

Wisdom and Joy
Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:10

This virus forces people to think about the brevity of life and the uncertainty of life,
We are seeing the evidences of the fall.

- Ecclesiastes has been hitting these themes.
- This is a good text for our times as it speaks yet again to viewing life in view of death and to the need to cherish the people we hold dear in this short life. **[Pray]**

What we've seen is life is a mixed-bag.

It contains joys and sorrows; highs and lows; pain and pleasure.

- I have often said that being a pastor is a strange profession for a number of reasons. On any given day you can meet with a person and be greatly encouraged by some wonderful blessing in their life. Then you can meet with someone else and the discussion makes you want to weep with sorrow.
- Sometimes both can happen before lunch.

But it's not just pastoring; that's life.

- We have many difficulties; we are tempted despair often.
 - **Anxieties - aging parents, economic uncertainty**
- But there is also wonderful relationships to experience and joys to celebrate.

What are these two experiences saying to us? *The trials and joys?*

I believe both are telling us *that we long for heaven.*

We're homesick.

- How many of you have had a case of homesickness?
- You go to college ... out of town ... you face problems, conflict, loneliness, and you want to go home."
- Last week, "Guys, we've got to get home. I'm out."
- "I pray you get home." I pray all of you will get home.
- Paul tells us that our "citizenship is in heaven." (Phil 3)
- "We here have no lasting city; but we seek the city that is to come." (13:13)
- We are *sojourners* in this life.

God uses different experiences to create this heavenly ache in us.

A. He uses hard times: death, loss, grief, suffering, illness, perplexities, frustrations.

- The stuff of Ecclesiastes!
- We want these experiences to be gone!

B. He uses good times: food/drink, companionship/friends/family, a job well done.

- The best that life can offer.
- These experiences are but foretastes of the greater joy that is to come.

In Heaven, we will no longer have death, loss, suffering, trials; and in heaven we will have joys that surpass the joys of this life.

The pain and the pleasures are both pointing us to something beyond the sun!

This passage in Ecclesiastes is one of those kinds of texts.

- **We see the frustrations and hardships conveyed; and we see the joys of life commended.**

Flow:

- The Preacher walks us through various frustrations and challenges and perplexities in life (8:1-9:6) before leaving us the call to enjoy God's grace (9:7-10).
- Re the frustrations/challenges, he emphasizes **wisdom** for navigating life; he gives us wise **counsel for dealing with life's uncertainties and death's inevitability**
 - o **8:1** - sets up the whole flow — who is wise?
 - He gives wise counsel on dealing with a king (2-9)
 - He gives counsel to fearing God (10-13)
 - He speaks of the limitations of wisdom and how the unanswered questions shouldn't keep one from enjoying God's gifts (14-17)
 - He speaks about the reality of death and the urgency of living life well (9:1-6)
- Then he expounds further on **the joy of life** (9:7-10).
 - o These verses contain the **strongest and longest exhortation** to enjoy life in the book.

So let's heed this counsel and let's pursue this joy.

#1: Wise Counsel (8:1-9:6)

Verse 1: "Who is like the wise?" Who knows the interpretation of a thing?"

- Who has the skills to explain something difficult?
- It is hard to find such a wise person.
- Chapter 7 admits that one cannot know it all, but wisdom is still to be pursued.

"A man's wisdom makes his face shine"

- Wisdom has a transforming effect.
- It can change a person's countenance and demeanor.
- A fool's folly is known to everyone; and the wisdom of the wise is also obvious.
- Light stands out!
- Joseph and Daniel rose to leadership through wisdom — their wisdom was known to all.

"And the hardness of his face is changed"

- Instead of "hardness," God's grace makes us gentle.
- Our "gentleness" is evident to all. (Phil 4)

He is not telling us to **"fake" a "happy face** — "turn that frown upside down!"

- It's the result of what the Psalmist said: "Those look to the Lord are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed" (**Psalm 34:5**).
- True wisdom, the wisdom centered on Christ, changes us.
- The fruit of the Spirit's work in us expresses certain graces from us.

Grace-filled Christians radiate a contagious joy.

- **Ray Ortlund.** “We can start now, Ray is here.” He radiates grace.
- **Grumpiness** and **coldness** do not correspond to the wonderful message of grace.
- One time on a plane... “**You got that glow**”
 - I don’t always have that glow.
 - I had it then because I had a personal revival in my soul going on...
- “**As we pray for our spiritual progress, we should ask God for greater wisdom to bring growing joy to life in our witness for Jesus Christ.**” (Ryken)
- Greater wisdom; growing joy.

Now in this context, the Preacher may have the need to behave and look a certain way in the presence of a king... in any event, it is the first of several topics that require wisdom.

A. On Dealing with Kingly Authority (8:2-9)

Be Discerning

- In the first two verses, he gives exhortations (2-3a).
- Then he drifts into Proverbial speak in verses 5-8.

2: Do what the king says. (Prov 13:3).

- “**You desire my command**” (Sasha). That’s the idea.
- The first obligation is to obey ruling authorities.
- **Many bristle at this (Americans and Protestants... gangsta rap... punk rock..) ... like a cat reacting to a water hose.**
- **But God works through authorities... bosses, parents, rulers...**
- **it’s not always the time to protest... so we are home today, honoring this text!**
 - “My son, fear the Lord and the king, and do not join with those who do otherwise” (Proverbs 24:21)
 - **Jesus said we should render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.**
 - **NT: this is teased out in places like Romans 13 and 1 Peter 3 — where we are told to submit to governing authorities.**
 - What Luther called “**Political obedience.**”
 - We are to be good citizens, going about doing good, honoring everyone.

God’s Oath: King’s subjects took an oath of service to the king in God’s name.

- There’s a clear link between **God and government** throughout Scripture.
- To obey the King, as long as it doesn’t violate God’s word, is to honor God.
- If there is a great conflict between the King and God, we are to honor the highest authority.

3: Do not be in a hurry to leave him.

- It’s a warning against **disrespect** and **disloyalty**.
- To enter the **courtroom of the king was dangerous**. One must tread lightly.
 - Esther 4, Esther entered King Ahasuerus’ presence and said, “**If I perish, I perish.**”
- **So, Don’t be hasty, flippant; but respectful careful.**
- **To disrespect the king would also cause one to lose influence.**

- o Don't exasperate those in leadership or you will never see change.

Additionally he says do not be **engaged in something evil**: "do not take your stand in an evil cause"

- Don't just go along with the king ("who does whatever he pleases") without thinking, lest you become implicated in something evil.
- **There is a time to resist**: 3 Hebrew boys in Daniel 3; or those who resisted Hitler.
- When one does resist evil, we are to also do so in *a righteous way*.

4: This speaks to the times and ways of the ancient world; Kings were given nearly absolute power.

- **No one could correct him.**
- Remember how **Nehemiah** approached the King - **carefully and prayerfully**.
 - It took great courage to speak contrary to the king (asking, "What are you doing?" or to ask for his permission to do something (like go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem).
- God placed **Esther**, an orphan, in the court of the Persian king, to bless the Jews.
 - Her respect to the monarch, and her behavior in his presence, illustrate the kind of influence the Preacher is talking about (cf. Esth. 5:1–8).

5: The wise know *the time to act*: the wise know the "proper time" and "just way"

- **Biblical examples include not only Josph; Daniel and Esther, but also Jonathan** (1 Sam. 19:4–6), **Nathan** (2 Sam. 12:1–14)
- **We need wisdom to know *when* to *submit* and when to *protest* —**
- **Pick your battle.... not every hill is worth dying on.**

6: Looking for 'times' and 'way for everything' requires one to be patient, be alert.

- The wise man or woman knows **the right thing to do**, and **the right time** to act on it.
- The phrase, "**although man's trouble lies heavy on him**" – that is, **you may want to act all the time because of your trouble**.
- But you have be wise. You may have more trouble if you defy the king.
- So **wait patiently** and **don't act rashly**.

7: It is risky to act in the presence of the king, perhaps to offer him correction, and we do not know the future, he is saying.

8: But, again, that doesn't mean we don't speak or act.

- **The servant is not counseled to silent/unthinking submission, and is here told of the limitations of every man — including the king!**

Four humbling limitations to humanity are set forth.

- First, '**no man is master over the spirit**'
 - o That is, **the ability to give life**. We aren't God.
- Second, '**There is no master over the day of death.**'
 - o **We don't know the day of death**.
 - o And when that day comes, **there will be nothing we can do to extend life**.

- Third, **'there is no release in war.'**
 - When a good soldier is engaged in war, he doesn't flee; he engages.
 - And you cannot escape the consequences of war.
- Fourth, **'wickedness will not deliver those given to it'**
 - That is, there will be a judgment — even for kings.

9: What a king *can do* is *hurt people* — he can *abuse power*.

- Hence, the need to **wisely wield influence for the flourishing of others.**

Application: Pursue wisdom.

- The kind of wisdom that is built on God's word.
- The kind of wisdom that is discerning; that knows when to speak and act.
- The kind of wisdom that makes you a person of grace and gentleness, who radiates the presence of God.
- Wisdom like Esther-Nehemiah-Joseph-Daniel — whom God raised up for such a time as theirs. People who used their influence for those without influence; for the good of others.

B. On the Need to Fear God (8:10-13)

Don't conclude that godliness doesn't matter!

10: Already Qoheleth has described how the righteous do not always prosper in this life.

- Sometimes the wicked live long lives, and receive the kinds of things the righteous should receive.
- Sometimes the wicked are honored with a proper burial.
- The Preacher is **troubled** by this.

10b: The wicked were praised. This is not what they deserved.

- God has his purposes; but they **are unknown to us.**
- Life often doesn't seem fair in this fallen world.

11: Further, he laments the lack of swift judgment. (Their sentence is *delayed*)

- **Delayed judgments and the reward for wickedness leads to more wickedness!**
- Everything remains as if nothing wrong happened (Life, health, shelter, family, food and clothing remain)
- **Baseball: One of the reasons players used steroids for so long was that no one was getting punished.**
- The human problem is here: the *heart*.
- **"full to do evil" - nothing intervenes to check the sinner's actions.**
- But again, we must not see things just from this "under the sun" perspective.
- **There will be a judgment.**

12-13: But the fact that the wicked may be praised in this life; that they may live long; that they may not be punished; doesn't mean you should join in wickedness!

- **Don't conclude that godliness doesn't matter! It does!**

12: It's only a matter of time before the righteous are vindicated and the wicked are judged.

The wicked will not prosper after death; whereas the righteous will.

- The life of the faithful is to be marked by *the fear of God*.
 - His summary emphasizes it (12:13).
 - The 'seasons' of life call for it (3:14)
 - Worship demands it (5:1–7).
 - Eternity will reward it (8:12)

Remember the words of one of the thieves on the cross.

- One of them mocked Jesus; the other thief rebuked him, "Do you not fear God?" (Lk 23:40)
- The thief who asked the question then displayed his fear of God by asking Jesus to save him: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).
- How do you fear God. Start here: Ask Christ to save you!
- It is well with the one who trusts Christ....

13: Why should you? Because, despite delay, destruction will finally befall the unrepentant.

- Though he may 'lengthen (his days), the coming judgment will not *lengthen his days!*
- The unrighteous will **not flourish beyond the grave** (cf. Pss 49; 73; Eccl. 3:16–21; 12:14).

Application: Godliness matters

- Don't let your circumstances tell you differently!
- 1 Timothy 4:8: "bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way; as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

C. On the Limits of Human Understanding (8:14-17)

Don't obsess over things so much that you fail to enjoy God's gifts.

14: Injustice Restated

- He laments that the righteous sometime suffer; while the wicked are sometimes prosperous.
- I was "envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Ps 73.3)
- Sometime **it seems like the wicked get what the righteous deserve.**
 - One student cheats and gets an A, while you do your own work at get a C-.
 - One pastors gets put to death, while persecutors go free.
 - The corrupt coworkers climbs the ladder while the honest employee doesn't.
 - As my friend Jon said: "A few years ago I met regularly with a guy I was mentoring. He and his wife were struggling with infertility. One day we met early at McDonald's, and he came in very upset. He told me that a guy at his work came into the factory cussing the previous day because he had accidentally gotten his girlfriend pregnant. My friend was distraught because he and his wife had begged God for a child, and here was a guy who did not even want a child but was going to become a dad. Many of us face this kind of faith crisis.... Walking with God does not mean everything will come up roses. Things do not always work out immediately like they should."
 - Something is broken.

- So question: “Why bother with integrity and godliness?”
- Because the circumstances of this life is not all there is!

Psalm 73

- The righteous take the long view!
- The righteous hold on to the fact that God is with us; that is guiding us; that he will take us to glory!

15: The Call to Faith; and the call to enjoy grace (Again!)

- He doesn't go into a great explanation of the problem of evil.
- Instead he gets practical, as he is concerned with life under the sun.
- He says, don't get so overwhelmed with these perplexities and problems that you fail to enjoy God's grace!

You can find joy in the ordinary blessings of life.

- We keep coming back to these themes of joy and contentment, right?
 - Joy (2:26; 3:12; 5:18, 20)
 - Contentment (2:24; 3:13; 5:18)
 - Leading up to 9:7-10
- Keep on enjoying your life, and trust God.

16-17: the limits of human understanding restated

16: In light of everything that has been said, Qoheleth is puzzled.

- His quest has been thorough.
- “**sleepless nights**” – the hardships of humanity.

17: We must admit that **we cannot know everything**.

- You may work hard, you may search things out diligently, you may have skills and experience, but you cannot unravel all the enigmas of life.
- Wisdom is to be pursued; and wise people do great things; but they too will be mystified at times!

Application: So accept this fact, and don't let the perplexities and puzzles keep you from enjoying God's pleasures.

D. On the Unpredictability of Life and the Certainty of Death (9:1-6)

Trust God and get busy living!

9:1: Unpredictability. Who knows what the righteous and the wise will experienced in this life?

- Living righteously and wisely is no guarantee that you won't have hardship. (You may experience “Love or hate”)
- Regardless of your circumstances, you can know that your life is “in the hand of God.”
 - Therefore, you are safe; you are blessed.
 - God's hand is a hand of love;

- o No one will snatch us out of our Father's hand. The Son's hand stretched out for us as he was crucified for us.
- o Christ died for us, and we can rest assured, that he will care for his people and guide them to glory.

The Certainty of Death (9:2-6)

2: Death will come to both the righteous and the wicked.

3: Death is not a 'natural' phenomenon, but an *evil*.

- Also linked with *evil* is *madness*,
- **These are results of the fall.**

4-6: Where there's life, there's hope

4: He's not denying an afterlife, but simply saying you have one shot to enjoy this life.

- A proverb to illustrate: *Lion/Dog*.
- The *lion* was admired in the ancient world. The *dog* was a despised scavenger.
- **Peanuts cartoon: "Theology and the Dog" Snoopy is a top his dog house. Charles is handed what Snoopy has written. It reads, "As it says in the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes 'a living dog is better than a dead lion.'" Charlie gives the paper back and asks, "What does that mean?" Snoopy examines it and replies, "I don't know but I agree with it."** Yes, it's good to be alive.
- **A poor pauper is better than a dead king.**
- So get busy living while you have life!
- Once again, **Death is the great teacher!**

5: Life has many advantages: the dead have no knowledge, no hope, no more reward, and their memory is forgotten.

6: What has been forgotten? **Their love, hate and jealousy.**

- **That is, we soon forget the dead; their highs and lows, joys and sorrows; fortunate and misfortunes.**

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Qoheleth is not living on this side of the resurrection like we are.

- We know that **those in Christ are not forgotten; and they will go to their great reward!**
- We have been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Application: The focus here is on **making the most of your life.**

- If you have never trusted in Jesus as Savior, **then do not delay!**
- Now is the time! Love him, serve Him; serve his church, advance his mission.

#2: God-Centered Joy (9:7-10)

So we're all going to die... we're sandcastles, that the waves of death will come and take and we will be forgotten — so here is God's bucket list.

It's different from many people's bucket list [**Read**].

I love this text!

Go ...! This is no longer advice, but has now become a command!

- Go implies urgency.
- 2:24–26; 3:12f., 22; 5:18–20

Basis: God has already approved what you do.

Two things:

1. God. These joys are not apart from God; but enjoyed through a relationship with God.

- It's not pure hedonism; it's God-centered, God-honoring joy.
- It is saying, "Life is enjoyed with God."

2. Approve. Clarification and Meaning.

- God doesn't approve of wickedness, sin, bondage, or idolatry!
- **But the Teacher is saying that God delights in you delighting in his gifts.**
- Like a dad who loves his kids, "ah go ahead..." you don't say that to everything!
 - **Can I discharge a firearm in the house? No.**
 - **Can I stay up late to watch the World Series — Ah, yeah...**
 - **Can I have ten bucks - yeah — get it from your mom.**
 - **I like being asked — because they're sneaking around if they don't**
- **God loves his kids.**
- **God loves his creation.**
- He formed the sea creatures to play in his ocean; and he delights in his people when they enjoy his gifts.
- We are to enjoy the blessings of God.
 - **If you grew up in an environment that only saw holiness as "holiness by subtraction" you may struggle with these texts.**
 - **If you were raised with "have no fun, don't dress up, don't enjoy food and drink, don't wear cologne... don't have fun with your spouse."**
 - **That's not religious that's ridiculous.**
 - **God says, I love you; I sent Christ to die for you — go enjoy my gifts to my glory.**
 - **Get dressed up and go out with your wife**
- We just better never lose sight of the Giver; focusing only on the gifts.
- We need joy in this hard life, and God delights when we delight properly in his gifts!

Luther:

The Teacher is "not urging a life of pleasure and luxury characteristic of those who do not sense this vanity, for that would be putting oil on fire; but he is speaking of godly men and women, who sense the vexation and troubles of the world. It is their downcast hearts that he wants to encourage."

Let this text encourage your downcast heart!

Notice the focus on "joy" - 7, 9.

4 Means of Joy - What God wants us to do

1. **Food/Drink (9:7)**

- We are commanded to eat our bread and drink our wine (yes, wine) with joyful hearts.
 - One may not choose to drink wine for various good reasons; that's fine, but the text is saying, enjoy food and drink to God's glory.
- And don't miss **the main focus is not on the bread and wine as much as it is the attitude: joy/cheerfulness.**
- **Receive these pleasures with a grateful and joyful heart. This glorifies God.**
- **One of my favorite things to do in life — having dinner with our family around the Table. Saturdays I like to cook... I often read the passage for tomorrow...**
- **We eat our food with joy to God's glory**

2. **Comfort and Festivity (9:8).**

- This speaks of **festive garments (white) but also of comfort (oil).**
- Some also suggest that white garments also communicate comfort as it was **more comfortable in a hot climate**, and oil also helps during hot climates as it received skin irritations.
- **As you dress up, and put on your beard oil, give thanks to God.**
- **You can imagine a wedding, or a party, where we are dressed up and enjoying the evening — this can be done in a way that is honoring to God.**

3. **Companionship (9:9).**

- **Life is hard, but companionship makes it more manageable.**
- **Marriage is God's gift.**
- **Marriage is not the only form of friendship and companionship in life (cf., Eccl 4.9-12), but it's the one emphasized here.**
- **We are not to endure marriage, but enjoy it! (Song of Songs)**

What if a guy says, "My wife is difficult to enjoy?"

- Notice: "**whom you love.**"
- **You won't enjoy your wife if you don't love your wife.**
- **Romance and companionship flow out of sacrificial love and commitment to your bride.**
- **If you don't enjoy her now, then the question is: are you obeying the command to love her now? Let that love lead to enjoyment.**
- **You won't have sweet enjoyment until you exhibit Christ-like love!**
- **Sacrificial love and sweet enjoyment go together!**

As wonderful as this is, it is ours for a short time - "**this vain life**" -- that is, this short life.

- **It's an earthly blessings; so enjoy it now.**

It's interesting that these things: white, food, drink, wife, are all associated with a wedding.

- **That's where the saints are going!**

In the meantime we have work to do...

4. **Enthusiastic Work (9:10)**

- **After the of encouragements the conclusion is: throw yourself into the tasks of life with energy and enthusiasm.**
- Not a positive description of *Sheol*.
 - It involves the **absence of opportunity for earthly life.**
- **So don't be idle, and don't be slothful!**
- **And serve the Lord Christ with zeal.**

Conclusion

This picture of joyfully receiving food and drink; of joyful companionship; of joyful comfort and festivity; of joyful toil points us to the fulfillment of these longings: in heaven.

- **The moments that we enjoy now help us endure the hardships of life.**
- **And soon the hardships will be no more, and we will enjoy such blessings fully and forever with our King Jesus — who is not like the kings of this world.**
 - **Jesus has anointed our heads with oil, the Holy Spirit, empowering and renewing us.**
 - **Isaiah promises us this feast: [Isaiah 25:6ff.](#)**

⁶ On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,

If you have experienced the grace of God through Jesus Christ then consider what you possess.

- **You have more reason to rejoice than Qoheleth has in mind.**
 - **Your sins are forgiven! Your name is in the book of life!**
- **As we share the pleasures of God in this life, remember that they are wonderful preparations for what is to come!**
- **He has promised us a great wedding feast in the future, where we will wear our white garments at a party that will not end!**
- **Our earthly pleasures are telling us that we are made for another world.**
- **We eat and drink in this life — but then vanish like a vapor.**
- **But soon, we will eat and drink in the city of our King, where sickness and death will be varnished forever!**