

Living wisely in the hands of God

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- [0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we come as your gathered people, hungering for your word.
- And so we come with expectation that you would speak to us, that you would help us to see how we should approach life under the sun. Give us indeed the eyes of faith and help us to live the way you want us to.
- And not just live the way you want us to, but to have joy even as we do that. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Have you ever tried to do it all?
- And then, despite feeling busy, felt like you still needed to do more? That what you did was not quite enough? Sometimes I do. Sometimes I worry that maybe I haven't put enough effort into the sermon, or that I haven't spent enough time talking to you guys, or that I haven't prayed enough, or that I haven't put enough energy into strategic planning or developing our leaders.
- And I feel guilty. So, I think, maybe I should try to squeeze in one more regular meeting with person X or person Y.
- [1 : 16] Maybe I should read one more commentary, or put in another hour of work to make the sermon feel more relevant. And perhaps you know that feeling too.
- You feel like you could have achieved more at work this week. You feel like you could have given more time to your family and friends. You feel like you could have done more to stop your house from being so messy.
- You feel guilty. So you push yourself more. Maybe you can just work harder or faster, since that seems to be the most natural way to fit an increasing amount of activities into the same non-increasing amount of time.
- Or you say to yourself, don't just work harder, work smarter. And so you skim the internet for articles on time management or productivity hacks.
- You try to increase your efficiency. But let's slow down and think a little bit about why we feel this way.
- [2 : 25] Where does that impulse to do more come from? What are we doing when we get caught up in what one cardiologist calls hurry sickness?
- That is, a continuous struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time. Well, for one thing, we are forgetting we are human.
- By definition, we are limited because we are creatures. We have limited bodies. We can only be in one place at any one time. We can't be everywhere.
- We have limited minds which doesn't know everything, can never know everything, whose IQ number can only ever go so high.
- We have limited giftings. No single person is the absolute best at maths, playing the trombone, origami, and fixing cars all at the same time.
- [3 : 29] But we forget we are human. Instead, we believe the devil's lie. From the very beginning, the devil has been persuading us to forget we are creatures.

He wants us to feel ashamed that we are not God and to reject the creaturely limits that we possess. You can be more, he whispered to Adam and Eve.

You should be more. You can have it all. You can do it all. You can be like God, accepting no limits on what you can do, how you can do it, where you can do it.

You can obtain control of the universe to the extent of determining good and evil. You can take life into your own hands and exercise and exercise mastery over it.

Leave it to God and you'll just be miserable. And we believe him and end up trying to do it all. But the problem is we can't.

[4 : 42] And when we can't, we feel like we don't measure up. We compare ourselves with others and wonder why we can't cope. But the horrible thing is that feeling of not measuring up often causes us to try even more to do it all.

You know, we don't want to feel like we're not good enough. We want to prove ourselves to others and maybe even to ourselves that we are in total control of our lives, that it's all going fine.

And so we try again to take our lives into our own hands. Well, today, the teacher looks at all that hurry sickness, shakes his head at us and says to us, Hebel, why do you want to live like that?

He asks. Haven't I shown you already throughout this book that refusing to accept your limits is foolish? Haven't I shown you already that all attempts at chasing gain with your labour is doomed to failure?

Because we live life under the sun. This is our world today, ephemeral and enigmatic, fleeting and frustrating.

[6 : 11] it is Hebel, labouring under sin's curse. But since we are slow to learn, the teacher says, let me remind you one more time of the entire message of Ecclesiastes.

You see, today's passage, Ecclesiastes 9 verse 1 to 12, is really the message of the whole book in a nutshell. It's a great summary of its main point.

So if you've come today without having heard the rest of Ecclesiastes, you've picked the right day to come. And the teacher is going to give us hope, even joy, because he's going to show us the answer to the following questions.

How can we pursue a path different to that of hurry sickness? happiness? How can we be wise, even find joy in this Hebel world?

Well, the teacher says, here's my answer in two parts. First of all, don't take life into your own hands. Verse 1, So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands.

[7 : 31] And with these words, the teacher makes clear that God's people are held by God. We're under His supervision. We're in His care.

We're in the palm of His hands. Now, that is reassuring, is it not? We'll come back to that later. But for now, I want to explore the flip side of that.

For, if the righteous and the wise are in God's hands, that means even though we might be righteous, even though we might be wise, that alone doesn't mean we have the right to control our lives.

It's not in our hands. life. And so, verse 1 is disconcerting at the same time it is reassuring. We are not meant to take life into our own hands because we can't.

It doesn't belong to us. We have no control over it. We are not its master. And to support that conclusion, the teacher draws on two observations he has made about life.

[8 : 50] Firstly, he says, life is unpredictable. Life is unpredictable. Look at verse 1 again. The righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them.

some commentators suggest that this is referring to God's love or hate, in which case, verse 1 is suggesting that the dilemma is this.

We don't know for sure what God's attitude is towards us. We are not sure if God's hand is for us or against us. We don't know if he has accepted or rejected us.

But I'm not sure that best fits the overall context of the passage. Instead, I think verse 1 is simply saying this. Even though we might be righteous and wise, even though we know in our heads we are in God's hands, yet we cannot be certain our lives will be completely smooth sailing.

Regardless of what we are, we might experience love or hate, good or evil. All possibilities remain open.

[10 : 13] In this respect then, the righteous and the wise are no different from the unrighteous and the foolish. If you look at both groups in life, notice that their experience is filled with both highs and lows.

There is not necessarily a clear correlation between being good and being loved or blessed. We might be wise, but we still cannot know our future and whether blessing or testing awaits.

We might know we are in God's hands, but we don't know exactly what is in his hand. We don't know what lies around the corner.

Life is unpredictable. Of course, it's not completely unpredictable. Take Adam Petey, for instance. He's the current world record holder and Olympic champion in the 100 meters breaststroke event.

He has not lost a race in eight years. Every time he takes to the water, you expect him to win. After all, he holds the top 20 times in his event.

[11 : 30] And if over the last eight years, in every single event he competed in, you bet on him winning, you've just provided yourself with a regular income.

And yet, a few days ago, at the ongoing Commonwealth Games, for the first time in his senior career, he did not finish first.

It was a major upset. No one expected him to fail, not just to get the gold medal, but to miss out on the medals altogether.

But he finished fourth. And that's the point the teacher wants to make in verse 11. I have seen something else under the sun.

The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favour to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.

[12 : 34] Look at life, the teacher says, and what do you notice? Yes, usually the fastest runner or swimmer wins, but not always.

Usually the strongest wins, but not always. Because, end of verse 11, time and chance happen to them all.

The word chance here is really referring to the unexpected events and circumstances that intervenes in our lives. And all sorts of events and circumstances could happen to turn things upside down, can't it?

You train for ages, but you fracture your foot right before the Commonwealth Games. invest years in your PhD, but at the end, the accreditation of your university is suddenly withdrawn and your PhD is worthless.

You do more than is required to protect yourself from COVID, but you catch it anyway. For you cannot control the timing and the events that make up your life.

[13 : 44] you can try to do more, you can try to do it all, but there is no certainty all will go according to plan. Or in the words of James 4, verse 13 to 14, you could say, today or tomorrow, I will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money.

But do you even know what will happen tomorrow? No, you don't. For, back to Ecclesiastes 9, verse 12, no one knows when their hour will come.

As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

So just as fish and birds don't see what's coming, neither do we. Times of disaster could happen any time. I remember a friend of mine, a Christian, telling me one evening that his father had just been diagnosed with cancer.

24 hours later, when the news had barely sung in, he came to tell me again his father had died. It happened so quickly and unexpectedly.

[15 : 06] That just shows how much of our lives are outside our grass. As the great Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner so poetically puts it, our lives are swung from one extreme to the other by the tidal pool of waves we do not control.

In the sea of life, we are more truly the fish caught in a cruel net than the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls.

Life is unpredictable. But that's not the only observation the teacher makes. For secondly, he says death is inevitable.

Death is inevitable. Come back with me to verse 2. Or, the teacher says, share a common destiny.

all go to the grave. Death, you see, is the most inclusive employer of all. It will win awards for the way it champions diversity.

[16 : 19] For it doesn't matter if you live a good or evil life. It doesn't matter if you're the most religious person ever, or you never step foot into a church.

It doesn't matter if you have integrity or not. Death comes to take you anyway. Everyone shares in an uncertain life, first observation, and everyone shares in a certain death, second observation.

If you've been following this series, you know very well the teacher makes this point again and again. But just as importantly, death is not merely something that is unavoidable.

No, verse 3, it is a great evil. It is the great disruptor because it disrupts relationships as those who die are torn away from their loved ones.

It is the great degenerator because it tears away soul from body and turns those same bodies into mere food for maggots.

[17 : 29] How is that not evil? But there is more. Because the teacher is not just saying death is the evil, he is saying the way death does its work is also evil.

It takes down the good people, not just the bad. It rewards the upright in the same way it rewards the mass murderer.

Everyone dies. And unfortunately for us, we can't wash our hands clean of this. We can't claim to be innocent bystanders. Because verse 3 again, it is our hearts that are full of evil.

The evil of death finds its origins in the evil that emerges from our hearts. The evil of trying to be God, to replace God, to exercise control over every inch of our lives, independent of God.

Try to do it all, the teacher asks. Try to be God in a way you shouldn't. That attempt, verse 3 again, leads only to madness while you live, as you seek what you cannot get, and end up the same as everyone else.

[18 : 51] Dead. So here is the teacher's first conclusion. Life is so often beyond control, it's unpredictable. And death too is beyond control, it's inevitable.

Or put another way, our lives, like it or not, are not in our hands. So don't try to be God over our lives.

But let me ask you a question. how often do we try to live as if the one thing that is inevitable will never come, while the many things which are unpredictable are the things we are so certain about.

So perhaps you think, if I just spend enough hours in the office, I will get that promotion. Then I'll relax. If I just work those two jobs, including the Sunday shift, which means I'm never at church, I'll earn enough money.

And then after that, yeah, I'll do less. If I just go to the Bible study regularly, or follow what the Bible says about parenting or marriage or some other subject, then life will surely go 100% well.

[20 : 13] My kids are guaranteed to follow Jesus. My marriage is guaranteed to be amazing. You see, we so often think of life as a computer program, something that we can just put in the X and Ys and it will work out in a certain way.

As long as the proper method or technique is employed, we can control the outcome. That's what we think. But the root of such thinking, in the end, is deeply unchristian.

It's actually not that much different from people who consult BOMOS or tarot cards or Ouija boards. Because the mindset is the same.

How can I take life into my own hands? How can I exercise control over my life that I can manipulate it to fit what I want?

God becomes the means to my ends. God says, but the teacher pleads with us, don't go down that route.

[21 : 21] It's futile. And thank God, as long as you are alive, you can change course. You don't have to keep following this path.

That's the point of the proverb in verse 4. Anyone who is among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better than a dead lion.

Now, to make sense of this proverb, we must understand that dogs in ancient Near Eastern culture were among the most despised animals. They are not considered cute pets.

They are unclean. Lions, on the other hand, are noble beasts, much admired. So, you know, lions are here on the hierarchy and dogs are down here.

But, in spite of that, a living dog definitely has the advantage over a dead lion. He's still alive. Because, here is the teacher's point.

[22 : 23] You have one life. You have one opportunity. Once you are dead, that opportunity is gone forever. There is no replay button.

That's what verses 5 and 6 are all about. The dead can't even reflect on their own lives, much less live it. Those emotions that make us feel most alive, love and hatred, are permanently switched off.

But, since you are still alive, you still have opportunity to switch gears. There's hope. So, given you can't control life and death is inevitable, so how can you make the most of today?

How can you still live well? Or, put another way, how can you die well? It's not just a question for the old. As you know, the recent Clang Valley Bible Conference was on this very subject.

But, I got a bit of the vibe that some of us might think that this is a subject just for the old. If we are young today, we know in theory that we will die someday, but it feels so far away.

[23 : 37] So, the subject doesn't grab us. But remember verse 12, no one knows when their hour will come. You are not promised that you will die only when you are 90.

I am not 40 yet, and I have schoolmates who are dead. So, what should we do? We've heard the first part of the answer already, don't take life into your own hands.

things. But here's the second part. Put your life into God's hands. Put your life into God's hands. Now, when I say that, I wonder what comes to your mind.

What does it mean to put your life into God's hands? Maybe you're thinking, oh, it means to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Maybe you think it means to participate in Christ's sufferings so that we can share in his glory.

Maybe you think it means letting his ways guide your ways. And every one of those answers are correct. They're affirmed in the Bible.

[24 : 51] They're important truths that must be proclaimed. But my guess is, before today, none of you were thinking verse 7.

go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. You see, how can we be wise in this Hebel world?

Given that life is short and unpredictable, and you don't know when you will go, how should we live? Answer, live life to the food.

Take what you've been given and enjoy. We've heard the teacher express this sentiment a few times already in this book. But this is his strongest yet.

Because, for the first time, he expresses it as a command. Go, he says. This is the day that the Lord has made.

[25 : 59] Go, and rejoice and be glad in it. You see, what we are seeing in verses 7 to 10 is really the essence of the entire book.

Genesis 3, the teacher says, is the reality that encompasses our entire lives. Because of the fall, because of sin, because of death, the world is hebal, life is enigmatic, things don't always make sense, they don't always work as they should.

But, but, Genesis 2, the teacher says, is also still true. The world was created good, and in spite of the fall, it still is good.

That hasn't changed. Now, think about it back in Genesis 2. What did Adam and Eve have? They had each other, they had work, they had food and drink, and they had God.

That's all they had, really. And all they had was a gift from God. Then sin came, death came, and yet, those Genesis two gifts, food and work and marriage, still remains, even today.

[27 : 36] And God remains. He didn't leave the moment the world got messy. He remains here in it and here with us. That's why the teacher says, go eat your food with gladness, verse 7.

Go drink your wine with a joyful heart, verse 7 again. Go enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, verse 9. Go, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, verse 10.

because to put your life into God's hands is simply to recognize that your very life is a gift itself to be received, and all the Genesis two things you have, food and drink and work and relationships, are all gifts from him, still to be enjoyed.

That's what it means to put your life in his hands. Does that sound a little too unspiritual for you? Does that make you feel a little uncomfortable?

Maybe that's because we who call ourselves evangelical Christians don't have as strong a doctrine of creation as a doctrine of salvation. That's why we need Ecclesiastes.

[28 : 59] It reminds us that to put our lives in his hands is to find joy in his good gifts of creation. I wonder if you notice how the emphasis in these verses fall on joy.

It's not just go eat your food, but go do it with gladness. Do it with a joyful heart and joy. Or take verse 8, always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.

You see, for them, this is the stuff that you wear when it's Chinese New Year or Gawai or Christmas. These are celebration clothes. These are celebration activities.

It's the time of festivity. And did you notice when you should be glad and celebrate these good gifts? Look at the beginning of verse 8 again.

Always. This is to be our attitude in life. It's not to try to gain it all. It is to find joy simply in his good gifts of creation that we receive.

[30 : 21] I want you to try to grasp what this really means. it means the next time you are just playing the piano for fun and really enjoying that, you don't have to feel guilty.

It means the next time you take pleasure in that very satisfying bowl of laksa, you know what? God is taking pleasure in your pleasure too.

It means that when you take satisfaction in writing that piece of programming code, when you take satisfaction in getting the artwork for your graphic design right, when you take satisfaction in seeing those scones well-baked, when you take satisfaction in seeing that your son has benefited from your badminton coaching, you shouldn't imagine that God is somehow looking over your shoulder, frowning at you because you have not used all the 24 hours in your day for evangelism and Bible study.

It even means that if you found pleasure in sex with your spouse, that is not somehow something dirty because you are simply expressing your humanity.

Remember, it was always God's idea back in Genesis 2 that you should enjoy food and drink and work and relationships.

[31 : 49] relationships. And when you do, just like a parent takes pleasure in watching his kids gobble down some ice cream or make sounds of delight when they are just having fun, so that's God.

In fact, the only reason we might find this hard to believe is because once again, we have believed the lie of the devil. don't forget back in Genesis 3 what he whispered to Eve.

Did God really say you can't eat from the tree? And what the devil is really insinuating is, isn't God such a cute joy? You can't even do anything.

But James tells us, chapter 1, verse 17, that every good and perfect gift is from above. coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

That has always been true. It was true in Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and that hasn't changed this side of the cross. If anything, the cross proves it.

[33 : 03] God is generous. He's given every good gift. He's given the best gift of all, Jesus, and the best way to respond is to go and enjoy them.

And that's why in 1 Timothy 4, 3-5, Paul calls on those who impose unbiblical restrictions on whether you can marry or not, or whether you can eat certain foods or not, as promoting the teachings of demons.

Instead, he says in verse 4, for everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

Well, that's how we should live in this world. Put your life in God's hands. Now, certainly don't worship these gifts. They are not your creator.

But as God's creatures enjoy God's good gift of creation. But not just that, because I want you to notice one other thing. To put your life in God's hands is ultimately to find joy in God's good gift of grace.

[34 : 18] Look once again at verse 7. Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Here's the other big surprise. I wonder how you think about God's grace. Maybe you think of it as something that Jesus had to wrestle from the Father's hand.

You know, God the Father didn't really want to be gracious to us. Jesus had to kind of convince him to. And yet, Ecclesiastes 9 verse 7 tells us nothing can be further from the truth.

God never needed us to earn his favor. Back in the Garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve accomplished anything, before they had done any kind of work, God had already said of them, it was very good.

They were pleasing in his eyes, even though they had yet to achieve anything. And today, even before we have finished the work of our hands, even though our earthly accomplishments are fleeting and don't last, God still smiles.

[35 : 46] He approves. He's like a father who genuinely enjoys his little kids' artwork, or their attempts at it anyway, even though he knows that artwork might maybe spend a week or two on the fridge, and then into the bin it goes.

Because everything we have are all from him anyway, given to us irrespective of what we achieve with them.

But this is the gospel truth. God doesn't relate to us on the basis of our achievements. He relates to us on the basis of grace.

grace. Yes, even in the Old Testament. So that frees us from having to try to do it all.

That frees us from thinking we need to prove ourselves, to measure up. It frees us simply to eat and drink with gladness. When we know the sovereign God is full of grace, we won't try to run away from him.

[36 : 53] We won't try to take our lives into our own hands. Instead, we will want to put our lives into his hands. Because of grace, we can live a life before him, confident we have his smile.

We can go to the party and not feel guilty about having fun. At the same time, we can go to the party, not to forget God, but to be full of thanksgiving to God, not do things he doesn't approve of.

We become free simply to be the same person whether we are at worship, at work, or at play. Because we don't just see the goodness of God in church, we see the goodness of God in all of creation.

And if we are Christians today, every gift of creation we enjoy also points us to something more. They all point to our future home.

The food, literally the bread and the wine, reminds us of the Lord's Supper, which reminds us of the wedding banquet waiting for us in the new creation. The blessing of marriage points forward to the ultimate wedding between Christ and his church.

[38 : 16] and the white clothes remind us that all this is worn for us because Christ has given us the clothes of salvation that we wear.

And because of what Christ has done, we can truly step into the presence of God himself, the giver of these good gifts. I wonder if you remember at the beginning of this series that I said the subtitle of this sermon series is Memento Mori Vita Donum S.

I wonder if any of you have gone to find out what that means. Well, it is Latin for remember death, life is a gift.

Yes, life is unpredictable, death is inevitable, don't forget that, but as a creature, your very life is a gift from a gracious God to be enjoyed and live before him.

This is the book of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell. Let's learn its lesson today. Let's pray. Father, we indeed pray, Lord, that we will learn the lesson not to put our lives into our own hands.

[39 : 40] We're no good at it. We can't control much, if anything, but Father, help us to entrust it into your hands, knowing that we are entrusting it into the hands of a good and gracious and generous God.

So, Lord, we pray that we would indeed just go and enjoy everything that you have given us, even as we want to tell others of the gospel, which enables them to enter into the presence of a good and generous God to enjoy the best gifts that you can bring.

We comment all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.