

“Enjoy Life as God’s Gift”

6 March 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: He Has Made Me Glad

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

Sermon:

I am very conscious today of the appalling plight of the people of Ukraine because of the unprovoked and unwarranted attack on them by the State of Russia. I am conscious that the title enjoy life as God’s gift could be seen as trite and unsympathetic. Indeed, this is the challenge of the Teacher’s message. We are not in control, we cannot avoid life’s difficulties, we are not God, and he has placed limitations on us. I want to picture a Ukrainian soldier having a break from fighting and giving thanks to God for that moment of peace with perhaps a drink of water and something to eat having come to terms with the fact that he may die, that is in essence the message of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. We are not God and God gives us life as a gift to be enjoyed.

Neither is the Teacher unaware of the complexities, difficulties, and senselessness of life, he has been wrestling as we know with these big questions in Ch’s 7-8 and he finished in 8:17 saying, *“Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.”* It is this honesty that is compelling, he accepts the complexities, difficulties and senselessness of life at times including the final reality of death. It is this honesty and acceptance that makes this wisdom worth listening to, because he continues to reflect on the unjust reality of the unrighteous prospering and the righteous dying and yet he manages to see a way that helps us navigate life.

In verses 1-6 he reflects on the common destiny of death and in v11-12 he reflects on the observation that life can be unpredictable and death unexpectedly sudden and he has instruction for us in v7-10. We will look at v1-6 first and then v11-12 and finish with the instruction in v’s 7-10.

I. Death is certain (v1-6)

The Teacher reflects that the righteous and wise and what they do are in the hands of God (v1) Those who are God’s people, who trust him and follow his ways are the righteous and the wise. They know that God is in control, holds them in his hand, and has directed the circumstances of their lives in his sovereign will. However, the problem is that the Teacher cannot say what will happen in the future, what awaits (v1) if God’s will be love or hatred.

Is that not one of our most common thoughts and questions, when things go badly for us? What have I done wrong? Does God hate me? Is God punishing me? When serious stuff happens in our lives it feels like punishment, and we believe God must be displeased with us. Such a thought makes us uncomfortable. The Teacher is convinced that God is in control and sovereign but he (the Teacher) is unsure what the future holds.

So where does he go next? (v2) *“all share a common destiny”* that common destiny is death as he lists a series of contrasts, between the righteous and wicked, with the conclusion that all will die. However v3, neither does that help because he rightly sees that such a truth is *“the evil”* he has been wrestling with, the good taken the same as the bad where is the justice in that? It makes no sense to him, under the sun, that doesn't mean that it makes no sense at all, simply that to him it doesn't make sense, under the sun, he doesn't have the perspective of God.

In his reflection on “death and the evil” of the righteous dying he acknowledges the origin of evil in the hearts of humanity, and he describes it as madness, the madness of defying the living God. Evil intention in human hearts, mad defiance of God, equals death there is an abruptness in his language. This is a point we need to fully appreciate, backed up in Genesis 6:5-7 *“The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”* And Ecclesiastes 7:20 *“There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”*

The teacher says every aspect of our lives are in the hands of God and it is important that we reckon with that truth, no-one knows if love or hate awaits him. The outcome of every life is death, it is our common destiny, and it is the result of our sin and the madness of our defiance of God.

There is advantage in living (v4-6)

We have two dogs, brother and sister, Toby and Winnie. I am the first to recognise that there are different levels of the love of dogs. However, in the culture the Teacher lived, dogs were not pets, but dirty scavengers, and I was intrigued by this Sumerian proverb, *“he who esteems highly dogs which are clever is a man who has no shame.”* The contrast between a dog and a lion was huge and the proverb, *“even a live dog is better off than a dead lion”* (v4) is to say, the living person has hope and even a miserable life is better than being dead (v5). The dead know nothing, death is bleak, and you will be forgotten. It is a very stark picture of death. This point then sets the scene for the instruction that follows, there is one thing that you can be certain of in life, death and it is better to be alive than dead.

II. Life is uncertain (v11-12)

The teacher further reflects on something he has seen in his life. It is that life is uncertain. I had no idea that I would be Covid positive and unable to be with you in person, to prove the point. Those who are physically the strongest don't always win and those who are smartest are not always the richest or get the greatest benefits in life. Time and chance happen to them all.

The time of death is also unpredictable. *“so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them”* We see that in Ukraine, we see it in unexpected diagnosis of cancer for example, in the death of a loved one in an accident, the time of death is unpredictable.

The poetry is good, and the ideas make sense and we have also observed them, but what is his point about the uncertainty of life? It is not to trust in these things, strength and intellectual brilliance, they can and will not always help you in life, evil times can unexpectedly fall upon you. Hope must be found beyond life under the sun; your faith should rest not in these things but in God, who has your life in his hands.

Death is certain in life and life is uncertain, so how then should we live?

IV. Instructions for life (v7-10)

The Teacher has told us before to enjoy life, (2:10, 24-25; 3:13; 7:14; 8:15) but this is the fullest treatment he gives.

- A. **Go!** By implication do not give up, or become anxious, or complain and be negative. Our natural tendency is to procrastinate, but he says get on, live life, go! Everything is in God's hands and therefore whatever happens we are to keep going. You do not know if you will have another day, this day is a gift and being dead is of no benefit to you.
- B. **Eat your food with enjoyment!** Eating has become a functional thing for many of us but, says the teacher, it should be a moment of thankfulness to God for the food we eat. Consider its variety and goodness, we are called to savour our food and eat with enjoyment. Doing so allows us to think positively about God and his wonderful provision.
- C. **Drink your wine with a joyful heart.** I read that the Israelites enjoyed their wine. Perhaps tea is your thing, or coffee, the point is whatever you drink do so with joy and thankfulness because it is a gift from God.
- D. **Look after your appearance.** The white clothes and oil on your head were symbols of joy and health and the instruction is to be careful to take time to present yourself positively. You do this because God is in control, he has some purpose in what you are experiencing at the present time. There is a definite direction of thought in Christian experience towards asceticism, but this text and others Psalms 23:5 / 45:7 move us in the opposite direction.
- E. **Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love.** For those of us who are married, do we enjoy our married life together? Undoubtedly this is in praise of sex but it is much more. What a great gift marriage is, what a beautiful reality sexual intimacy is, it is true that two are better than one (4:9) As with food if you are too busy to enjoy the good gift God has given you then you are too busy. Food, a wife, friends, enjoy them as a gift from God. The list of course is not exhaustive but representative, enjoy and savour the good gifts that God has given.
- F. **Work hard** *"whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."* Work is a gift that God has given us from the beginning. Yes, it is hard and can be frustrating because of sin and the fall. The Teacher has acknowledged that and writes in the context of death, where there is no work, planning, knowledge or wisdom, so again we are to see the work we do as a great gift. Get on with the business of living. Hard work is part of the joy of living, it is a great gift from God

David Gibson finishes his thinking on this passage with reference to all the above as things we do at a banquet and specifically at a wedding banquet. Having just been at a wedding last week, I can testify that I have yet to be at a wedding that I didn't enjoy. The bride and groom were brilliant musicians, in fact they were leading figures in the world of traditional music in Scotland and the Isle of Man. The quality, energy and joy in the music was great. The bar was free as well and we ate and danced into the small hours of the night.

Jesus came eating and drinking and was accused by the religious of gluttony (Matthew 11:18-19). Jesus blessed the marriage at Cana by his presence and turned the water into the best wine (John 2:9-11). Jesus warned against worry and spoke eloquently about how God provides for his creation with great thought and care (Matthew 6:25ff). Jesus encouraged work because as the Teacher did, someday our ability to work will end (John 9:4). The early church enjoyed fellowship and sharing and did so with great joy.

The Apostle Paul warned the timid Timothy about the characteristic of false teachers, “*They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods. Which God has created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything that God has created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*” 1st Timothy 4:3-5

And the picture of what life will be like after death with Jesus is described as a wedding banquet in Rev 19:6-10. “*blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.*”

We can be confident that whatever comes to us in life that it is in God’s hand, the certainty of death and the uncertainty of what time and chance bring. These things, death, sickness, uncertainty, sorrow and grief are God’s means to dislodge us from seeking security in this world. We must not worship the gift but worship the giver and give thanks for his gifts. We can know that God always works his purposes for the good of those who love him, and we are instructed to embrace life and live life joyfully and positively being careful not to waste our lives or fritter them away.

“*This is the day that the Lord has made we will rejoice and be glad in it.*” Psalm 118:24

Praise: Rejoice, the Lord is King

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: Rejoice

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

What certainties do you depend on, and how do they shape your day-to-day life?

- If death was not one of the certainties mentioned above, how might the teaching of this passage impact your daily life in the coming week?
- Many of these ‘certainties’ are actually uncertainties. Reread v.11-12. How will this teaching impact your approach to life?

What are some things you could purposefully seek to enjoy - *appreciate, savor, relish* - today and tomorrow?