

The Gift of Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

As a young theology student at Yale University, Jonathan Edwards was captivated by an overwhelming sense of the holiness, beauty, and intoxicating glory of God. Edwards was taken up not merely by the study of God, but by his delight and enjoyment of God. That delight moved Edwards at the age of 19 to draw up a list of seventy spiritual resolutions to live by.¹ He begins stating:

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake.

1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time . . .

He continues:

5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

9. Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

One author describes, "In mapping out his resolutions, Jonathan realized before turning twenty what it takes many people a lifetime to discover: living for God matters more than anything else."²

Jonathan Edwards understood that life was a gift. There are three basic ways we can treat a gift, when you receive a gift at Christmas or for our birthday or something. First you can trash it. You can disregard its value and dispose of it, whether by leaving it in the box and never taking it out, or else by treating it carelessly and destroying it. Another response is to treasure the gift, to set it aside as a trophy never to be touched lest you damage it. We all have things like this in our homes—plates you never eat on, baseballs you never play catch with. But there's a third way to treat a gift: you can take it out for spin. You can put it to use, and do with it what it was meant

¹ "The Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards," available at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>.

² Owen Strachan and Doug Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards: Lover of God* (The Essential Edwards Collection; Chicago: Moody, 2010), 39.

for, in the case of life, to bring glory and honor to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus.

Edwards’s gospel-fueled passion is a beautiful example of what our passage in Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 is calling us to this morning—that because our future is secure in God’s hand, we can in spite of our looming death enjoy and make the most of our lives for the sake of God and his gospel.

If you’re just joining us, we’ve been in Ecclesiastes for several months, following the Preacher (probably King Solomon) as he has explored all of life under the sun—life as you and I see and experience it, here and now, often setting God aside for the moment—to see if there is any lasting gain or significance to be found. And as the graphic on the front of your worship folder illustrates, everything he’s encountered so far is smoke, vapor, vanity of vanities. Work, wealth, pleasure, knowledge, and other dreams that disappoint. They don’t last, they don’t satisfy, and they often don’t make sense.

And one of the sharper realizations he’s made in his study is how death messes everything up. This book has had a lot to say about death; nearly every chapter has touched on the subject. While God’s design for his people was life and blessing in his presence, we all like Adam in the beginning have all schemed and plotted God’s overthrow, that we might live life on our terms. And the result of our treachery is death, something no person has power over the day of, as we saw last week in chapter 8 (v. 8).

The first six verses of chapter 9 remind us once again of the proven fact that no one escapes death. Take a look with me at vv. 2-3:

It is 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 him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

There’s a cheery summary of human existence; one of the bleakest we find in this book. Death is an impartial foe, and God’s people (described as “the righteous” here) are no exception. He makes this point by comparing seven sets of opposites—one good, one bad, both dead (eventually). Regardless of whether you do what is right or what is wrong, death is still hanging out at your door. Because ultimately, as v. 3 reminds us, all of us have contributed to the problem. The human heart is full of evil, characterized by madness (stupid sin) during our few days, and after that we die. That is the story of humanity in a nutshell. Life under the sun. And that sun will eventually set on every single one of us.

Now frankly, all this talk of death in a book like Ecclesiastes can begin to get a little unnerving, or even depressing for some of us. No doubt the majority of this culture spends its days trying to evade death, to hold onto our youth in some way. But some of us live with the harsh reality of death every day. We know that death is waiting, because the empty place at the dinner table reminds us. The car seat that’s still sitting in the box because the new baby never came home from the hospital—it reminds us. The collection of parking garage receipts from Mass General or

Brigham and Women's reminds us. We wish we could go just a few minutes without thinking about death. Death's shadow casts a cloud over every special occasion, every relationship, even our day to day work, threatening to rob us of every last drop of joy in this life.

But the Preacher is not morbidly obsessed the subject, nor is he wringing his hands in worry and fear, or even just whining and complaining. He's talking about death because he wants to help God's people, whom he calls "the righteous and the wise" in v. 1, to know how they should live before God *despite death's reality*. His main interest here is not the curse of death, but *the gift of life*, and what we do with it. Look with me at v. 1: "But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him."

In his study of life under the sun, one his observations is that God controls the outcome of our lives—the righteous and wise, his people, are *in his hand*. The only problem is that when we look at our circumstances or the outcome of our lives, it's not transparently clear whether his hand is for us or against us. That's what he's talking about in the second half of v. 1, as the NIV puts it: "no man knows whether love or hate awaits him." Some suggest that the love or hate in question is human love or hate, as we see mentioned down in v. 6. But the context here is speaking of what God does with those who are in his hand—will they find *love* from God at the end of their days, mercy and salvation? Or will they find *hate*, in other words, judgment and punishment for sin? The Preacher's point here is that if we try to answer that question based on how our life is going today—whether great or terribly—we're going to be left with confusion. We've seen multiple times in this book that in a broken, fallen world such as we live in, things don't always work as they should. Good days are not necessarily evidence of God's favor—sometimes the wicked prosper in their wickedness. And bad days are not necessarily evidence of God's anger, for sometimes the righteous suffer much. And both the righteous and the wicked face the same destination, the grave.

By ourselves and our circumstances, we cannot tell what posture God's hand is in, whether for us or against us. The shadow of death makes us fear it's against us. But *by faith*, we can tell and we can be confident what posture God's hand is in—that it is for us, *if our faith is in Jesus Christ*.

Left to ourselves, in our sin, God's hand is against us. But Christ came to rescue us from God's holy anger toward our sin and reunite us to him, by living for us the life we were supposed to live but couldn't, and dying for us the death we deserved to die because of our sin. He offers this life, this joy, this peace with God to us through faith, through trusting in him. It's not about making it up to God and trying harder; it's about resting fully in the finished work of Jesus. And if our hope is in Jesus, then he tells us we "will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). Did you hear that? If we are in Christ, our life, our hope, our future is absolutely secure in God's hand.

Listen to how the Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the hope we have in Jesus. It begins by asking the question, "What is your only comfort in life and death?"

Answer: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that

without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.³

What a tremendous summary of Scripture's message and the hope we have in Jesus. It's that hope that keeps and frees us to live for God while we live out our few days on this earth.

God is not yet finished with us. And the Preacher reminds us of this in somewhat of a backhanded way in vv. 4-6:

But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

When the gift of life expires and we die, and our days on earth are over, we will have lost our window for contributing to God's vision for this broken world. We look forward in Christ to joyful participation in his new creation, but we only have one shot at this life. After that, our knowledge is useless for sharing in life under the sun. The fruit of our labor will wear out, our memory will fade as generations continue, just like our emotions. One life, that's it.

So, the implication is that we need to make the most of life while we yet live. As the Preacher puts it in a not-so-encouraging way: "A living dog [and by that he doesn't mean a pet; in the ancient world dogs were scavenging, scum eating street dogs] is better than a dead lion" (v. 4). A lion may be majestic, but if it's dead, a living dog is at least better than that. The living have hope. And here's the real kicker, the living have hope because they know, v. 5, that they're going to die! What kind of hope is that? Well, think about back to ch. 7: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart" (7:2).

Knowing that our death is imminent helps us focus on what really matters in life. And if we combine that knowledge with the confidence that our future is secure in God's hand, then we need to ask the question, what are we doing with the gift of life? How are we spending the days God gives us? Are we treating them like trash, whether neglecting it or throwing it away in carelessness and sin? Are we treating it like a trophy, too precious to do anything with it? Or are we taking it out for a spin? How do we make the most of our life for the sake of God and his gospel? That's what vv. 7-10 help us understand.

Look at vv. 7-10 with me:

Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. [That's the opposite of sack cloth and ashes, which is what you wear in the Old Testament when you're mourning; these are party clothes]⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

³ See <http://www.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html>.

When death comes, that's the end of our chance to contribute to God's work under the sun. So what does it look like to make the most of our life for the sake of God and the gospel? What we see here is that *God wants us to make the most of the natural rhythms of life*. Sometimes we think that making the most of our time means adding a whole bunch of spiritual activities to our already overcrowded life. We're supposed to be missionaries for God here in New England—how can I do that when I'm working and trying to raise a family, and I have all this church stuff? But the things we see in these verses are what naturally we spend our time doing every day. We eat and drink, every day, three times a day. We celebrate and party: birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, football games, and so on. We spend time with our spouses, families, and friends. We spend 40+ hours a week at work. This is normal life, our natural rhythm. This is what God wants us to enjoy and make the most of, not just for ourselves, but for God's sake and for his gospel.

So what does this look like? First, *we enjoy God's good provision* (according to vv. 7-8): food, drink, and celebration. Now some of us read this and get a little nervous. "Eat your bread in joy, drink your wine with a merry heart, put on your party clothes"—that sounds like the Preacher is telling us go out and party in a frivolous way, as in 'You're all going to die anyway, so live it up while you can.' But that can't be what he's saying, since he tells us in v. 7, "for God has already approved what you do." This isn't rebellion but worship. To enjoy the goodness of food, drink, and celebration is to treat God with honor by receiving those things from him as a gift. God is the one who, according to Psalm 104, brings "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" (Ps. 104:14-15). We receive these things with thanksgiving and celebrate God's good provision.

On the other hand, some of us are afraid that if we actually enjoy life we're not being very spiritual. We're at war; we need to be serious. Yes, we are at war, but the victory has already been achieved by Christ. There's work to do, but we celebrate that victory in advance. And there's nothing spiritual about trashing God's good gifts.

I've used this illustration before, but when you give your child a gift at Christmas, how do they show their gratitude to you? By neglecting it and leaving it in the corner? No—by taking it out and playing with it! Do you feel dishonored or taken advantage of when they do that? No—you gave that gift out of love. You *want* them to enjoy it. Now if their enjoyment goes so far that they begin to ignore you or obsess over the gift or begin to think they can't live without it and so on, that's not good. That's not what you had in mind. You want them to enjoy it, not worship it. So God wants us to enjoy his good gifts, and to celebrate the good things in life while we still live.

The truth of the matter is that no one should celebrate more than Christians. Think about all that we have in Christ: We live forever. Death is coming, but it has no power over those in Christ. Our sins are forgiven by God and we've been adopted into his family. He promises that we're going to inherit the whole world in the new creation—that "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). How can we not celebrate and party? We should throw the best parties, because we have the most to celebrate! And if our celebration is not just for us, but for the sake of God and his gospel, then we should be inviting others to join in the party, the meals, the celebration—those who don't yet know Jesus.

I was at a conference this weekend and the teacher⁴ was making the point: We eat on average 21 meals a week. What would it look like if everyone in this room shared just one of those meals each week with someone who doesn't know Jesus yet? That's part of living on mission—sharing life with non-Christians. And you haven't added a single thing to your schedule. How many birthday parties, football parties, or holidays do we celebrate in a given month? We were invited to two yesterday. There are lots of reasons to party. What if we brought others who don't know God into our celebrations, or joined in their celebrations, and made intentional use of the natural rhythms of life for the sake of God and his gospel?

Now that doesn't mean that we're only honoring God if we're eating with non-Christians. But as the people of God in Christ, to whom God promises to give all things along with Christ, don't we want to share them? Don't we want to include others in our joy? Not just the food, but our Savior? I'm asking my own heart these questions, and what keeps me for sharing this way.

So we make the most of our days for God by enjoying his good provision, and finding occasion to enjoy it with those who don't yet know Jesus. Second, we see in v. 9 that we make the most of our days by *enjoying our marriage relationship*, and relationships in general.

Relating to people, especially family, is something we naturally do every day. It's a normal rhythm of life. God wants us to enjoy these relationships; they too are a gift. Sadly, some of us tend to trash them. We don't realize the value of the gift, and so we ignore our parents, or neglect our children or our spouse. And then, just as sadly, some of us turn them into a trophy. We revolve our lives around our children's performance and achievement, running frantically from one thing to the next, because we're trying to find our salvation and theirs in their achievement. Or we wring our hands nervously trying to protect them and keep them in the box, afraid that if we ever take them out they'll get a scratch. As parents, it's our calling before God to shepherd our children. Sometimes that means protecting them; this is an evil world, and we need to guard them. But it also means preparing and equipping them to do what God made them to do—to serve his name and lay their lives down. And serving Jesus is not always as safe as we'd like to think.

But Solomon's main emphasis here is on marriage—on enjoying your spouse. How do we make the most of our marriages for God? What does it look like to take our marriages out of the box and take them for a spin—use them for what they were meant for? It means we cherish our spouses (and our children and friends) in such a way that Christ is on display.

The purpose of marriage, according to Scripture, is to put a spotlight on Jesus. When Paul gives instructions in Ephesians 5, he wants the husbands to love their wives in the way that Christ loves us, by dying for them in self-giving love. Laying down their lives. He wants wives to respect and submit to their husbands as the church does to Christ, a picture of our union with him. And in doing this we help one another see Jesus better. Not only that, we show the world what Jesus is like when they see our mutually self-giving love. The real joy in marriage is not just companionship or sex or children, though all those are good. The real joy is seeing Jesus, delighting in Jesus, and being changed by Jesus.

⁴ Ceasar Kalinowski, "Gospel-centered Rhythms of Missional Living." PLNTD / Gospel Alliance New England Conference, Sept. 22, 2012.

One of the chief reasons so many of our marriages are strained is because we thought we married our Savior, and they have let us down. We thought we married Jesus. But your spouse is a sinner; he's not your Savior. Only Jesus is our Savior. It's your spouse's job to point you to Jesus. And it's your job to point your spouse to Jesus. He's your joy. He's the one who rescues you, who satisfies you, who holds you safely in his hand.

So are we enjoying and cultivating our marriages not just for our joy, but for our joy in Jesus? And are we letting others in on the party? Do our children see Jesus at work in our marriages? Do our friends see it? Our neighbors? Making the most of our marriages for Jesus is not about adding to our lives, but redeeming them for what they were meant to be, a display of God's love and glory and grace through Christ.

So we enjoy God's good provision, we enjoy our marriages. Third, we make the most of our lives for God by *working hard*. That's what we see in v. 10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." Or as Edwards said, "Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live."

This is what we spend the bulk of our day doing—working. We're not talking about adding a job; becoming a missionary in addition to being a teacher or an accountant or a waitress. God might call some of us to do that, or some of us to quit our day jobs and take up vocational ministry. But for most of us, our mission field is our job. Our work. And so are we trashing it—going through the motions each day, being a mediocre employee, with one eye on the clock ready to hit the door? Are we treasuring it, turning it into a trophy, worshiping our job as the source of our security and achievement, burning ourselves out and spending our days in an anxious frenzy to get ahead? Or do we believe that our future is secure in Christ, that he has given us all we need in Christ, that he will give us everything when he returns, and so we are free to rest in him and serve him by working hard, being good employees for the glory of God?

What does it look like to love your boss? Does your boss know you love him or her? How can you show them? What does it look like to love your colleagues as Jesus loves them? To love your customers or clients? How about being the best employee you can be? How about showing the character of Christ by the grace of God? How about acknowledging when you've done something wrong? Telling the truth? How about giving a reason for the hope that you have—that Jesus is your hope and your salvation, and that because you have everything you want and need in him, you're free to lay your life, your reputation, your promotion, your rights down in love for others? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Again, we're adding nothing to our day; we're redeeming what we're already doing of Jesus and his purposes, working hard, resting in God, and bearing witness to Christ in order to make much of him all our days.

Life is a gift, and we only get one under the sun. If we are in Jesus, then we know that God's hand is for us, that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). We are secure in God's hand, and we are therefore free to enjoy life and make the most of this gift for God's sake and the sake of his gospel. May every meal remind us that we've been invited to the last and best of all banquets, the wedding supper of the Lamb. May every sweet relationship remind us of an

intimacy in Christ that we can't begin to imagine. May ever honest day's work bring us one day closer to our eternal rest in Jesus. May every God-centered party anticipate the heavenly celebration that will never end.⁵ May God receive the glory due his name in whatever days he gives us.

⁵ These lines adapted or quoted from Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 220.