

# Finding Joy in a Broken World (Ecclesiastes 8:2-9:18)

**Big Idea:** Accept the harsh realities of a broken world. As you do, urgently enjoy every good gift that God gives you.

Welcome to our sixth sermon on the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books of the Bible. It wants to help us learn how to live skillfully in this world. Ecclesiastes isn't afraid to ask hard questions about life in its quest to help us live skillfully in a broken and painful world.

I saw a house recently on Clinton Street just north of College. It looks like a beautiful house. But inside, contractors have gutted the entire house right back to the studs. The outside walls remain, but inside, everything has changed.

I get the feeling that this is what the Preacher is trying to do with us. He's stripping the way we live right back to the studs, but not because he wants to demolish us. His goal is to help us rebuild our lives around what really matters.

As we look at today's passage, that's exactly that the Preacher is going to do. He's going to strip us of some things, but then he's going to begin the rebuilding process. He's going to help us figure out what to add back into our lives, even though he's going to remove a lot and it's going to be painful.

# Stripped

Before he can rebuild, the Preacher has to strip us of some things. That's what he's done all along in this book. That's what he's going to keep doing today.

What's got to be stripped? He wants to strip three ideas away from us:

## **The idea that life is fair (8:2-17)**

We like to believe that life is fair, that good people get ahead and bad people suffer. If you believe this lie, we're going to be very confused when good people suffer, bad people get ahead, and life seems unfair.

And so in chapter 8, the Preacher gives us three examples to strip away this belief:

- In verses 1 to 9, he talks about how to deal with kings. We can follow his advice and learn how to deal with anybody in authority over us. His advice: follow orders, even when it's hard. Life will go a lot better if you're tactful and obedient. This is good advice. But even then, there are no guarantees. In verses 6 and 8, the Preacher says, "For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it." You can follow all the rules, but you will still find that you can't control life. You can do

everything right and still have a life full of suffering. You can be a good employee, for instance, and still get fired. Life's not fair.

- Then, in verses 10 to 13, the Preacher talks about wicked people who die and are buried. A wicked person should have a bad reputation, right? But here's the way it works. Some wicked people have a veneer of religion: "they used to go in and out of the holy place." And they're also popular: they "were praised in the city where they had done such evil things." Even when the wicked die, they continue to get the praise owed to the righteous. It's infuriating. The reason is given in verse 11: because we live in an unjust world that tolerates wickedness. In the long run, God will vindicate the righteous (8:12). But in the short term, the wicked often get ahead.
- The Preacher caps this off in 8:14-17 with the observation: "there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous." Good people get what the wicked deserve, and wicked people get what good people deserve. It's inexplicable. It's unfair.

That's the key message of chapter 8: never think that life is fair. The Preacher wants to strip us of that expectation. Life is all tangled, and formulas don't work. The Preacher wants to strip us of the expectation that life is fair. It just isn't.

There's a second idea that he wants to strip away from us:

## **The idea that we can treat death like it's not a problem (9:1-6)**

Of course, we know we can't avoid death. Deep down we all know that we're going to die. That's not what the Preacher is talking about. He's talking about the fact that most of us ignore this reality. A hundred years from now, as Anne Lamott says, there will be all new people. Nobody alive will exist. Most of us will be forgotten. Everything that we've worked for will be lost. Death is the great equalizer. It will come for everyone: the righteous and the sinner, the rich and the poor. We can't escape death.

Death is certain. It comes to everyone. Contrary to those who say that it's natural, Ecclesiastes 9 reminds us that death is evil. You can never stand beside a casket and think that death is okay. It isn't. "Death is an enemy, and it can be a fierce one .... It is ugly. It destroys relationships. It is to be feared. It is repulsive. There is something odious about death. Never pretend otherwise." (D.A. Carson)

Don't think you can dodge death. It is actually one of the greatest problems that Jesus came to solve. The New Testament has a lot to say about how Jesus solves the problem of death – but don't you dare ever think that it's not a problem.

There's one more idea that the Preacher wants to strip from us in this passage:

## **The idea that you can predict how your life will go (9:11-18)**

I've noticed that I have expectations for how life will go. I've got my whole life mapped out. I think that I can control what's going to happen in my future. I don't think I'm

alone. It's easy to presume we know how life will go. We make plans and we expect that the plans will work out.

The last part of chapter corrects this belief. We're *not* in control. There are no guarantees of how life will turn out. Life is unpredictable and cruel. We don't get what we think we have coming to us. All it takes is one bad person to ruin all our good efforts. As the Preacher says in verse 11 to 12:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

"Time and chance happen to them all." Life is unpredictable. We can't predict how our lives will go.

The Preacher wants to strip us of three lies that just don't work in real life. Don't think that life is fair. Don't think that you can treat death like it's not a problem. Don't think that you can predict how your life will go. If you believe any of these lies, you'll be setting yourself up for a lot of problems.

In essence, the Preacher is reminding us we don't live in a Genesis 2 world. We don't live in the world God originally created for us. We live in a Genesis 3 world, still full of

beauty, but affected in every area by sin. Don't think we live in a Genesis 2 world. Expect brokenness to touch every area of your life. Don't be surprised.

## Rebuilt

Remember that house I talked about on Clinton Street? The builders gutted not because they wanted to destroy it, but because they wanted to rebuild it. That's what the Preacher is trying to do. He's not trying to gut our lives. He's trying to knock down what won't work so we can rebuild something beautiful.

In the middle of this broken world, the Preacher extends some hope. Soak in every word:

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. (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

Once you realize we're in a Genesis 3 world, you can actually start to appreciate it for what it is and enjoy it. In fact, when you realize how uncertain and short life is, there's an urgency to what the Preacher says.

Think about a vacation. You could go on vacation and think, "Man, this vacation is only going to last a couple of weeks, and it's costing me a lot of money, and who knows if it will even turn out like we hoped." Or you could go into it and say, "This vacation is short, and nothing is guaranteed, so I'd better make the most of every minute." Same realities, different responses. The second is much better.

Instead of complaining that life is short and unpredictable, enjoy every moment. This is now the sixth time the Preacher has made this point in this book. Savor your food. Wear clothes you love. If you're married, find joy in your marriage.

Ride a bike, see the Grand Canyon, go to the theater, learn to make music, visit the sick, care for the dying, cook a meal, feed the hungry, watch a film, read a book, laugh with some friends until it makes you cry, play football, run a marathon, snorkel in the ocean, listen to Mozart, ring your parents, write a letter, play with your kids, spend your money, learn a language, plant a church, start a school, speak about Christ, travel to somewhere you've never been, adopt a child, give away your fortune and then some, shape someone else's life by laying down your own. (David Gibson)

Enjoy all of God's good gifts. This is true Christianity.

We can do this in a Genesis 3 world because we know that we're moving to a Revelation 21 world, in which God will set everything right. Jesus died to undo the

damage that sin did to this broken world. When you know Jesus, you can find hope even when life is short and uncertain.

If you hear nothing else, hear this: **Accept the harsh realities of a broken world. As you do, urgently enjoy every good gift that God gives you** – especially because of the hope we have in Jesus.

Lord, this world is hard. Help us to never deny that. But in the middle of the harsh realities of life, help us to enjoy every good gift you've given us as we look forward to the day when everything sad will become untrue. In Jesus' name. Amen.