



Ecclesiastes

(19) Joy in Everyday Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

Text: verses 7-10

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Today we are going to hear the Word of the Lord from another one of these “eat and drink and enjoy your life” passages in the book of Ecclesiastes. This is the fourth or fifth one in this book. Up until lately I have been viewing these repetitions in the book of Ecclesiastes as a difficult challenge (for me as the preacher and thus also for you as the listener.). Different preachers deal with this challenge in different ways. Some of preachers deal with the book thematically – that way you don’t have to deal with all the repetition. Then you just have one sermon on the all the “eat and drink and enjoy your life passages” and you’re done with them.

I have not chosen to preach through this book thematically. I’ve chosen to start at the beginning and work to the end – the way that God has given it to us. I’m not saying that it is bad to deal with a book thematically, but we are working through the book from the beginning to the end. That means that we run into themes that we have run into before. What I have been trying to do is to live with some repetition, but also to try to deal with similar topics from different perspectives and with different applications. On the one hand some repetition is good and even necessary. You need to think about the same thing many times in life and hopefully you will learn it a little deeper each time. You don’t think once about the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins and then get on with your life. You think about it every day, hopefully, and also, hopefully, through the repetition you come to a deeper appreciation of the wonder of that familiar truth.

On the other hand, we can look at the same truth from many different perspectives and angles. Life in relation to God is very rich. God's Word is very rich. Sin is very subtle and multifaceted and so there are endless ways of thinking about any one topic. So, this morning we will hear the Word of God from this particular "eat, drink and enjoy your life" passage. Hopefully we will hear something old in a deeper way and some new or at least different perspectives on something that is old and familiar.

One striking thing about this passage is how it is placed right in the middle of a passage that I have described as an expression of someone's dark night of soul. Verses 1-6 are about how you can't really tell if God loves you or hates you from the way he treats you in this life. Verses 11-12 say that by looking at the way things happen in the world you cannot tell that God is in control. It all appears so random and pointless. We saw last week that this is not how God's people usually think about life, but that sometimes they do. And it is very significant that God includes dark thoughts like these in his word for us to reflect on and learn from.

But right in the middle of one of these dark reflections we have this exhortation to enjoy your life. The contrast is striking. All around these verses the words are dark – life is meaningless – hardly worth living. Everyone dies. And then in the middle of all that darkness you have these words: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do."

Clearly the author of Ecclesiastes has done that on purpose. And clearly, he wants us to think about this odd juxtaposition of two very different passages. And we must ask, what is his point? I'm going to take the rest of this sermon to answer this question and I am going to do it in a roundabout way. I want to get at the meaning of this passage by comparing it with another passage in the Bible that is similar in some ways but has a profoundly different meaning. We will look at a few verses from 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 15 is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a long passage and it deals with many different facets of the resurrection, but one of the things that Paul deals with is what would be the case if the resurrection did not happen. Paul discusses that in verses 12-19 of 1 Corinthians 15. This is some of what

he says: Verse 14: “[I]f Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, and your faith is in vain.” Verses 17-19, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Then later on in the passage Paul gives the implications of this point for eating and drinking. In verse 32, Paul writes, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.’”

What Paul is saying here is that if there is no resurrection for us after this life, it means that Christ has not risen from the dead. The resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of his people stand and fall together. He is saying that if Christ did not rise from the dead and if we will not rise from the dead, our faith is vain – empty meaningless, futile. “If we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” And if that is the case, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

What he means is that if this life is all that there is, get whatever enjoyment out of it that you can because there is nothing more. This is an ancient philosophy known as hedonism. There is more to it, of course, but the basic idea is, live for the moment, get as much pleasure in life as you can, because when you die it’s all over. There is nothing more to live for than for pleasure. Paul is saying that if there is no resurrection from the dead, this is the way that you should live. “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

The point that Paul is making is that if there is nothing after this life, life is ultimately meaningless and so get whatever pleasure you can in this life because when it is over it is over. And it is very significant that this is basically where modern philosophy ends up. Again, there are nuances, but underlying much of the thinking that rejects the Bible as the truth of God is what is known as nihilism. Nihilism is the conviction that since there is no God and since everything ends at death, there is no basis for right and wrong, there are no ultimate consequences for how you live, so you might as well live without worrying about the consequences for soon you will be dead and that will be that. And so that is how many people live, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

Here is a post from a chatroom on nihilism. This guy is 17 years old. This is part of an ongoing discussion. "I used to think this way about death as well, why bother living if you will never remember any of it? Now, i try to treat life as a GTA [video] game in a way. Since life doesn't matter, there's really no consequences to my actions after I'm dead. Since i don't have the guts to kill myself right now, i might as well do what I want to do while i'm alive. I'm planning on leaving my house and camping in the woods alone, where it's probably illegal to do so. I'm 17, so I won't go to prison or something. I Hope you can find entertainment in life."

Even though most people do not spell it out so crassly, this is the philosophy that underlies the lives of many unbelievers. And indeed, this is the logical consequence of the reigning world-view in our society that there is nothing more than this material world. And Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15 that this is the logical outcome of unbelief. If death is truly the end – if there is nothing beyond this life – then get whatever pleasure you can – nothing matters beyond that because death is the end of your existence and so nothing matters once you are dead.

This does not mean that people live meaningless lives. It means that without God and the afterlife – meaning is whatever you bring to your life. There is no meaning that comes from outside of yourself. You can choose to live to try to make the world a better place. You can choose to live for your family. Or you can choose to sleep with any many people as you can or make as much money as you can or whatever – but there is no ultimate meaning to any of it. Once you die whatever meaning you got out of life vaporizes. There is no meaning that is objectively real. There is no meaning that is true for the whole thing. The universe is just there and it does not care about the few billion human beings that happen to have evolved on this tiny planet lost in a vast impersonal universe.

So that is one way to think of eating and drinking. "Eat and drink for tomorrow you die." Life is about the pleasures you can experience and nothing more. The meaning of eating and drinking is keeping you alive and whatever pleasure you get from it. There is no more meaning to eating and drinking than the pleasure that you get from it.

This is a pretty empty way to live. It is not very satisfying. Pleasure by itself tends to be fleeting and is not satisfying for the soul. Thinking about life in this way leads to a lot of depression and emptiness and futility and even suicides. If you live by the philosophy "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" you get some short-term pleasure from eating and drinking and other things, but there is something empty about eating and drinking in this way.

This not quite what Ecclesiastes is saying. Ecclesiastes is struggling with the apparent meaningless of life that ends with death. But Ecclesiastes does not deny the existence of God and Ecclesiastes does not deny the difference that the existence of the God of the Bible makes to life. Ecclesiastes is wrestling with the fact that life appears to be meaningless and futile and it is difficult to see how it is all part of a good plan of God, but Ecclesiastes does not, on account of that, turn away from God and abandon all hope. And these "eat and drink and enjoy your life" passages are one of the indications of that.

Let's go back now to our text passage and see how it is different from the way that Paul speaks of eating and drinking if there is no resurrection from the dead. Here it is again. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. 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. 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."

Now in this passage Ecclesiastes does not forget about death altogether. In verse 9 he says, "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life." He is not ignoring all together that life often seems vain and futile. In verse 10 he says, "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." So, he has not completely left behind his dark thoughts about life. But there is not the same despair here. The mood is more positive. There is a difference between

this passage and the implication that Paul draws in 1 Corinthians 15 if there is no resurrection and death is truly the end. What Paul is saying that if there is nothing beyond this life, life is ultimately meaningless. Live for momentary pleasure because when you die it's all over. Ecclesiastes is thinking along similar lines, but he has not lost all hope. God is still in the picture and that is why the bottom line is not hopelessness and futility.

I think that this corresponds to the psalms of lament that we looked at last week. In the psalms of lament, the psalmists voice some pretty strong complaints to God about how he is neglecting them. But the reason that they feel as strongly as they do is that they believe in God and they are bewildered about the way he is treating them. Furthermore, in most of the psalms of lament, the psalmists end up expressing their faith in God's goodness and faithfulness even if they are not seeing it at the moment.

I think that that is what we are seeing here in this "enjoy eating and drinking passage." God's people have dark times. Sometimes things can seem very bleak. But they know that God is there, and they know that he is good and faithful and so there are also times when there is more light and more hope.

There is a big difference between having questions and doubts and outright unbelief. Unbelief is a settled rejection of God – either a denial that God even exists or a settled pattern of living as if he does not exist. Doubt is not a rejection of God. It is struggling with questions about God and his way with us or with the world. God is still very much in the picture and with God still very much in the picture there is still hope – even if it is not unambiguous hope.

And we can look at this "enjoy eating and drinking passage" in this way. God is there. God is good. And that is true even if I cannot always reconcile God's goodness with what I see and experience in my life or with life in general. And, while I am struggling with these questions, life goes on, I still need to eat and drink and work and live with my family and there is a lot of joy in that.

One helpful insight that we can draw from this is that one of the ways to deal with negative thoughts and discouragement in life is by carrying on with life and with enjoying the everyday pleasures that God has built into life. In the middle of all the dark thoughts, Ecclesiastes says, “Enjoy eating and drinking, and feasting and living with your wife and work hard at your work.”

This is a great antidote to depression and discouragement and dark thoughts about God and life. This will not fix everything, but very often, the everyday stuff of life can make us feel better about the things that we are struggling with. In a book that I was reading this week the author told of a time in her life when she was really struggling and feeling down and discouraged. In that context she ended up on a holiday with a friend who had a bunch of kids. They were housed next to each other. Well somehow the kids got lice and the lice got into both apartments and so she had to spend the weeks of her holidays cleaning and disinfecting and doing whatever it takes to get rid of lice. But by the end of her holiday she was feeling a lot better.

In that connection she tells an anecdote about her grandmother who when she heard that someone was depressed she would say, “What, don’t they have floors to wash!” The point is that one of the best antidotes for depression and dark thoughts about life and about God is just engaging life and being busy. There is a time to think deeply about life and also about the struggles of life. But there is also a time to stop brooding and enjoy the simple pleasures of life like eating and drinking and feasting and family and work. And often, after a time, the darkness lifts.

This is not to say that this is the complete answer to every sorrow and every discouragement and every dark night of the soul. Sometimes these things can be persistent. There can be deep mental-health issues. They can sometimes need professional help. But this is one insight that is often helpful. And what Ecclesiastes is getting at in this passage is that it is possible to have profound struggles with life and gain perspective from just enjoying the everyday joys of living.

A related point is that there is a time to think deeply about life and its meaning and there is a time just to live life and enjoy it. That is one of

the points of these “enjoy eating and drinking passages” that are interspersed between serious passages dealing with the deep questions and enigmas of life. It is as if the author is saying, “You can’t think about these deep things all the time.” A large part of the time you just need to live your life, enjoy the everyday pleasures of life, and don’t be thinking deep thoughts all the time.

Now I suppose this point applies to different people in different ways. Perhaps the exhortation of Ecclesiastes for some of us is that we need to spend more time thinking deeply about the issues of life. Perhaps we spend too much time just enjoying eating and drinking and living life and not enough time thinking about why there is so much suffering and injustice in the world and other issues of life in the light of God. That leads to a life that is superficial – a life that is not really engaged with God and his kingdom and the wellbeing of other people. Surely if we care about the glory of God and if we care about the suffering of people, there is plenty that is troubling about life. One of the lessons of the psalms of lament is that these poets cared very deeply about good and evil and God’s relationship to it. So there needs to be a balance and that seems to be one of the lessons of the book of Ecclesiastes and the alternation of deep thinking passages and “enjoyment of everyday life” passages. To live the kind of life that God is calling us to live we need to think deeply about life in God’s world, but we also need to just live life as well and to enjoy the everyday pleasures that life brings.

But this is different from what Paul is talking about when it says that if there is no resurrection from the dead let’s just eat and drink for tomorrow we die. That is not Paul position, but he is saying that if there were no resurrection from the dead, that would be the logical way to live. That is nihilism – the conviction that nothing really matters so just live it up until you die. That is not what Ecclesiastes is teaching in these “enjoy eating and drinking” passages. And the reason is, as I have said, is that for Ecclesiastes, God is in the picture and that changes everything.

Hear again verse 7. “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.” Eating your bread with joy and drinking your wine with a merry heart is

something that God approves of. And the same can be said about the other things that Ecclesiastes mentions in these verses. He talks about letting “your garments always be white” and not allowing your head to be lacking oil. He is talking about getting ready to go out to a party. White garments were festive garments. Using oil on your head is the equivalent of us using mousse in our hair or whatever else people put on their head or their face when they are going out to a party. That’s not my thing, but thankfully for you all, what is my thing is not your standard. So, put oil on your head if that makes you feel good.

So, Ecclesiastes is saying that the life of eating good food and drinking good wine and going out to parties and enjoying your family and doing your work with energy and effort – all of that is pleasing to God. Now he is talking about God’s covenant people. This book is addressed to covenant people – the people of God. These are the people that God has delivered from the slavery in Egypt and chosen for his own. Applying this today, this is addressed to the church, to those who are in Christ, whose life is lived on the basis of salvation in Christ and who are forgiven and are being renewed in Christ. The hedonism of the world is not pleasing to God. Those who eat and drink and enjoy the moment because for them life is meaningless are not pleasing to God. Paul writes that those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

What is pleasing to God in our text is everyday life in relationship with God. What is pleasing to God is God’s people enjoying the everyday things of life as a gift from his hands. The everyday life of eating and drinking and getting together with family and friends and enjoying family life and working for a living – when that is enjoyed in relationship with God, before the face of God, out of thanksgiving to God – that is pleasing to God.

This is part of the theology of everyday life. This is part of the biblical teaching about everyday life. This is part of the theology of the ordinary. This is part of the theology of creation, but it is also part of the theology of the life of salvation.

It is very interesting that there is so much in the four gospels about Jesus eating. One author has pointed out the fascinating fact that each of the gospel writers had a very limited space to tell the story of Jesus

and his monumental significance, and each of them make many references to Jesus and food. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus provided wine for the wedding at Cana. A number of times the gospel writers mention that Jesus was hungry. Jesus mentions that John the Baptist lived on a restricted diet of locusts and wild honey, but the Son of man came eating and drinking. Jesus ate with his disciples and he provided food for the five thousand when they were hungry. The gospels make a point of mentioning food and eating and drinking often in connection with Jesus.

There are many different points that they make, but surely one of them is that the ordinary life of which eating and drinking and being with others is such an important part is pleasing to God. Jesus, among many other things, is the example of a perfect human life and the gospels make a point of the fact that Jesus participated in the every day joys and pleasures of life in relationship with his Father. This is part of the way that Jesus lived his life to the glory of God.

But at the same time Jesus showed us something else about eating and drinking and food and that is while it is significant in and of itself, it also points beyond itself to the reality of spiritual hunger and spiritual thirst. Jesus said "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst John 6:35). Eating and drinking are significant in themselves, but they also are intended to teach us and remind us that we have spiritual hungers and thirsts that can only be satisfied with spiritual food and drink and that spiritual food and drink is fellowship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Apart from God, eating and drinking and everyday life cannot satisfy our spiritual hungers and thirsts. We were made for more. We were made to enjoy everyday life in fellowship with God. And that is the relationship between salvation in Jesus and the enjoyment of everyday life to the glory of God. The joys of everyday life find their true purpose when they are enjoyed by those who find their deepest joys in the relationship with God which Jesus Christ provides for those who trust in him.