

Ecclesiastes' Guide to Joy **Ecclesiastes 9:7-10**

June 26, 2016
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Do you like my shirt (see video of this message)? Our missionary in India, Abraham Thomas, gave it to me. It is a formal Indian shirt, like you would wear to a wedding. And it fits today's Scripture passage in ways you will see in a moment.

Life. We all get one. Ecclesiastes has pressed home a painful reality; death is certain and life is unpredictable. Life means opportunity. Death is the end of opportunity. Hence Ecclesiastes 9:4 (ESV) says, "*A living dog is better than a dead lion.*" Better a living Chihuahua than a dead Simba.

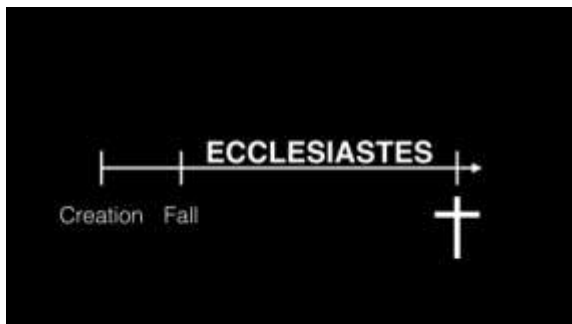
If you've been following our Ecclesiastes series, you would expect the next section to be another review of the absurdity of everything and the silliness of life under the sun and the meaninglessness of anything we think important. Ecclesiastes, blah, blah, blah. Instead, Solomon takes it a different direction. A pleasurable one. One I think everyone here is going to enjoy and I hope apply even today.

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy 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. Whatever 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." (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

Did you hear the big point? Rather than using the brevity and uncertainty of life as a reason for depression, Solomon says, the certainty of death should empower us to some serious joy in living. How about a biblical sanction for flat-out enjoying life?

There are a few ways we could tackle this text. We could look at the action verbs. *Go. Eat. Drink. Enjoy life. Work with all your might.* We could also summarize the section. One clever summary I found was three "W's:" *Wine, Wife, and Work.*

I want to tackle this by seeing it broadly in the context of the Ecclesiastes message as a whole.



Ecclesiastes explains man's existence apart from God. In history this had led to two basic approaches to life. One is hedonism. *"Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* (1 Corinthians 15:32) Pleasure and self-indulgence are enthroned, lived for, and worshiped. Death doesn't motivate moderation, death motivates decadence. Life is finding the next party. The next high. The next sensation.

The other approach is a morbid stoicism and pessimism. *Que sera, sera. What will be, will be. It doesn't matter, we're all going to die so what's the point?* This is unyielding despair and pessimism. They call themselves realists. Philosophers call this fatalism. Both are empty lifestyles. Hedonism fails because life doesn't offer enough pleasure. Fatalism fails because it offers no meaning to anything.

Along comes Ecclesiastes. The hedonist connects with its portrayal of life's pleasure as fleeting. The fatalist connects with its portrayal of life's all-encompassing futility. This is the power of Ecclesiastes. It offers a blunt description of how life feels and inserts God right where our philosophy of life needs him most.

With that said, let's get into the meat of what Solomon says. This comes on the heels of a harsh description of the certainty of death. Verse 7 flows as the "therefore." Since we are going to die and we never know which day is our last, *"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do."* Eat bread. Drink wine. I know some here are fixated on the Bible saying "drink wine." It would derail this message to go off on the subject so I'll just refer you to our teaching series, [Wine, Wisdom, and the Holy Spirit](#) which deals with Christian liberty and love.

The point here is that God sanctions not just the eating and the drinking but the enjoyment of them as well. Why do you think he made things taste so good and gave us taste buds that send pleasure signals to our brains? These are gifts from God to humanity and are part of his purpose and pleasure in creation. *"You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."* (Psalm 104:14-15) The Fall didn't remove these pleasures from creation. The Psalmist says these "make the face shine" and "strengthen man's heart." So when Ecclesiastes urges us to go eat and drink and do so with joy and a merry heart, it is not merely sanctioning God's creation gifts to mankind but also urging happiness in them as also God's design.

Is it just food and drink? No. Look. It gets even better. *"Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head."* (Ecclesiastes 9:8) A couple thousand years ago, people didn't have washing machines or bleach. White means clean. A white garment was reserved for very special occasions. The wedding. The party. The festival. To wear white was to be in a party spirit. Today we would say, *let's dress up go eat at some fancy restaurant downtown.* Dressing up signifies something special. A celebration. Dress up and enjoy!

Don't let oil be lacking on your head. Again, 2000 years ago resources were very limited. You didn't have a Bed Bath and Beyond in every town. Oil was extremely valuable. Remember Mary who anointed Jesus used very expensive oil. In our day this is a luxury moisturizer or a fine cologne. Moisturize! Exfoliate! Clean up! Splash on the cologne! Enjoy your life!

But wait, it gets better. *"Enjoy 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."* (Verse 9) Solomon makes an assumption here, that you have a wife or you have a husband. That's not always the case and we've done lots of teaching

on singleness to the glory of God. But we see in creation that God gave a gift to Adam. Her name was Eve. Eve was brought to Adam for two reasons. *"There was not found a helper fit for him."* (Genesis 2:20) So he provided a "helpmate." And God also said, *"It is not good that the man should be alone."* (Genesis 2:18) So he provided a companion who was the perfect complement to Adam's humanity, masculinity, and sexuality.

Why? God wanted Adam to enjoy Eve and Eve to enjoy Adam. This includes all aspects of God's design for marriage: friendship, companionship, and marital intimacy. It's all good! One commentator summarized these verses as: "With gratitude – eat your bread, drink your wine, dress in white, and make a little love to your wife." (Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether*, p. 93). That's blunt, but that's what this text is encouraging.

Why is this to be enjoyed? Solomon hasn't forgotten about death. He includes the reminder *"...all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun."* (Ecclesiastes 9:9) "They may turn to love their wives, not because sexual love is forever, but rather because it is not. In the world of creatures, we may only enjoy what we do not worship." (Wilson, p. 93, emphasis added)

First Things Versus Second Things

That little phrase caught my attention. We may only enjoy what we do not worship. What does that mean? While these pleasures are great, why do we so easily obsess over these things and somehow they lose their appeal? We can only truly enjoy things as God intended when we see them as secondary things.

"The woman who makes a dog the center of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping. The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only pleasurable) levels of intoxication. It is a glorious thing to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman—glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life (it is sometimes feasible) that you will have nothing to do but contemplate her, and what happens?"

*Of course this law has been discovered before, but it will stand re-discovery. It may be stated as follows: every preference of a small good to a great, or partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice is made.... You can't get second things by putting them first. You can get second things only by putting first things first." (C.S. Lewis, "First and Second Things," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, p. 280).*

Did you catch it? There are first things and there are secondary things. Really, there is a first thing/person and everything else is secondary. God is ultimate. He made the universe and all its pleasures as a reflection of him. They can only be enjoyed as a reflection when we love in first place what it is reflecting. When God commanded, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."* (Mark 12:30) he was creating an order in our hearts. God is the first thing. All his good gifts are second things.

I've often illustrated this with pictures. We love a picture of somebody when we love the person in the picture. When a dating couple breaks up, the first thing to go are the pictures. The only way for a picture to continue to mean something is for our love for the person to continue to mean more to us than the picture. I've seen in many homes old and treasured

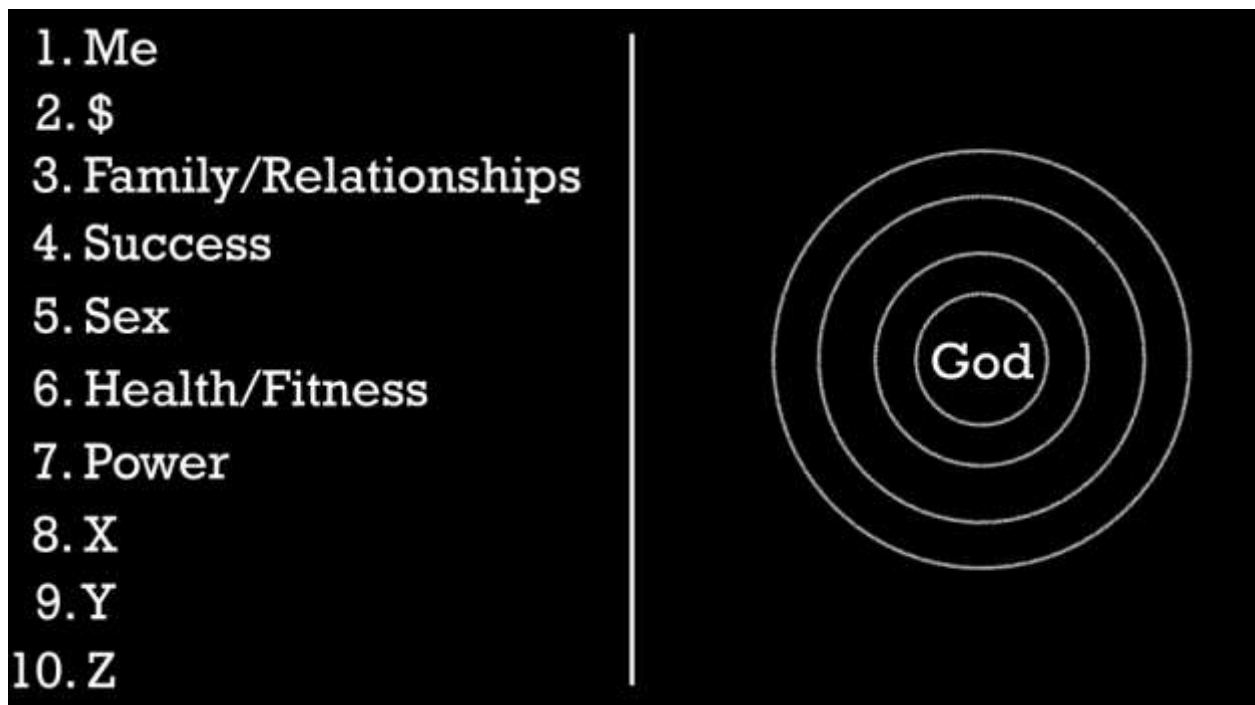
pictures of moms and dads and husbands and wives. Brothers killed in the war. They stay on the mantle because the love for the person doesn't fade. This is why the world and its desires and pleasures are Ecclesiastes. The unsaved have no first thing and keep trying to derive happiness from second things. All they have is the picture, not the person.

All the substance abuse and sexual addictions and codependencies and all the tragedies and despairs that flow from them can all be summarized as man confusing second things for first things.

Maybe that is you today. Your life aches with emptiness even though you've partied hard and tried everything this world seems to offer. Yet something is missing. You are missing a first thing. A person to love and live for that doesn't disappoint or fade.

Ecclesiastes (and the Bible's) Guide to Joy

We must put first things first



How does God move into this position? It's not by our trying or our going to God. It is the wonderful truth that God came to us through his Son Jesus. He came and died for our sin and died to displace secondary things (idols) from our hearts and to enthrone his glorious person in our lives. He becomes this when we put our personal trust in him as our Savior and Lord by virtue of his death on the cross for our sins. To believe is to put God back where he belongs on the priority list of our heart. Everything else significantly moves down. In fact, everything moves to where it's supposed to be and we are free to live for Christ and enjoy the secondary things as secondary things.

Perhaps God will use that sadness in your life to lead you to joy, first with him as Savior, then with everything else in its proper place.

God delights when we enjoy his gifts fully

The second application is a guide to happy Christian living. What do I mean? The first word in verse 7 is "Go." It doesn't say wait; be passive. "Go" is an action word. These are things we are free to pursue along with the joys they create in us. There is no guilt or shame. It doesn't mean we are unspiritual. He delights in our joy in his gifts!

We have celebrated two birthdays in the DeWitt house in June; both daughters in the last three weeks. We have given gifts. As a parent I have discovered there is great joy in seeing your kids excited about the gift. I know this because I also know the feeling when they aren't excited. They open it. They look at it. No joy. No excitement. They set it aside. Another item doomed for the garage sale. It's kind of disappointing. *We paid good money for that. Don't you like it?* But when they open a gift and the joy is on their face, and days later they are hugging the doll or playing with the toy, I love it. I gave it to her hoping she would like it.

God has given us wonderful gifts that he delights in seeing us delight in. Not to worship them but to receive them as gifts. If I ever got the idea that Kiralee actually loved her Elsa doll more than me, I think Elsa would find herself in the garbage bin. I don't want her to love my gifts more than me or to use me as a way to simply get gifts. I want her to love me first and when she does, I have total joy seeing her enjoy my gifts for her and I want her happiness in them.

This is why verse 10 is there. *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."* (Ecclesiastes 9:10) This passage is not biblical permission for a hedonistic life, but rather a circumspect one. There's no marriage in eternity. There's no sex in eternity. There will be aspects of this world we love there, but now is the time for these to be vigorously pursued and savored.

This applies to two different Christians. First is Mr. Sunshine. He's carefree. He enjoys the finer things of life. Everything's cool. Mr. Sunshine gets the joy but not the seriousness of it. Life and time are being wasted.

The other Christian is the too serious one. All he has in his wardrobe is sackcloth and ashes. He would never waste money on cologne or a latte for that matter. Why should I enjoy a latte when people are dying and going to hell? The story of Jesus he likes the least is Jesus celebrating at the wedding feast and turning water into wine for no other reason than to keep the party going.

Some of us aren't serious enough. Some are far too serious.

The wisdom in this passage is to look back to creation and God's blessing on these gifts and to enjoy them to his glory. And to look ahead to our certain death and savor every sweet moment in this life which will make all our joys serious ones.

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