Is this all there is?

9.20.26

Message 9

Ecclesiastes 9:1–10 (CSB)

ENJOY LIFE DESPITE DEATH

Indeed, I took all this to heart and explained it all: The righteous, the wise, and their works are in God's hands. People don't know whether to expect love or hate. Everything lies ahead of them. **2** Everything is the same for everyone: There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As it is for the good, so also it is for the sinner; as it is for the one who takes an oath, so also for the one who fears an oath. **3** This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone. In addition, the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live; after that they go to the dead. **4** But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion. **5** For the living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten. **6** Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun.

7 Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works. **8** Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head. **9** Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun. **10** Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength, because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

The Great Unknown

A. Death is still the greatest mystery.

1. What happens after we die?
2. Where do we go?
3. Is there even an existence after death?

B. Thinking about death is a young person's game.

1. In 2021, a British study showed that people aged 16-24 were twice as likely to think about death on a daily basis as those 60 and older.[1]

2. That was heavily influenced by the pandemic, but thinking about dying is not just for seniors.

3. One study said that by the age of 18, kids have witnessed 16,000 simulated murders.

4. Yet, our understanding of death and eternity is so shallow.

C. Because of this shallowness, we stand in the middle of our life and wonder, "Is this all there is?"

1. There has to be more than eating, drinking, working, and dying.

2. Solomon's father, David, knew this better than Solomon did.

3. He wrote:

Psalm 39:4–5 (CSB)

4 "LORD, make me aware of my end

and the number of my days

so that I will know how short-lived I am.

5 In fact, you have made my days just inches long,

and my life span is as nothing to you.

Yes, every human being stands as only a vapor.

Selah

Psalm 90:12 Teach us to number our days carefully.

D. As Christians, in a world that is chaotic at best, how we view our days and our end matters.

1. Many of us are struggling, and we can't explain it.

2. This morning, I want to talk about a life that is meaningless and what the cure is.

[1] https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/37385-yougov-death-study-perception-and-impact-death

Everything is before us. Vs. 1-2a.

Indeed, I took all this to heart and explained it all: The righteous, the wise, and their works are in God's hands. People don't know whether to expect love or hate. Everything lies ahead of them. **2** Everything is the same for everyone:

A. Solomon sums up all of life by pointing to nothing.

1. Makes sense: If everything is Hevel, then nothing matters.

2. Solomon thinks it's best that we don't know what the future holds.

3. No hope means no disappointment.

4. Verse 7 sounds promising, but it falls short:

Ecclesiastes 9:7 (CSB) **7** Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works.

5. In other words, enjoy life because this is all there is.

B. Verses 2-3 sound like a man with no hope or perspective on eternity.

1. Everyone dies, he says.

a. The good and the bad all receive the same fate.

b. This, he declares, is an evil…

2. Solomon declares that it is evil that everyone gets the same fate.

a. He doesn't say it's not fair, but it's evil.

b. Is the writer being poetic or serious?

3. Because to accuse God of not being fair is one thing, but declaring him evil, that is different entirely.

a. Haven't we all been in the same kind of place?

b. We all have been involved in or have witnessed a terrible situation, and feel that God is not only unfair but wrong.

c. I suggest that it is rarely one situation that pushes us over the edge of cynicism or accusing God of evil.

d. It is usually cumulative until one day, we've had enough.

C. Solomon's wisdom and experience have led him to this place.

1. The rich aren't spared, the good aren't spared, the poor aren't spared.

2. To make it worse, he views eternity, if it even exists, as the same for everyone.

3. It doesn't matter if you worship and make sacrifices, or rob and steal.

4. A live dog is better than a dead lion (verse 4).

Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 (CSB)

5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten. **6** Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun.

D. When we approach the world only with human wisdom, we come to the same conclusions.

> Enjoy life, eat and drink, enjoy life with your wife; don't mourn or fast or take anything too seriously. Whatever you find to do, "do it because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going."

1. If we were honest, Solomon is saying out loud what we have been thinking.

2. Wondering "So What?"

3. Why are we working so hard, why is life so unfair, why am I even here?

E. We all handle these realities and questions differently.

1. I think the younger generations have turned these thoughts inward, creating unmatched anxiety and depression.

2. Many of us have adopted a combination of fatalism and tragic optimism.

3. I want to say, out loud, how many of us are probably coping with the realities of the world within us and then give us some.

4. If I can be your spiritual doctor for a minute, I want to name some of the diseases and then give us the cure.

Fatalism, Tragic Optimism, Horizonlessness.

A. **Fatalism** is the philosophical belief or mental attitude that all events are predetermined, inevitable, and outside of human control.

1. Solomon is a fatalist.

2. It doesn't matter what we do; the game is fixed and determined.

3. Try, fail, doesn't matter.

4. Soldiers will often practice fatalism: the idea that there is a bullet with your name on it, or when your number is up, that's it.

5. Fatalism is a defense mechanism that might make for effective warriors but problematic husbands and fathers, and followers of Jesus.

B. Horizonlessness is a term I first heard from Dr. Aditi Nerurkar.[2]

1. Notice how she describes this:

> When someone asks you what you're looking forward to about the future, you may draw a blank. You're not striving for a goal like you once were because nothing feels particularly motivating or exciting. Life feels like an endless grind with no clear destination. You may find yourself asking, "What's the point?"

2. It feels like being on a never-ending treadmill.

   a. Always moving and striving, going nowhere and making no progress.

   b. The horizon not only doesn't end, but there is no horizon.

3. Solomon didn't use this language, but it sounds like he was there.

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 (CSB)

11 Again I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, or bread to the wise, or riches to the discerning, or favor to the skillful; rather, time and chance happen to all of them. **12** For certainly no one knows his time: like fish caught in a cruel net or like birds caught in a trap, so people are trapped in an evil time as it suddenly falls on them.

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[2] https://mentalhealthish.substack.com/p/do-you-feel-horizonlessness

a. Solomon observes that the fastest don't win the race, the strongest don't win the battle, the wise don't get the bread, and the rich are not deserving.

b. It is all chance (fatalism), and all people are trapped (horizonless)

C. Tragic Optimism[3]

1. Survivors can teach us a lot about life and death.

2. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl discovered that those who had too much optimism and hope died first.

a. They would say, "This will be over by the end of the year," and when that hope didn't materialize, the disappointments led to broken hearts, and they would give up and die.

b. The people who survived were those who embraced reality and found meaning in the midst of tragedy.[4]

3. This is the same type of thinking that helped Navy pilot James Stockdale survive 7 ½ years as a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton, the infamous prison in North Vietnam.

4. He survived because he was willing to face the brutal truth of the moment, while maintaining unbreakable faith in the eventual positive outcome.

Is this really all there is?

A. Whether we are reading Ecclesiastes as a teenager and young adult, a middle age person in the middle of life, or a someone in the last quarter, we wrestle with this:

1. Is this it?

2. Do I really want to chase wind and come up empty?

3. Do I want to do all this work for something that is meaningless, futile, vanity, Hevel?

B. How many of us are living our lives to avoid disappointment?

1. Are you living a life without hope because you don't want to be disappointed, again?

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[3] https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/self-improvement/stockdale-paradox/

[4] https://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/self/tragic-optimism/

2. No hope means no disappointment.

a. If I don't feel, you can't hurt me.

b. If I don't have trust, you can't disappoint me.

c. If I don't have hope, then you can't let me down.

3. So we end up living a life we don't enjoy.

a. We don't take Solomon's advice to eat, drink, and be merry.

b. We don't enjoy the wife of our youth.

c. We don't enjoy the work in our hands.

d. We don't enjoy, because we don't want to be disappointed.

C. If we were purely rational, like Solomon, we would read Ecclesiastes and fully agree.

1. A death is better than a birth.

2. Everything is meaningless.

3. Eat, drink, and be merry, because we are all dying.

4. And after we die, Solomon says, there is no reward, punishment, or justice.

Jesus changes the narrative.

A. If the diagnosis is that life is unfair, people are evil, and everything is meaningless, then the cure is Jesus.

1. Jesus is the Great Physician, who heals and restores what sin has wounded.

2. Jesus is the Author and Finisher of our faith, creating and sustaining meaning for everything in between.

3. Jesus is the giver of hope, who speaks into our meaninglessness and brings forth hope.

B. The Apostle Paul, who is the opposite of Solomon, said it like this.

Colossians 3:23–25 (CSB)

23 Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, **24** knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You

serve the Lord Christ. [25] For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism.

1. The Apostle changes the narrative:

2. Don't work for yourself, but work for the Lord.

3. Then he gives two phrases loaded with hope:

    a. You will receive the reward of an inheritance.

    b. The wrongdoer will be paid back, without favoritism.

C. Paul's language paints God in a different light.

1. That God is not evil but instead judges right and wrong.

2. Those who serve the Lord Christ receive an inheritance (something good and positive).

    a. Who receives inheritances?

    b. The kids! Not dead lions or living dogs, but the kids.

3. Those who do wrong receive payback (they are paid back for their evil).

    a. If there is no judgment, then God, if he exists, is evil.

    b. But God isn't evil, and there is a judgment.

    c. Every sin must be atoned for: either through the death of Jesus or our own punishment in eternal death.

4. In other words, what is done in this life isn't meaningless, and it isn't forgotten.

D. The difference between living a life of fatalism or horizonlessness and a life of faith is the resurrection of the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:32 (CSB)

[32] If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus as a mere man, what good did that do me? If the dead are not raised, **Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.**

1. This sounds a lot like Ecclesiastes, although it is a quote from Isaiah 22.

2. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then none of it does matter.

3. But if we are living not just for today but for a never-ending day, eternity, then everything matters, everything is meaningful, and we aren't chasing wind and vanity.

4. Life isn't a treadmill, taking everything and going nowhere; life is a journey with an eternal destination.

5. When we forget that, we wind up living our lives in the most meaningless way possible.

How do we live a meaningful life when everything seems meaningless?

A. Enjoy life

1. How many of us are actually enjoying life?

2. We aren't having fun because life is hard.

3. But it isn't helpful for someone to tell us: enjoy life.

    a. It's like going to the doctor, and they tell us we need to lower our stress.

    b. If we knew how to do that, we would do it.

    c. If we felt that was a possibility, we would.

B. Live for the right reasons.

1. Parents, you don't live for your kids.

    a. Spouses, your person isn't your reason for living.

    b. We are to enjoy our kids and spouse, and steward the gifts that they are.

    c. But they are not your reason for living.

2. We can't live for retirement, promotion, or success.

    a. There is nothing wrong with these.

    b. But if they are your goal, you will find them disappointing when you get there.

3. We live for:

a. Jesus.

1. You must search and discover to find out what that means.

2. I can't tell you in one sentence; you can't find it in a bestselling book.

3. We can point you in the path, but you must discover this meaning for yourself.

4. Matthew 7:7–11 (CSB)

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the
door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one
who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.
9 Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?
10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you then, who are
evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will
your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.

b. Live for eternity.

1. Eternity causes us to view our lives through a long-term lens.

2. It's looking past our present feelings, conditions, wants, and desires and looking to an ending we can only perceive by faith.

3. The resurrection is the difference between a life of meaning and a life of Hevel.

1 Corinthians 15:12–19 (CSB)

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say, "There is no
resurrection of the dead"? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been
raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain, and so is your faith.
15 Moreover, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified wrongly
about God that he raised up Christ—whom he did not raise up, if in fact the dead are not raised.
16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been
raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Those, then, who have fallen asleep in
Christ have also perished. 19 If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be
pitied more than anyone.

4. Could some of our struggle be because we have forgotten that there is more to living than what we are experiencing right now?

5. We are so consumed by our present condition that we forget that this is a paragraph on a page, not the whole story?

C. Live with gratitude.

a. When I pause and force myself to be thankful, I am reminded of all that God has already done for me.

b. And when I realize what he has done, what he has given, and what has already healed, I am encouraged to believe and trust again.

c. I haven't been given everything I want, but I have always had what I needed.

d. I have walked through some dark seasons, but I can see that God has walked with me.

e. Gratitude is like a Vitamin B12 shot to the soul.

f. It provides a boost to the season and helps us push forward.

Prayer

A. I look around, and many of us are weary.

1. Overwhelm, discouragement, anxiety, and depression are written on our faces.

2. I want to pray for the weary.

B. I also look at our culture, and many of us are apathetic.

1. We can fix the world's problems, so we stop caring.

2. We can't live up to the ideals, so we give up.

3. We look at our walk with Jesus and say, it's good enough.

C. You can't heal apathy, and you can't motivate weariness.

1. Apathy needs a spiritual kick in the butt.

2. Weariness needs the healing of a doctor.

3. So if you are struggling right now, I'm going to pray over us.

4. But you need to ask the Holy Spirit what you need.