem that it would be better to be dead, or better to have

never been born at all, than to go on living in such a broken world. Chapter 4 was about facing up to the harshness and injustice of life in this fallen world.

The Preacher is making a different point here in chapter 9. Here his focus is upon the goodness of this life and the evil of death. Even though life is unjust, unpredictable, and beyond our control, it is still worth living. It is better to be alive than it is to be dead. This is the meaning of the statement, “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” In the ancient world, dogs were looked upon as unclean scavengers, while lions were one of the most powerful predators. A lion is dangerous, but it was seen as a much more noble creature than a lowly dog. Nevertheless, a dog that is still alive is better off than a lion that is already dead.

The Preacher says in verse 5 that those who are still living have the benefit of knowing that they are going to die. This may sound a little morbid, but it is no small thing. It means the living still have the opportunity to prepare for their death. The dead have lost that opportunity forever. It is too late for them. This is a matter of great significance. We all need to prepare for our death, especially with regard to the state of our souls. How often do you think about this? What is the state of your soul? Are you right with God? Are you resting and relying upon Christ alone for your salvation? Are you walking with Christ and following him as your Lord? I can say with absolute confidence that these are the most important questions you will ever be asked in this world. And I can also assure you that your time to answer such questions is running out, like the sands in an hourglass.

It is important to point out that the statement “the dead know nothing” in verse 5 is not meant to be an absolute statement about the afterlife. It is not saying that human beings cease to exist or cease to be conscious after they die. Such a statement would contradict a number of other passages of Scripture that clearly affirm the continued conscious existence of the human soul after death. The Preacher is simply saying that the dead no longer have a share in what is done under the sun, as he says in verse 6.

Life is better than death. Life is a gift from God. And it is therefore to be enjoyed. This is the Preacher’s point in verses 7-10. To use the phrase made popular by the film *Dead Poet’s Society*, the Preacher is saying *carpe diem*, “seize the day.” And he focuses upon three areas in which we can find some measure of earthly happiness: food and drink, marital relations, and work. While it is true that none of these things have been left untouched by the fall, they are still good gifts from God, and they are to be enjoyed as such.

Verse 8 says, “Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.” This was the Preacher’s way of saying that we should not go about life in a perpetual state of gloom. Once again, this might seem to contradict something that was said earlier in the book. In chapter 7 the Preacher wrote, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting.” But once again, we need to understand these sayings in their larger context. In chapter 7, the focus is upon our need to face up to our mortality. We have to stop trying to pretend that we are not going to die. Going to the house of mourning helps us in this. It reminds us of the inevitability of death.

But in our passage, the Preacher is saying that we must not allow our acceptance of death to cause us to refuse to seek any happiness in this life. We should not live in a manner that denies the goodness of creation. Food, drink, marriage – these are good gifts from God. He wants us to find joy in them. As someone has said, the gloomy Christian is not the product of too much religious devotion but too little.

The enjoyment of life is not just about food, drink, family, and leisure pursuits. As I said earlier, man also finds a measure of joy and meaning in the work that he does in this life. Life is not to be wasted. Make the most of the life that God has given you. Do the work that God has appointed for you, and do it with all your might. As Horatius Bonar says in one of his hymns,

*Make hast, O man, to do  
Whatever must be done;  
Thou hast no time to lose in sloth,  
Thy day will soon be gone.  
Make haste, O man, to live!*

This is what the Lord has appointed for us in this life: to do what he has given us to do, to enjoy what he has given us to enjoy, and to leave to him what he has chosen to keep secret.

If you are a Christian, the fact that you have Christ with you in this life, paired with the fact that you have an eternal inheritance being kept for you in heaven, makes your life in this world a truly blessed life, an abundant life, a good life. And this is true even for those Christians who have to endure a great deal of suffering in their lives. The most difficult Christian life ever lived is still infinitely better than the happiest unbelieving life ever lived. As one 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator on Ecclesiastes writes:

“Say then – Christian sufferer – does thine heart rebel to see *the wicked* prosper, and thyself in woe? Say, wouldst’t thou change? Is he better off than thou? Are his earthly blessings better than thy grace? Is not Jesus more than silver and gold to thee? Hast thou the *lesser* portion, because thou hast the Lord?” [cited in Bridges, 205]