

# Enjoying life

Ecclesiastes, this odd little “wisdom” book, had some trouble getting into the Bible. Its Hebrew is a later form than other Old Testament writings, and it was written between



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332 and 200 B.C., when Judea was under Greek rule. It faced objections that it showed Greek philosophical influences and offered a rather bleak outlook. As odd as it may seem, Ecclesiastes points out the contrast of life with and without faith in God and helps us understand that this physical world presents opportunities to discover joy in God’s creation.

Instead of a name, the writer is called “Preacher” or “Teacher,” derived from the Hebrew word for an assembly or congregation and refers to one who calls the people together. When this Hebrew word was translated for the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament it became *Ekklesiastes* after the person who presides over a congregation (*ekklesia*). The writer opens with life as absurd and meaningless: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2, NASV). We may feel the same about life when our minds are filled with today’s news headlines or a particular personal life challenge.

Curiously, this “Preacher” discovers that life has its joys and meaningful relationships. At the time of its writing, the Hebrew concept of death was not defined by either anticipated rewards or deserved judgment. Sheol, the place of the dead, was shadowy and God could send people there or bring them back (1 Samuel 2:2). You may remember in the Broadway musical “Fiddler on the Roof” when Tevya claimed to have had a frightening vision of dead relatives in Sheol. Psalm 139:8 says God is to be found even in Sheol. Even in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees were still arguing about life after this world

(Acts 24:14-21). So the Preacher, our guide, stumbles through the maze of life and comes to understand that in spite of unanswered questions and mysteries there is joy and satisfaction in living in this creation God called “good” in Genesis.

The writer sounds much like a country philosopher as he ruminates: “I spent my life tryin’ to figger out this rat race and it boils down to this: you only have so many days so ya better git some happiness from what ya eat, drink, and labor at afore it’s over. We all in the same race!” (5:18, MKO paraphrase). I’m not making fun of anybody; I’m just saying there is joy to be found in the simple things of life, without trying to construct a complex philosophical foundation and work out a system of rewards and balances. God can be found in the smile of a grandchild, the majesty of Brice Canyon, the good news of a successful surgery and the seeming impossibility of Jesus’ empty grave. Life is the gift of God. Are you living that gift, celebrating familiar things, enjoying the flavors, sounds and images all about you?

Hard work is also recorded as a joy in living (5:18). Don’t be sidetracked by the words “their lot in life” (v. 18) or put off by “their place in the world” (v. 19). The idea is not that you are predestined to work yourself to death while singing a hypocritical song of joy. Work is a way to provide for those you love, to earn respect, to be creative, to help someone else be productive. If there is no joy in what you do, seek another opportunity that offers challenges and satisfaction where there is joy.

Be about the business of joy. The Preacher advises you to wear a white garment and don’t run out of oil for your head. These are images of celebration, the joy resulting from the discovery that God accepts you! (9:7-8). I have known individuals whose faith was marked by harsh judgment, a dour demeanor and

## Formations

October 11, 2015

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 5:18-20;  
8:15; 9:7-10

the attitude that we are but inches from the flames of hell. Then there is another flawed idea that you better get all you can, everyone is on their own and time is short. Nowhere does the Preacher promote selfishness or disregard for others. Ecclesiastes can help us understand that God gives us this life so that we can enjoy his gifts and do it in such a way that we show gratitude and live well.

There is a specific joy to be found “with your dearly loved spouse... all the days of your pointless life!... because that’s your part to play... in your hard work under the sun” (9:9). There is no harder work than building a satisfying relationship, in marriage or otherwise, but the result is true joy. I suspect the Preacher smiled as he wrote those words. Your life is not “pointless” if you can cultivate a rich and satisfying marriage. Society is weakened when people fail to build a meaningful marriage.

The closing of our text is somber: “Whatever you are capable of doing...because there’s no work, thought, knowledge, or wisdom in the grave, which is where you are headed” (9:10). Plain words: Do it now before it’s too late! But we know more than the writer of Ecclesiastes. We know the Christ who promises us a place in heaven (John 14:1-2), the Christ who died in our place on a cross (Matt. 27:45-54) and the Christ who arose from death (Matt. 28:5-10).

The Preacher is right to tell us to seek and experience joy in life. Because of Christ we have a much clearer understanding and motivation to experience joy and share the hope of God with our world.

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