

What's the point of death?

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Date: 13 September 2020

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[0 : 00] So on the 24th of June 1982, British Airways Flight 009 took off from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, heading for Perth, Australia. The Boeing 747 flew into a cloud of dust and ash above the Indian Ocean, and the engines failed, and the plane began to freefall.

And so Captain Eric Moody made an announcement, a masterpiece of understatement really. He said, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have a small problem. All four engines have stopped. We are all doing our best to get them going again.

I trust you are not in too much distress. And Charles Capewell, who was travelling with his two young sons, who sensed that they were in trouble, they looked at their dad as if to say to him, well, what do we do now, dad?

And he told them to pull down the blind so that they couldn't see outside and just pretend that it wasn't happening. The good news about the flight is that it did have a remarkable escape.

After about a quarter of an hour, without any power, the engines all of a sudden were brought back into life again. The ash that had clogged them had then hardened and then broken off, and the engines were able to restart.

[1 : 14] And so the plane headed back to Jakarta, where it landed safely. So good news, but doesn't it sound strange that here they are hurtling down towards the sea, and the best that the dad can say to his sons is, just pretend it isn't happening.

But maybe it isn't so strange after all, because isn't that what many people do when it comes to death? Choose not to think about it and pretend that it isn't happening.

And the reality is that we are all hurtling towards death, closer to death right now than we were when we walked through the door this afternoon. Because death is the only fixed reality in life.

When you think about it, death is the only thing that really is certain. And so nothing that we can do as human beings will change the inevitability of our death.

And that's why the teacher in Ecclesiastes chapter 9 tackles this issue of death head on. Because what he wants to do in his search for meaning in life, he wants us to look at all of life, and also look at death, because death will help us make sense of how we live our lives.

[2 : 25] And so what we see in our reading today is that the certainty of death challenges us to live a wise life. The certainty of death challenges us to live a wise life.

And so we're going to look at this passage really under two headings. First one is, death is certain, so enjoy life. Verse 1 to 10. And then secondly, life is uncertain, so be wise.

Verse 11 to 18. Death is certain, so enjoy life. Life is uncertain, so be wise. So the first point, death is certain, so enjoy life. Look at what the teacher says in verse 1 to 2.

So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands. But no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good, so with the sinful. As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. So the teacher here is continuing his reflection on everything that he has observed in life.

[3 : 36] And he wants to wake us up to the reality of death. Of course, we don't like to think about death, but death is the common destiny that we all share.

And so he wants us to work backwards from the fixed point of death to help us make sense of life. Because everybody dies, no matter who we are or what we've done.

So the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, the believer and the unbeliever, the truth teller and the liar, all will die. Whether Mother Teresa or Adolf Hitler, we all share the common destiny of death.

And so it doesn't matter if you jog around Victoria Park every morning, if you only drink bottled water, if you practice a vegan diet, if you avoid drugs and alcohol.

Fact is, you'll still die. Because we all will. George Bernard Shaw said, death is the ultimate statistic. One out of one dies. So death will catch up with us all sooner or later.

[4 : 40] And so he says in verse 3, this is the evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil.

And there is madness in their hearts while they live. And afterwards, they join the dead. So he sees death as being an evil that happens under the sun. It's an evil thing that happens in life.

Not just that death is evil. We know that it is. It's painful. It's sad. But death is evil in the indiscriminate manner in which it operates.

So a young child is hit by a car and dies. Yet a violent criminal can live out his days in luxury before he dies. So he's saying under the sun, it makes no sense.

And so while we can't understand why some people die when they do, we can't understand why there is death. And so the teacher says we know there's death because the hearts of people are full of evil.

[5 : 47] In other words, we all have this sinful human nature. We're born with it. Because before sin entered this world, there was no death.

Death wasn't part of God's good creation. But then when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, it resulted in the fall. And a consequence of the fall was that death had entered into our world.

So death is the curse for rebellion against God. Paul says in Romans that the wages of sin is death. And yet the good news is that death is in the end.

Jesus Christ defeated death through his resurrection. Now, of course, the teacher could only grasp so much. But he wants us to focus on death so that we know how to live life.

And so see what he says in verse 4. Anyone who is among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. Well, what does he mean?

[6 : 48] Well, in ancient Israel, dogs were despised and unclean. They were filthy scavengers. They weren't pets. You wouldn't let a dog into your house. But lions were different.

Lions were great, noble creatures. Strong, powerful, and fierce. And so he's saying, but if the lion is dead, it's nothing.

A dog, a dirty dog, is better if it's alive. And so the point he's making is, well, where there is life, there is hope. So death is certain, but if you're alive, you've got the opportunity to live your life to the max.

I wonder if you read the obituaries in the newspaper. I do. I mean, you thought I was sad before, but I feel even more sad now. But I'm fascinated just to discover how those who are now dead live their life.

What they did, what they achieved. To see what the rich and the famous and the influential, how they made their mark. And yet, with the logic of the teacher of Ecclesiastes, what he's saying is, no matter who they were, no matter what they achieved, or what they have or had, they're dead and gone.

[8 : 04] You're alive and you're here. So you are better off than them. And that's what the teacher expands on in verse 5 and 6. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.

They have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished. Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.

So he is getting us to consider everything we lose through death. Death takes away everything that is important to us. And so when the dead are gone, they know nothing, they have nothing, and they're forgotten.

Because death just brings that chilling finality, doesn't it? And so no matter how difficult life is sometimes, and life can be tough, what he's saying is, what we've got now is better than death.

Ernest Becker, in the Hootser Prize winning *The Denial of Death*, argues that human beings can't accept that we are mortal, and that death is truly the end.

[9 : 10] And so he gives his impassioned answer as to the why of human existence, and he writes, the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else.

It is a mainspring of human activity, activity designed to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it, by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.

And so he goes on to say that for most Westerners, like us, the fear of death is so prominent a part of our psychological makeup. Now here's the thing, while modern secularism gives no help or no comfort in death, the teacher of Ecclesiastes points us to the God who not only helps us make sense of death, but who confronts us with it so that we can make sense of life.

And that's really what verse 7 to 10 is all about. He wants the light of life to shine out from the darkness of death. And so this is what is, some of the scholars call a joy passage in Ecclesiastes, where we've seen them a few times, where with joy he interjects the despair and the death to help us see that life is meaningful and life is significant because it comes from God, it's a gift from him, and so it's to be enjoyed.

Listen to what he says, verse 7, Go eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil.

[10 : 47] Enjoy life with the wife, pardon me, enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun. All your meaningless days, for this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might, for in the realm of the dead where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. So he's telling us how we should attack life, how we should live life before God.

We should live life with joy and with gladness, making the most of everything and everyone. He says, We do this for God has already approved what you do.

And so before we achieve anything or before we do anything, he's saying, God is pleased with us. He's pleased with you. In giving us life, he has been good because he's given us that gift.

And he wants us to enjoy every other gift that he gives us to make the most of each and every day that we're alive because one day we will be dead.

[11 : 57] And so in the mundane, yet everyday essential thing of eating and drinking, he says, Do it with joy and gladness. And so when he speaks of being clothed in white and anointing your head with oil, it's equivalent of getting dressed up for a party to celebrate.

And so what he's saying here is really just another way to celebrate life. We're to celebrate. We're to enjoy intimate relationships, enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun.

So it will mean spending, if you're married, spending quality time with your spouse, loving each other, valuing each other, listening to each other. Enjoy life with your wife or your husband every day of your life because one day one of you will die.

And enjoy time with your children if you have them because one day they'll grow up and they'll leave home. Or if you're single, enjoy good friendships.

And he says, Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. So if you've got a job, work at your job with all your heart. You've got limited time to work.

[13 : 13] So work all you have the chance. If you're studying, then study hard. Make the most of the opportunity. Because the teacher is saying here, Life is so short, you will die.

So make the most of you have, make the most of your life that you have right now. Savour it. Appreciate it. Make the most of everything that God has given to you.

I guess if we were to practically apply what he's saying here, we might add, well, go and cook a nice meal for your family. Go for drinks with your friends. Visit your parents.

Celebrate that special occasion. Create something beautiful. Be a good neighbour. Do something fun. Climb a mountain. Play football. Plant a church.

Learn an instrument. Read a book. Go fishing. Learn another language. Run a marathon. Call somebody who's lonely. Write a letter. Go for a cycle. Help somebody in need.

[14 : 14] Wrestle with your children. Generously give of your time, your talents, your treasure. Initiate a new friendship. Adopt or foster a child.

So in the sea, watch a movie. Mentor a young person. Speak about Jesus. Help somebody who's dealing with an addiction. Write a poem. Pioneer a new ministry.

Support a child in a developing country with compassion or whoever. Call somebody who's sick. You see, if God has given us life and he has given us every other good thing to enjoy, then there are plenty of opportunities every day that we have to invest ourselves in the life and the people he's given to us.

And so it isn't wrong to enjoy all God's good gifts because he's given them to us for our pleasure. The problem is that we can take more pleasure in the gifts than we can in the giver.

And so eating, drinking and celebrating, they're all good but not if we leave God out of them. And relationships are good but not if they take priority over God.

[15 : 26] And work is good but not if we live for work instead of living for God. You see, it's dangerous when the good things become God things because that's when they become an idol that we worship instead.

Because we worship them, we serve them, we live for them in place of God and we look to them for our identity, we look to them for our significance, our joy, our purpose, our satisfaction and our meaning instead of the God who made us.

Which means we only end up losing the joy they give because they can't fully satisfy us. But they are meant to be enjoyed by us. And it's only a relationship with the God who made us that will satisfy us.

And when we have that, it will help us get everything else in life into proper perspective. So seize the day. Carpe diem. I've been reminded of this this week just as I've reflected on these words and I've savoured the simple joys in life.

So a homemade pizza for my daughter. So good. Playing rugby with my boys in the garden. That was also good. So what about good? Relaxing by the fire with my wife.

[16 : 42] Celebrating a birthday and giving gifts. Walking the dog with a good friend. Putting up new lights without electric treating myself. All good things to do.

You see, having these opportunities in our life is to know God's goodness in life, isn't it? It's to know that he is with us and he's given us all these things to enjoy. And what the teacher is saying is death means that the ability to enjoy your family, your friends, your work, your life, death means that one day these things will be no more.

So you really need to enjoy them right now. And so it's wise to reflect on death, isn't it? That's what he's forcing us to do because reflecting on death challenges us to live life.

So that's the first point. Death is certain, so enjoy life. Second point is life is uncertain, so be wise. Verse 11 to 18. So verse 11 and 12, drill home the teacher's earlier words because while death is certain, life is uncertain.

And yet ironically what we do is we live as if we could hold death off and we think that we can control life and the teacher's saying it's the opposite way around.

[17 : 58] And so we need to get this proper perspective which he gives us. 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.

So these words, the words time and chance happen to them all, remind us of the random nature of life. Sometimes life just doesn't make sense and that's why he fleshes this out with some great images, really five examples of how life doesn't always go the way that you'd expect.

So the examples are athletics, war, food, wealth and favour. Athletics. So the race is not to the swift. Normally, it's the fastest person that wins the race using gold but not always.

One of my favourite stories as a wee boy was the hare and the tortoise. Classic story and a classic example of what the teacher is saying here. And here's another, just for your general knowledge.

In the Winter Olympics of 2002, Australia won its first ever Winter Olympic gold. gold. So Steve Bradbury won gold in the short track speed skating because all four of his other opponents collided and crashed at the final corner.

[19 : 22] And Bradbury, who was last the whole way round, didn't even get a mention by the commentators won, basically because he was the last man standing. Watch that on YouTube, you'll enjoy it.

But I just emphasise this for the teacher saying. Then war, he goes on, or the battle to the strong. So stronger armies have often been defeated by weaker opposition because of factors like weather, hunger, or illness.

They have dictated the battle more than strength or power. And then food. Nor does food come to the wise. I used to help at a drop-in cafe on a Wednesday morning here in Glasgow, and it helped homeless folks and people who were struggling with addictions.

And their circumstances meant that they didn't have enough food to eat. And yet, they had such a vast knowledge, so many of them, and such great stimulating discussion.

And then wealth, he says, are wealth to the brilliant. The most naturally gifted in life are not always the ones who make the most money. Just look at celebrity culture. It just proves that you can have absolutely no talent but still make loads of money.

[20 : 33] Whereas, many who have unique abilities, just go and notice. And then favor or favor to the learned. Having knowledge doesn't mean other people will respect you or recognize you, because life under the sun is very uncertain.

Time and chance mean the obvious outcome isn't always the obvious outcome. And that's why we can't be so certain as W.E.

Henley in his poem, Invictus, when he says, it matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

It's nicely poetic, but it's horribly wrong, according to the teacher of Ecclesiastes, because he says in verse 12, moreover, 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. He's saying, we have no way of controlling the future.

[21 : 37] Our lives are like a fish that's caught in a net or a bird that's captured in a snare. Neither the fish nor the bird could see the trap coming. And so he's saying, our lives too are often suddenly and unexpectedly hit by evil or bad times that we never saw coming.

And yet, when it happens, it changes our lives forever. Just think of the current coronavirus crisis. It unexpectedly fell upon us, impacting life, causing death, complicating life, crippling the economy, all sorts of issues and problems.

Never what anyone expected. And that's why the teacher's words in Ecclesiastes are so relevant. So if we are surprised by the kind of things that happen in life, he would say to us, haven't you read my reflections on life and death?

I mean, what were you expecting? Did you really think that you were in control of your life, let alone your death? Didn't you realize that the God who made you and made us has placed limits on our human existence?

So he is God and we aren't. Yes, he's given us life to enjoy, but we can't control it. We can't completely understand it.

[23 : 06] And that's why the teacher of Ecclesiastes forces us to stare death in the face. Because he is reminding us that we are mortal beings. beings.

And so it is ridiculous to live our lives as if we were in charge. Because the God who is beyond the sun, he's talking about life under the sun, but the God who is beyond the sun is in charge.

And he has made life this way so that we would wake up to that fact and realize that he is the creator and we are merely creatures.

And that's why we need to be wise. Well, how can we be wise? Well, just check out his story at the end here about the poor wise man, verse 13 to 16.

Let me read it. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it and a powerful king came against it, surrounded it, and built huge siege works against it.

[24 : 11] Now there lived in that city a man, poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, wisdom is better than strength.

For the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. So there was a poor but wise man who saved the city by his wisdom. And so you think, after such a great feat, then that man would be remembered.

But the teacher says, nobody remembered the poor but wise man. So what's he talking about? Well, it's clear that the teacher found this perplexing as he thought about it.

But it's another example, really, of the uncertainty of life and the need for wisdom. But we should see something else here, or rather we should see someone else.

who do you think of when you hear about the poor but wise man who was a saviour but was despised and rejected? Only one person that can be, Jesus.

[25 : 14] Jesus perfectly illustrates that man in the story. And of course, this is not a prophecy about Jesus, yet it does describe his person and work. It's like a preview of who Jesus is and what Jesus would do.

Because Ecclesiastes, like the rest of the Bible, points us to Jesus Christ as our saviour. And so Jesus is spoken of here by the teacher in the same terms that the Bible speaks of Jesus in other places.

So Jesus became poor. Listen to how Paul describes the life and death of Jesus in 2 Corinthians. He says, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Jesus was wise. Again, Paul says in 1 Corinthians, Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God. Jesus became a saviour.

He came to be saviour. He said of himself, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. And yet despite what Jesus Christ came to do, he was despised and he was rejected.

[26 : 31] And so in Isaiah chapter 53, a prophecy about Jesus, we read he was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain.

And so the Bible's message, Ecclesiastes, and all the way through is about Jesus Christ, and the salvation that God offers in him.

So God gives us life, but God also gives us new life in Jesus Christ. And that's why Christianity is such good news for our world. It's the news that Jesus came to save us.

He died so that we might live. He came to save us from the power of sin and death, through his death in our place.

And that's why Jesus Christ is our only hope and our only comfort in life and in death. And so even while time and chance happen to all, they happen in the hands of a loving God, don't they?

[27 : 34] Verse 1. So death is certain, so enjoy life. I make the most of every opportunity. Life is uncertain, so be wise by receiving the salvation that God offers to us through Jesus.

Because we all die, but there is no need to fear. Death can't touch us when we believe in Jesus.

Let me finish with a story. Donald Gray Barnhouse was the minister of Tent Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in the USA, and his wife in her late thirties died of cancer, leaving him with four children under the age of twelve.

And as he was driving to the funeral with his children, a large truck pulled past them in the left lane, and it cast its shadow over the top of their car.

And so Barnhouse asked his children, would you rather be run over by the truck or the shadow of the truck? And his eleven-year-old answered, shadow, of course.

[28 : 45] And then their father concluded, well, that's what has happened to your mother. Only the shadow of death has passed over her, because death itself ran over Jesus.

So don't ignore the reality of death. But know that Jesus Christ has the deed of death. And that's why the wisest thing that anyone of us could ever do is to believe in Jesus, the true, poor, but wise man who came to save.

Because if Jesus died for you, and he is risen to be your savior, then what can death do? Let's pray. Thank you, our God, for giving us the gift of life.

May we be wise and use our life well. Help us to turn to you, the giver, and to receive the gift of your salvation in Jesus Christ, the one who gave his life for us, and who rose again, triumphing over death.

And so in him and through him, we have nothing to fear. And so we praise you and thank you for his work on the cross, so that all who put their faith in him are yours, and are safe and secure through death and also through this life.

[30 : 12] We give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.