



# Ecclesiastes

## (12) Enjoying Life!

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

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The verses that we are going to look at this morning are like a little ray of sunshine between the dark verses that come before them and after them. The last time we looked at Ecclesiastes, we considered verses 10-17 which teach us some of the downsides to having lots of money. Money does not satisfy, and it comes with all kinds of worries and it is easily lost and you cannot take it with you when you die. These verses are a good corrective to the kind of thinking behind the lottery commercials that suggest that the best possible life is to have lots of money.

In the verses that follow our text we are once again under the cloud of another evil that is under the sun and that lies heavy on mankind. But our text is bright and cheerful. It is about something that is good and fitting. It is a passage about joy in a book that is probing a large number of things in the world that are meaningless and evil and dark.

Now when we look at those dark subjects we always come out into the light because the Bible is a message about hope and not despair. The Bible deals realistically about all that is wrong about life and all that is painful about life, but its purpose is to show us the way to live a life that is profoundly satisfying and hopeful.

Verses 18-20 of Ecclesiastes 5 are wonderfully cheery, and they are part of the wonderful theme of Scripture that joy in the everyday life of working and eating and drinking is God's intention for his people. The creation was designed to be a place of joy in the pleasures of life in connection with a relationship with God. And this is what we are going to be thinking about this morning.

The relationship between these verses and the verses that surround them is important. They are meant to be pondered in the light of each other. The relationship between the surrounding verses and the bright cheery verses in the middle tells us something profound about life and it is a relationship that is built into the Scriptures. Verses 10-18 are a warning against looking to money and wealth to find your happiness. Having lots of money does not satisfy. Having lots of money comes with lots of worries. You can easily and quickly lose your money and you cannot take it with you when you die. So, the message is do not put too much of an emphasis in your life on getting lots of money.

The first two verses of chapter 6 are also about the fact that having money does not necessarily lead to joy. But our text tells us that to have wealth and possessions and the power to enjoy them is a gift of God. This is very interesting. It also teaches us something very profound about life as God designed it. The basic idea is that money and wealth can be a curse, or they can be a blessing. Money and wealth can impoverish our lives, or they can enrich our lives. And money and wealth here stand for the enjoyable things of this physical earthly life. This earthly life provides an awful lot of pleasantness and pleasure and enjoyment. It is clearly designed that way. There is beauty. There are all kinds of wonderful tastes and pleasant sensations. There are all kinds of pleasures and satisfactions that come from human interactions. There are all kinds of pleasures and satisfactions that come from work and accomplishments. Clearly the world is designed to be a place of enjoyment and pleasure.

And yet it is possible for these pleasures to be empty and unsatisfying. There is a way of indulging in pleasure that leaves us feeling deflated and sad. Ecclesiastes is holding these two experiences of pleasure next to each other and inviting us to reflect on the relationship between the two. What is the difference between the person who is rich and dissatisfied with life and the person who thoroughly enjoys eating and drinking and his work and his wealth and possessions?

The answer to this question has to do with God. In verses 10-17, God is not mentioned. In 6:1-2, God is mentioned once, but what God does there is withhold the power from a person to enjoy his wealth,

possessions and honor. The cheerful verses 5:18-20 mention God's name 4 times. That is in a book that does not mention God very often. In particular, our cheerful text tells us that people can enjoy the wealth and possessions if God gives the power to enjoy them. It says that the power to enjoy wealth and possessions is the gift of God.

That is the key. There are people who look to wealth and possessions to give them joy and satisfaction, but that does not work according to the author of Ecclesiastes. To try to find joy in wealth and possession or any other this-worldly pleasure is like striving for the wind – or like trying to package fog or like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. It does not work. But God can give you the gift of the power to enjoy your life – your wealth and possessions and your eating and drinking and your work. Just like faith and life itself, enjoying your life is the gift of God.

Let's work our way through these cheerful verses and see what hints that they give us as to how this works and thus how we can be the recipients of this gift of enjoying this earthly life of eating and drinking and working and wealth and possessions. Verse 18, "Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot." What a wonderful verse this is! Ecclesiastes has so much to say about vanity and meaningless and futility and things that are a grievous evil under the sun. Now we read of something that is good and fitting. And what is it? Eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in one's work. The simple pleasures of life. This is good and fitting. Enjoying the simple pleasures of life. How do we get that? Judging from the prevalence of discontentment in this world, this is an elusive goal.

This verse gives us the beginning of an answer. Notice that the enjoyment comes from the toil. The author of Ecclesiastes is speaking about finding enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun. The next two verses refer to toil as well. Verse 19 says that God gives him the power to rejoice in his toil, and verse 20 says that "God keep him occupied with joy in his heart."

The two things that come together here are God and toil – God and work. We find joy when God gives us the power to enjoy our work. And

a big part of that is seeing that our work is an assignment from God. Verse 20 says “God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.” This is one of the keys of enjoyment of life. Serving God through our work. Looking at our work as something that God gives us to do.

This goes right back to the Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. That was the world before anything had happened to spoil it. And we are told that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” The LORD God did not put the man in the Garden of Eden on a lawn chair. God did not put man in the Garden of Eden to play video games. He put him to work. We are designed to work. We are designed to be productive. And if you are designed for something you cannot be joyful unless you are fulfilling your design.

Joy is found in being productive. It is found in being productive because that is God’s assignment for us in this life under the sun. We can be productive in all kinds of ways. God gives us different assignments through our gifts and through our circumstances. Some people have jobs. Some people turn houses into homes. Some people take care of children. Some people are children and God assigns them the task of growing and developing and learning. Some people are retired, but they can still live productive lives by doing things that matter and not wasting their time even if they can no longer do what they used to do. Some people are not able to work at a regular job because they are disabled, but they too can use their time productively, using the gifts that God has given them. And all of us can be productive by doing things outside of our regular work that are worthwhile and beneficial and useful.

This a key part of the way to a joyful life – to toil because that is God assigns us to do. Notice that the focus of the toil is not on getting rich. The focus is on the toil itself. The focus is on doing what God has created us to do. This is what makes it enjoyable. The joy is in fulfilling our purpose in life. The joy is in doing something that is worthwhile. Joy is in doing what God has called us to do. Notice that when these verses speak of wealth and possessions they speak of them as something that God gives. Verse 19 speaks of a person “to whom God has given wealth and possessions.” Some people are given more wealth and possessions

than others. We can be happy with very different amounts of wealth and possessions. The happiness does not come from the wealth and possessions. It comes from the work. And it comes from the power that God gives to enjoy whatever wealth and possessions that God gifts to us.

So, work is an important part of this picture of the enjoyment of life. Work that is performed as an assignment from God. That is what brings joy.

The text also mentions eating and drinking. Eating and drinking are an important part of the enjoyment of life. Verse 18 says, “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and to find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun....” Eating and drinking are part of the picture of an enjoyable life. The Bible has a lot to say about the enjoyment of eating and drinking. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve a great variety of plants and fruit trees for food. Psalm 104 speaks of wine that gladdens the heart of man and bread to strengthen his heart. Many of the religious festivals involved feasting. The imagery of the end times is often imagery of feasting.

The joy of eating and drinking is not just in the enjoyment of the food and drink, but in the food plus the company. The blessed man has children like olive shoots around his table in Psalm 128. Feasting is delightful food and delightful people sharing the food. The author of Ecclesiastes says that this is a good thing. In a world where there is a lot that is vain and empty and futile and evil, it is good and fitting to find enjoyment in eating and drinking in the company of family and friends.

But it is not a given that eating and drinking is enjoyable, nor that work is enjoyable. Verse 17 describes the man who is in love with his riches as one who “eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.” The one who enjoys his eating and drinking as well as his work is one who accepts his lot. These verses refer to that twice. “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life God has given him, **for this is his lot**. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and **to accept his lot** and rejoice in his toil – this is the gift of God.”

One of the keys to the kind of enjoyment that Ecclesiastes is talking about here is accepting one's lot. That refers to accepting the reality of the fact that God has given us a very limited time on this earth. The text refers to "the few days of his life that God has given him." This is our lot. And the enjoyment of life that Ecclesiastes is talking about in these verses is rooted in accepting our lot – part of which is the fact that our lives can be compared to only a few days.

This is an important idea in Ecclesiastes. This is one of the great issues that Ecclesiastes is wrestling with. Again, and again he agonizes over the fact that death seems to make life meaningless. As recently as verse 15 of this chapter he has spoken about the fact that we toil all our life long, but we can take nothing with us when we die. He says then that our toil is toiling for the wind.

Part of the answer to this problem is accepting our lot and enjoy the lives that God has given us: eating and drinking and working and our wealth and possessions. To enjoy them we must accept our lot. We must accept the days of our lives that God gives us. We must accept the fact that this life is temporary and that we take nothing with us when we die. The enjoyment of life that these verses are speaking about is rooted in accepting our lot.

Accepting our lot is an attitude of receiving the life that God gives us as a gift. A couple of times these verses refer to the idea that God gives us things. He gives us the few days of our lives and he gives us wealth and possessions and the power to enjoy them. The key to the enjoyment of life is accepting the life that God gives us as a gift. There is an attitude of submission. There is an attitude of thanksgiving. There is an attitude of contentment with what God has given us. This is the key to the enjoyment of life.

It is rooted in a relationship with God. It is rooted in contentment with the life that God has given. It is rooted in receiving the life of eating and drinking and working and whatever wealth and possessions God may give as a gift of God. Much of the dissatisfaction that we feel comes from not being satisfied with what God has given us. We do not enjoy the life that we have because we are craving more than what God has given us. We can be miserable because we know that we will get sick

and die. We can be miserable because we place more emphasis on money and things than they are designed to bear. We can be living empty lives because we are too invested in this life and the pleasures of this life. The strange thing about the enjoyment of life is that it comes from accepting our lot as given to us by God.

And so, the relationship with God is crucial. When life and the pleasures of life are accepted as gifts from God the joy is not in the thing itself, but the thing as a gift of God. There is a huge difference between these two. We can enjoy eating and drinking and working and wealth and possessions without reference to God. That is what the world does. And that is what we all do by nature. Then our focus is on the food and the drink and the work and the wealth and possessions, themselves. But when we do that they do not really satisfy. There is some kind of enjoyment, but there is not deep contentment and joy. Then we experience what Ecclesiastes is speaking about in verse 10, "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income..." The thing itself cannot satisfy. The joy that Ecclesiastes is talking about in our text comes from receiving the food and drink and work and wealth and possession as a gift. The things we enjoy are enjoyed as gifts from God rather than the things without reference to God.

So, the enjoyment of life that Ecclesiastes is speaking about in these verses is the enjoyment of life with its pleasures as a gift of God. It is the gift of God part that makes the difference between an empty life and a life of profound enjoyment. Then the foundation of the enjoyment is the generosity of God. The enjoyment is in the goodness of God as well as the pleasure in the gift. And because of that there is a contentment with one's lot. One's lot in life is a gift of God who distributes his gifts in love and wisdom.

Now we need to fill out this picture with the implications of Jesus and what he accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. To hear the word of God to us from this passage we need to consider what difference the gospel makes to our understanding of it.

One of the difference that the gospel makes is that we live with a clearer hope because of Jesus' resurrection. This passage speaks about

enjoying our life of eating and drinking and working in “few days of this life that God has given [us].” The OT saints had some hope of life beyond the grave, but it was not very clear. We have the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have a clear hope of our own resurrection because of Jesus’ resurrection. We have a clear understanding of the fact that Jesus has overcome death so that the sting of death is removed.

This contributes to our enjoyment of life including our eating and drinking and our work. We can enjoy the few days of this life knowing that the best is yet to come. The resurrection of Christ gives us a more clear and definite hope for the future beyond this life and that hope increases our enjoyment of this life. What lies before us is way, way better than the wonderful joys of this life. And so, our enjoyment of the good things of this life is increased because we live in anticipation of the even greater joys that are set before us.

Another difference that Jesus and his salvation makes is related to this idea that to enjoy the pleasures of this life we need the power to enjoy them. That power is a gift of God. These verses make the point that the power to enjoy life is a gift of God.

Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are the basis for the gift from God that is the requirement for true joy in life. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we receive the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, adoption into the family of God, and the power for turning from sin and living for Jesus. The gift of God that we receive through Jesus is what Jesus calls an abundant life. Living for God is the abundant life. This is life as it was meant to be lived. This leads to deep joy. Joy rooted in being loved and cherished by God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

This is the gift of God that gives us the power to know the deep joy of life with God. Ecclesiastes tells us that it is good to enjoy eating and drinking and working and whatever wealth and possessions God gives us as a gift of God. But we are not able to do that unless God gives us the power to do so. Without that power we try to enjoy our eating and drinking and work and wealth and possessions apart from God. But that is empty and futile and unsatisfying. The joys and pleasures are superficial and frivolous. They are hollow because God is not in them.

But through Jesus and his salvation, we are given the power to enjoy life as a gift of God. That changes everything. That is what gives our enjoyment depth and makes it profoundly satisfying. It is rooted in the source of the most profound joy that we can know and that is joy in the Lord. Jesus said, in John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” Paul, writes that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

The gospel brings joy and that joy makes it possible for us to enjoy our eating and drinking and working and wealth and possessions with our focus on God. This is how we are intended to enjoy the gifts of life. By receiving them with thanksgiving as a gift of God. Paul writes “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4).

But the gospel has something else to say about this whole area of the enjoyment of the things of this life. Jesus calls us to follow him. He says “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” The call of the gospel and the fruit of the gospel in our lives is living for Jesus rather than living for ourselves.

The verses that we have looked at this morning, teach that there is an important place in the life that is pleasing to God for enjoying the legitimate pleasures of this life with thanksgiving. But there is also an important place for sacrifice for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of love of other people. One of the blessings of the gospel is that we are enabled to live for something greater than the enjoyment of the things of this life. It is by losing our lives for Jesus’ sake and for the gospel’s sake that we save our lives. So, there is an important place for sacrifice in lives that are rooted in Christ. Jesus died “that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

This too belongs to the joy of the Christian life. There is the joy of pleasures of life as a gift of God. There is also the joy of giving – the joy

of loving – the joy of seeking first the kingdom of God. There is the joy of living for God and others and not for ourselves. We follow a Saviour who gave his life for others. We are called to do the same.

These two ways of joyful living go together. The enjoyment of God's gift of eating and drinking and family and feasting and working and wealth and possessions. And the joy of doing with less for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of those who need us to invest in their lives with our money and with our time. And you can't know the deep joy of the pleasant things of this life as a gift of God without knowing something of the joy of sacrifice for the kingdom of God. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."