



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Is Dying Worth Living For?

THE GOOD LIFE

Ecclesiastes 9

Bill Warner | November 20, 2022



I invite you to turn to Ecclesiastes 9 as we walk through these passages together. For me, there's a refreshing honesty in Ecclesiastes about sin and the consequences of the Fall. We live in a post-Genesis 3 world; a here-today-gone-tomorrow reality. I think this book resonates with us because of its realistic appraisal of this phrase "life under the sun." That phrase is used many, many times in the book of Ecclesiastes. Interestingly enough, in our text today, it's used about one-fourth of those many, many times.

The Preacher is really honing in on something he wants to talk to us about. Last week Pastor Tim used the analogy of walking on a tightrope. This life under the sun brings us face to face with the tension between the way things are versus the way things ought to be. I feel that kind of tension daily and I'm sure you do as well.

I teach juniors and seniors at Aurora Christian, and from time to time I press into them, saying, "I don't have to teach you, your parents don't have to tell you, you don't need to hear a friend tell you or hear this on social media. You know this intuitively. You know in your heart of hearts that the world beyond you, the world outside of you, is not as it ought to be. There's another reality you also know: the world inside you is not as it ought to be."

So the question is, Why? What do we do about it? Do you feel that tension? I feel that daily—between the way things are and the way things ought to be. For me sometimes, that tension can be disorienting. Like up is down and down is up. Where am I? Where am I going?

Students here will validate this, especially the juniors. My first major assessment of the semester—a.k.a. test—is kind of a "come to Jesus" test. It's the "You are not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy" test. Now, we work through it together and they end up fine. But I want to help them understand, "You're a junior in high school; it's time to step it up. Time to get after it." I think Ecclesiastes smacks us in the face with that same reality. We are not in Kansas anymore. We are not in the Garden of Eden anymore. So how do we respond? How do we live in this reality that the Preacher calls "life under the sun"?

In "The Shawshank Redemption" movie, there are two main characters. If you've seen the movie, you know there's interaction between Andy and Red. Andy is played by Tim Robbins; Red is played by Morgan Freeman. Andy is in prison serving two life sentences for two double murders he actually was innocent of. Red has been in prison for decades for something he calls, "Something stupid that I did when I was a teenager." So they're both wrestling with this reality that they're not in Kansas anymore.

Now the clip you're going to see is broken up into two parts. In the first clip, you'll actually see Andy and Red sitting down, then Andy comes face to face with the reality that he is in prison. Unjustly. Double murder. Now what? How does he handle it? How does he react to it? In the second clip, later in the movie, we see Red in a hotel room and not doing well; he's lived so long in prison that he's struggling to adjust to life on the outside. So they're both facing this reality that they're not in Kansas anymore, but they both come to the same conclusion. Let's watch.

Andy: It's down here. I'm in here. I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really: you get busy livin' or you get busy dyin'.

Red: Get busy livin', or get busy dyin'.

I guess it comes down to a simple choice: get busy living or get busy dying. I think that's the value of a book like Ecclesiastes. It's real and it's raw. So what's our response supposed to be to life under the sun. Chapter nine challenges us to look in the mirror and squarely face reality number one, that we're not in Kansas anymore. And reality number two, that we need to answer the question is dying worth living for?

Look at Ecclesiastes 9:1 where the Preacher says:

¹ 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.

At the beginning of verse one—*“But all this I laid to heart...”*—the Preacher is summarizing here. “All this” refers to his observations of life under the sun, his observations that God's seemingly inconsistent retribution policy has been disorienting for him. Let me unpack that.

Retribution theology was very common in the ancient Near East, the setting of this book. It was somewhat similar to the law of Karma, if you're familiar with that. In the Eastern religions, you do good, then good comes back to you. You do bad, bad comes back to you. Generally speaking, think of the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs, generally when you do good, you get good, but when you do bad, you get bad. But Ecclesiastes comes along and just shatters that. It just blows it up. So the Preacher here is taking that all into consideration. He says, “In spite of the reality that life is unpredictable, somehow, in some way, it's all in God's hands. When the Preacher could not predict whether a given person would experience prosperity or adversity, he believed that the righteous and the wise are still in God's sovereign hand.

When we are reminded of that, we come to realize that because things don't go according to our plan doesn't necessarily mean there is no plan. Amen? Simply because things don't go according to our plan, it doesn't necessarily follow that there is no plan.

So with that in place, there are four sections in the rest of this chapter that we're going to walk through. At the end of each section—in the context of the question “Is dying worth living for?”—I'm going to pose a question that's true to the text. And true to this genre, I'm not going to move on to the next passage immediately.

Here in the West, we operate from a linear mindset. A leads to B leads to C leads to D—and on and on we go, right? That's not how this works. We are to come back to this time after time after time, and both sit with it and sit in it. So when I throw this series of four questions out, I'm going to pause with each one and we are going to sit with the question. Let's read verses two through six:

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.

Of course, this “event” that happens to everyone is death. Warren Wiersbe puts it this way. “Death is not an accident. It's an appointment, a destiny that nobody but God can cancel or change.” The Preacher is putting before us the reality that one day we will all breathe our last here. The Preacher says, “The living know that they will die,” and it's that knowledge that he continues to put forth in this book. I grant you that while the thought of death is sobering, even unpleasant—the Preacher calls it an evil—it's also crucial, because death will end our opportunities on this earth.

One of the things I appreciate about the Preacher, one of the things I appreciate about this book, is that he is doing justice to the negative side of life—that side of life that we like to keep at arm's length. Death is the great reality facing each one of us as we go about our day-to-day living in this life under the sun. Death is also the one certainty, if we're real with ourselves, that we regularly distance from our minds and busy ourselves to avoid facing.

Several weeks ago at the Indian Creek campus, I preached the message. Prior to that Sunday, I had made arrangements with the local funeral home to have a casket delivered. So when everybody walked in, it was sitting up on the platform, tucked away in the back. We sang our songs, did announcements, all that kind of stuff, then I got up to preach. I didn't look at the casket; I didn't reference it until the very end. Then I said, “All right. I think it's time we talk about the elephant in the room.”

I went to the back corner, grabbed the casket and wheeled it front and center. Then I stood behind it and said this: "If we're honest with ourselves, that's pretty much how we treat death. Oh, it's in the room, but it's back there, not up here." Then I suggested, not in a sick, twisted or morbid and all-consuming way, "What if we place death where the Preacher places death: right in front of us? What if we allow death to inform us, to teach us. about how we should ought to live in this life under the sun?"

Is that not typically how we handle death? Framed in the words of that eminent cultural theologian Woody Allen, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." True? The reality of death in the context of life under the sun compels us to ask some questions we might not otherwise ask.

For example, since the same event happens to all, since the same reality awaits us all, does it really make any difference whether we live like a Billy Graham or an Osama bin Laden? Does it really make any difference whether we live like a Mother Teresa or a Jezebel? The same event is going to happen to each of us. Death awaits each of us.

Question #1: How is the certainty of my dying informing my living?

Without an honest look at the curse of death, I suggest that we miss a key piece of the puzzle of how to live well in a post-Genesis 3, here today, gone tomorrow, life under the sun reality? Is dying worth living for? So I propose question number one: how is the certainty of my dying informing my living? In verses seven to ten, the Preacher suggests three ways this life under the sun, in light of the reality of death, can actually be enjoyed.

Celebrate your family and friends.

The first way he gives us is in verses seven and eight: celebrate your family and friends.

⁷Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

You see, pleasure in and of itself is not necessarily God's competition; pleasure is merely a gauge of how valuable something or someone is to me. If we simply live for pleasure as an end in itself, not only will we miss out on enjoying God's good creation, we'll also experience the bondage of "more." I need more of this, more of this, more of....and we'll never be content.

So the Preacher says we need wisdom regarding pleasure. We need wisdom that on one hand avoids asceticism—the denial of pleasure—or hedonism—where pleasure becomes the greatest good, the excess of pleasure. He says we need wisdom to avoid both extremes or, as those cultural philosophers that make up the band 38 Special suggested, "Just hold on loosely, but don't let go. If you cling too tightly, you're going to lose control."

Celebrate your marriage.

Celebrate your family and friends, but also celebrate your marriage. Verse nine:

⁹Enjoy 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.

Let me pose a question to you. If I said to my wife, "Babe, I really enjoy being with you; I enjoy thinking about you; I enjoy talking to others about you," would you accuse me of being selfish? I hope not. Why not? Because my delight in my wife is actually evidence that I value her. I take pleasure in her. In fact, I think—no, I know—my wife would be displeased if I didn't have that posture about her in our relationship.

Celebrate your work.

God is not some cosmic killjoy. He has given us good things to enjoy. Family and friends. Marriage. He has also given us work. Verse ten tells us, "Celebrate your work."

¹⁰Whatever 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.

Here are some audience response questions:

- What does the acronym TGIF mean? "Thank God It's Friday."

- What about TGIM? Outside of my classroom, when was the last time you heard that? “TGIM, man! Thank God It’s Monday.” The next time will be the first time, right?
- Or TGIT, Thank God It’s Tuesday. Thank God It’s Wednesday. Thank God It’s Thursday. Thank God It’s Saturday. Thank God It’s.....Sunday.

Is everybody really just working for the weekend? Is that all it is? Or is work actually a good gift from a good God? Remember, work was in place before Genesis 3. And if my understanding of Scripture is correct, work will be in place on the new earth. Work’s a good gift from a good God. In giving us the gift of work—hear this well—God invites us to blend the creativity of our minds with the labor of our bodies, then share that creation with others. That’s work. So TGIM, man, tomorrow.

The Preacher advises us that if we are going to enjoy life under the sun, then we must accept the reality that death is unavoidable. Therefore, we should enjoy life wherever possible, while we have the opportunity, because there is no further opportunity when we’re dead. Parties, marital relations, daily work—all of these are part of the order God has crafted for human society, and He wants us to enjoy them.

Question #2: Does the bitterness of death help me savor the sweetness of life?

Is dying worth living for? Let’s look at verses 11 and 12:

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.

Be careful with the word “chance” here. Chance is not randomness. What it means in this context is things that appear outside of what we are able to foresee, what we are able to predict, but not outside something God has ordained. We live in a fallen world where evil and sin still have a daily impact in and on our lives, where we can predict or foresee everything. We’re not omniscient.

So yes, there are wonderful gifts to enjoy with this life, but don’t think that you and I have it all figured out because we don’t. The strong, the wise, the intelligent don’t always win. From our perspective, often life is unpredictable. It really is. Author and pastor Chuck Swindoll writes, “Being in the hand of God is not synonymous with, or a guarantee for, being economically prosperous, physically healthy, shielded from pain, enjoying a trouble-free occupation and having everyone smile and appreciate us.”

Just that last phrase is not reality, right? That’s not real life. That’s not where I live; that’s not where you live. Suggestion: maybe it’s time we allow suffering back into our sanctification. Maybe it’s time we allow adversity back into the forming and conforming of our lives into the image of Christ. The reality is that adversity and suffering was even used in Jesus’ life to form Him and conform Him, as Hebrews 5:7-9 states: *“In the days of his flesh”*—while He was on this earth— *“Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”* Now watch this. *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience”* through what? *“Through what he suffered,”* through adversity. *“And being made perfect...”* The word perfect here means volitionally... competent. He is now ready for the task at hand. What was the task at hand? The cross.

So Jesus’ suffering formed in Him obedience and made Him ready to become *“the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him”* (verse nine). If we are Jesus’ disciples and the Father formed and fashioned the life of Christ through adversity and suffering, then maybe, just maybe, the same will be true for us in this life under the sun. Right? Is that fair?

Question #3: Am I present in the present before the present becomes the past?

Is dying worth living for? Let’s consider verses 13-18:

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

There's a parable told about two fish. One is a young fish, very immature and unwise. The other is an older fish, very mature and wise. While swimming in the ocean, the young fish swims up to the older fish and asks, "Hey, can you tell me where I can find the ocean?" To which the older, wiser, mature fish said, "Um, you're swimming in it." At which the younger, unwise, immature fish replied, "This? This is just water."

Do we want what we have? Do we want the good gifts, the wise counsel, that God regularly brings into our lives. Or are we more like that young fish. "This? This isn't the ocean. These aren't good gifts. This is just water." C.S. Lewis coined a phrase, "chronological snobbery," meaning that every generation is prone to think that with their generation truth, goodness, beauty and wisdom have now arrived, so we have nothing to learn from the past. I call it generational elitism and it's a trap.

Question #4: Am I listening to the wise while I can still hear?

Is dying worth living for? Just like a book cannot read itself, we cannot give meaning to our own lives. We are, after all, the creature and not the Creator. We must look to the Author and Perfecter of our lives, Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel of Jesus is that He came into our life under the sun, met us where we're at, in order to take us to life beyond the sun.

Jesus takes our "We're not in Kansas anymore" lament, reframes it and transforms it. Instead of, "Is dying worth living for?" Jesus asks Himself, "Is all this living worth dying for?" And His 2,000-year-old answer was—and continues to be—a resounding, emphatic "Yes!" That's the good life under the sun.

Village Bible Church | 847 North State Route 47, Sugar Grove, IL 60554 | (630) 466-7198 | www.villagebible.org/sugar-grove

All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers (www.sermontranscribers.com).