

Ecclesiastes 9

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[0 : 00] Great, welcome. It's a bit of a cliché question, I know, but if you knew you only had one day to live, how would you live it?

That is the question, isn't it, of what is worth doing with the limited time that we have in this life, life under the sun.

That's the big question that's been on the preacher's mind in Ecclesiastes, all the way through the book. Do you remember how he starts off the book, way back in chapter 1, verse 2, his little mini-sermon, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. He asks, doesn't he, what's the point of life?

And as we come nearer to the end of the book, from chapter 9 to the end, he's going to start tying up some of the loose ends and to begin to answer that question. And as you begin to answer that question with him, there are a few more things that he just wants to slip in before we make our conclusions.

A few more things that he has to say. And there are three things in our passage today that he wants us to make. Before you answer, how should I live in this world, he says, you need to look again with me precisely at what this world is like before you decide what to do in it.

[1 : 28] So first thing he says here, look at the world fully again with me. Look at the world fully again with me.

If you just drop your eye down to verse 1 there. All this I laid to heart, examining it all. Now do you see what he's doing here at the beginning of chapter 9?

He's beginning to draw conclusions, isn't he? To lay all that he's examined to heart up until this point. He wants to rewind the tape of the whole book and play us the video again.

Let's look at this world fully, realistically, properly, with our eyes fully open to reality. And as he does that, I wonder whether quietly in ourselves we're just thinking, not again.

Not again, preacher. Do we have to go through this again? He's quite repetitive, isn't he, as a preacher. He says the same things again and again.

[2 : 36] None of what he's going to say in chapter 9 is particularly new. But he does that because his perspective on the world is so different to our perspective.

And it takes a while for us to understand where he's coming from. He knows that we have made for ourselves little metaphorical sandcastles to live in.

Castles in our mind, in our attitude, in our perspective on the world. And we look out of our little sandcastles and we think that the world is a certain way.

That the world is there to be used. That we are in control of our lives. That I can dictate what is going to happen to me and my family.

That I can operate the future. The motto for that view of the world, of enjoyment, is simply in the one word, gain. That is our natural perspective.

[3 : 42] So how do sandcastles get knocked down normally? Well, by waves. And so with each repetition of his message, he sends wave after wave after wave.

And he begins to break us down. To erode and wash away that perspective we have. Which actually, he says, has no bearing on reality.

Not really. Because if you look at the world with your eyes fully open. He says to us, your castles cannot stand in this world.

Life on the ground does not work as we want it to, humanly speaking. It actually makes very little sense. Look at the world fully, he says.

And it's mad. It's a mad world, he says. Let's rewind. Look again, for instance, at the madness of events.

[4 : 48] Events that happen to us all. Just look at verse 2. It's 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 he who does not sacrifice. The key line there is at the beginning of verse 2. It is the same for all.

Here is the madness of the world in which we live. The same events, the same things happen for very different people.

And he gives a list, doesn't he, of very different people. Righteous and wicked, good and evil. Clean and unclean, religious or non-religious. But madly, he says, it's the same for all.

Cancer happens to atheists and Christians. Redundancy for the good and the bad. Success for the wicked and the righteous.

[5 : 52] Mad, mad. Unfair. Man doesn't know whether he'll experience love or hate. Verse 1. The actions of the righteous and the wise are in the hand of God.

But from our point of view, they're enigmatic, inscrutable, unpredictable, strange hands. Aren't they? Isn't it mad that bad things happen to good people, good things to bad?

It's all the same. Isn't it? We say to each other, good luck, good luck. And that is a confession, isn't it?

It's a confession that deep down we know that we don't know what the future holds. The madness of events. Then he says, look again at the winners and the losers in this world.

It's mad, in verse 11, that the best aren't always at the top. The race isn't always to the swift or the battle to the strong.

[6 : 56] And he gives other examples, doesn't he? The bosses in the workplace or the winners in life aren't always the people who are best at their jobs.

They're not always the ones who put in the most work. Lazy people sometimes get rich. Useless people get praised sometimes. Those at the top don't always know the most.

It's mad that sometimes it's, as they say, not what you know. The winners aren't always the best. It's mad. And then he says, look again at the madness of death.

There's this nonsensical, indiscriminate, cold injustice to it, isn't there? Whether you're good or bad, religious or not, the same end.

Death comes to all, regardless. You know, listening to some of the testimonies of people who survived Grenfell Tower, it's quite clear, isn't it, that those who were caught up in that disaster, there was a mixture of people there.

[8 : 07] There was a mixture of good people and bad people. But death is no respecter of persons. From our point of view, on the ground, the grim reaper is just not fair, is he?

He cuts people down in their prime. He allows bad people to keep on living too long. It's mad. And not only is it mad, he says it's wrong.

It's just wrong. Verse 3 again, that refrain that we've seen throughout the book. It's a grievous evil that the same event, the same death happens to all.

Regardless of lifestyle, of morals, of our controls, of our plans and of all of our securities, the same thing happens to all of us. So can you feel your cattle starting to crumble?

Can you feel it falling around you? How are you going to live in this mad world? Well, his answer is quite surprising actually.

[9 : 15] He says, look fully at the world in all its madness. But then, secondly, live life fully in the world. Live life fully in the world. Because there's one thing worse than living in this mad world.

He says, there's one thing worse than that. It is perishing from it. It is being taken from it. His solution to the question of the madness of life is to discover the alternative in death.

That's his point in that bit that we smile at in verse 4, isn't it there? A living dog is better than a dead lion.

It's a really great image. When he says dog there, he means a mongrel, kind of scrawny animal, a street dog. As much as we bemoan the problems of life, he is saying there, life is life.

And it's precious. Even if we're a dog. And he tries to convince us of that. From verse 4 to verse 10, he's trying to tell us that life is worth living.

[10 : 32] Whatever you've got, whoever you are, because the alternative to life is far worse. You see, he says when you're alive, verse 4, that there's always hope.

When you're alive, you're connected with the land of the living, with others. Chance to influence and have relationships. When you're alive, it's really interesting what he says in verse 5.

The advantage is, you know you're going to die. When you're alive, you've still got decisions to make. You've got the opportunity to gain wisdom, to let death shape how you live. When you're alive, you can enjoy things. You can eat and drink wine. You can enjoy life, in verse 7. When you're alive, you can get married. You can enjoy good company. When you're alive, verse 10, you can work. You can think. You can apply yourself. You can learn. You can do a whole host of things. Even dogs do a lot, don't they?

[11:40] Even dogs go into outer space. But once death comes, all of that goes. When you die, there are no more decisions.

There's no more knowledge. The dead know nothing, verse 5. All that is most dear to you, all that you love, all that you hate, will perish along with you.

You've got to understand how the preacher is talking here. He's not speaking literally or fully in every respect. He's speaking poetically, thinking about life on one level.

It's not as if there won't be any knowledge of any kind in heaven or in hell. He's not saying there won't be any consciousness after death.

But as far as this world goes, all of it will perish as far as we're concerned. Your knowledge, all that you've studied and accumulated in your life, all of your experience, will die with you.

[12:43] Your missions and your projects and your personal campaigns, your high horses will die with you. Your chance to change and to influence, to experience, will die with you.

In the school of life, death will come and ring the final bell. School's out. You hear people say a lot, don't you? Dream big.

Dream big. But the preacher warns us of dreaming big while living small. Often we're so focused on the next thing, aren't we?

On what I'm going to do then, when I get this thing sorted and when that's in place. But the preacher flips all of that on its head and he says in a way, dream small and live big.

Live big. Because you don't know in the madness of all this world what will happen and when your life will end. So live this precious life while you have it.

[13:52] Stop trying to make sense of everything and live. If you look at verse 7, there's a two letter word there that is really weighty at the beginning of verse 7.

Go. It says go. Live as much as you can now. Don't get life and let it pass you by.

Don't waste life. And if you haven't learnt your lesson, death will come and show you one last time that life was never yours to take in the first place.

But it was given to you as a gift. So verse 7, the whole of verse 7, sums up I think this passage and it sums up the whole of Ecclesiastes really.

Because the solution to all of this madness is that we can live life fully when we see that God is the giver of life. Go.

[14:54] Live. Live. When you know, he says there, God has approved what you do. Those who truly live despite the madness are people who seek God's blessing that his pleasure is actually the cause of our pleasure.

Knowing that when we live and grab life, he smiles when we enjoy this gift of life from him and receive it from him thankfully, he smiles.

That makes all of the difference. It means that life becomes totally different actually. Look at the world fully. Live in it fully.

Thirdly, he says, and paradoxically to do that, let go of this world. If you want to live in this world fully, let go of this world. When our castles are finally washed away and we start to realise that as creatures put in this world by a creator, we can only live in this world fully when we refuse to worship this world.

Even though we're in it, we can and we should let go of it, in a sense. Or at least let go of that one-dimensional worldly perspective that we naturally have.

[16:27] I think Ecclesiastes is a bit like one of those crash test dummy experiments. So you know when car manufacturers, they want to test the safety of their car. And so they video a crash, don't they?

A controlled collision. And they put a dummy in there and see what happens to the dummy. And we are like the dummies being put into a crash when we read Ecclesiastes.

This book does that to us because it forces us into a collision where we are smacked against the world. We are bombarded against this world.

And what we see and observe in the world is smashed against our conscience. And our inbuilt sense of right and wrong that God has put there. And when we see, like the preacher here, that things aren't fair.

That we see that the same event happens to all. We cry with him, don't we? Grieve us evil. And we step away from the crash and say, this just cannot be all there is.

[17 : 42] This just cannot be all there is to the world. This is our perspective. But in the crash, we're pushed into admitting that there must be another perspective to the world.

There has to be. There has to be some reward or punishment that the same ultimately does not happen to good or bad.

That somehow everything will be fair in the end. And if you feel that stepping out of the crash of Ecclesiastes, then happily your castle is breaking down.

It is falling. It is falling. The world is mad. But only when we reduce ourselves down to our own perspective. When we do life our way, gain.

And living life like that will drive us absolutely crazy if we limit ourselves to our own perspective alone. But when God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, becomes our centre, everything changes then.

[18 : 54] And we can enjoy life when we hold it lightly, when we hold this world lightly. He who loses life for my sake and the gospel will find it, Jesus says.

Not just in heaven, but now. It's so counterintuitive, isn't it? We can take life and live it fully when we admit that our portion in life is apportioned to us by God.

By God. And we submit our lives to him and to the Lord Jesus Christ. God wants us to live life and to enjoy life.

But the key is not just in living life, but living life for him and from him. Strangely, when God's pleasure we find becomes our pleasure in life.

If you've got children, you'll know or you'll remember what it's like to see your child enjoy pleasure. It's a great thing. I took our two-year-old out a couple of weeks ago and went to Walpole Park but I thought I'm going to buy him a bacon roll.

[20 : 08] And not just any bacon roll. A giant adult-sized bacon roll from Wenzel's in West Ealing just to see his face. And it was just filled with surprise that I could be so irresponsible as to give him this bacon roll.

It was filled with pleasure and shock that I could give him this thing. And in that moment I approved of his enjoyment.

I loved seeing that. And God approves when we live when we live for him and not for ourselves.

That makes him smile. And that smile can fill all you do. eating, drinking, marrying, working, resting, learning.

His pleasure will be your pleasure. We can even suffer, can't we, with great meaning knowing that the God above us knows all things.

[21 : 16] The God who made us. So, what would you do if you had one day left? You could ignore the world, couldn't you, as it is. You could despair of it.

You could get angry and in some twisted pleasure just destroy things as a mass murderer smiles as he pulls the trigger. You could reap it.

You could eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. The 16th century church reformer Martin Luther was asked that question and he answered like this, if I knew tomorrow that the world would go to pieces I would still plant my apple tree.

I think Luther understood the preacher who says that while it may be a mad world the right response in this mad world is live. Grab life.

whatever your hand finds you to do, do it with all your might. Go and write a book. Enjoy the smell of rain on hot tarmac.

[22 : 20] Drink a Coca-Cola. Phone someone. Change a nappy. Give. Share. Learn. Be quiet. Pray.

Watch a film. Travel. Talk to the neighbours. Go. Go and live while you can. Death may be no respecter of persons but God is.

So live in this mad world because life is a precious gift and when you come to God in Jesus Christ he will give you licence to enjoy it and his pleasure will be your pleasure.

So live for him. Pray. Let's pray together.