



## Learning to Live with the Facts of Life

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

I noticed recently that a new TV show will soon be airing. It's a remake of the old *Dragnet* series many of us "young people" watched as we grew up. Jack Webb was unforgettable as a no nonsense, cynical, "nothing can surprise me" cop named Joe Friday. Who can forget the way he walked. Who can forget his famous line, "Just the facts, ma'am."

The last few months, we've been working our way through the book of Ecclesiastes. In many ways, the writer of Ecclesiastes is the Joe Friday of the Bible. He's also a no nonsense, cynical, nothing can surprise me kind of guy. In this book he takes us on a journey where he's searching for the meaning of life. He's a guy who refuses to accept easy, canned answers. He deplores spiritual platitudes. He takes out his microscope and he tries to observe all the data, everything that takes place "under the sun," as he calls it. In many ways, what he wants is "just the facts."

Frankly, I'm glad we have this book as part of the Scriptures. I'm glad there is a book that kind of approaches life from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. It's not that he denies the existence of God; it's just that he refuses to allow the existence of God to candy coat the realities of life under the sun. The wonderful thing about this is that in doing so he teaches us how to integrate our faith in God with the real facts of life.

This morning we begin the home stretch of our study. The themes he covers in the last three chapters have already been covered, but he enlarges upon those themes and best of all he gets more practical in terms of how to live. Starting in 8:16 and extending down through ch. 9, he tells what the facts of life are, as well as how to live with them.

### I. What are the Facts of Life?

**A. Life is mysterious:** The first fact of life he gives us at the end of chapter 8.

**"When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover."**

He says here that life is mysterious. No matter how hard we try, we can't figure it out. The Teacher says that life is too complicated, too vast, too filled with conflicting elements for any one of us to figure out all the answers. Even though we stay up all night and day, trying to think through and understand the complicated events that bring to pass the circumstances of our lives, we'll never fully understand.

The Bible encourages us to try to understand life and

pursue knowledge. We should never adopt the attitude of anti-intellectualism that characterizes some segments of Christianity today. The mind does matter. We're to reason and think about what God is doing and what life gives us. God has placed in mankind a desire to know and understand and make sense out of life. This is why NASA will continue with the Shuttle program. There is something in us that needs to know more. But we have to remember that no matter how much we try, mysteries will still remain. We don't have the ability to see life in its totality to answer all the questions. We have to be content with mystery.

This is true in the spiritual realm as well. Many people are unwilling to take the step to follow Christ until they can understand everything involved in the Christian faith. But if you're waiting for that, you'll never make a commitment. This book is full of mysteries, and even in our age of advanced knowledge, we can't find all the answers.

This is also true as we think about our own lives. When you think about how many of the things that have happened to you have been determined by events over which you had no control and which had to fall together in a certain pattern before they could ever have come to pass, events you couldn't have anticipated, you can see how true this is. Think of how one small decision led to a chain of events that changed your destiny! How can that be? Life is too complicated for us ever to answer all the questions and understand all the mysteries.

**B. Life is not fair:** The second fact of life comes in 9:1.

**"For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him."**

Not only is life mysterious, but life isn't fair. Being good doesn't guarantee the good life. He says that even though the righteous and their work are in God's hands, they don't know what awaits them. Those are good hands to be in, but who knows what God has in store for them? Will it be love or hatred? This is not talking about romance, it's talking about the circumstances of life. We can never really know by those circumstances whether we have God's approval or not.

The other day I had one of those days where everything seemed to go wrong. First, both Lynn and I locked ourselves out of our house. We had to pay a locksmith a small fortune just to let us into our own house. A few hours later, as I was running a simple errand, I rear-ended another car. I began to think that maybe God was somehow upset with me; that there was some sin in my life that I needed to confess. Why is it that we think like that? That's an attempt to view life as fair. When I'm good, good things happen; when I'm bad, bad things happen.

The Teacher tells us that life doesn't work that way. Several times already in this book we've seen that prosperity is not always a sign that God favors you; even the wicked prosper

sometimes. Adversity, on the other hand, is not always a sign that you're being punished by God. The book of Job is proof of that. Job's three tormentors, whom he called his "friends," were convinced that what was happening to him was a sign that God was angry at him and was punishing him for sin. But by the end of the book it's clear they're wrong in that judgment. All suffering, all personal problems, do not always come, although sometimes they do as a result of God's disapproval of things in our lives.

**C. Life is short:** The third fact of life is found in vv. 2-6.

**"It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean, and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead. For whoever is joined with the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun."**

The Teacher says that not only is life mysterious and unfair, it's also short. When he talks about that "one fate" he's talking about death. Throughout this book, the Teacher seems to be preoccupied with death. We're not used to that today. We live in a time when people are trying to forget about death. We've devised all kinds of means by which we can maintain the illusion that life is going to go on forever. But the Scriptures are very honest about life, so they frequently face the fact of death. There are three things he observes about death.

*First, he observes that death doesn't play favorites.* It doesn't matter if you're good or bad, clean or unclean by OT standards, offer sacrifices as an act of worship or not. "As the good man is, so is the sinner." Some of you will remember a few years back we had Rio Cujuanco share her FaithStory with us. Rio was and is a very prominent person in the Philippines. She was a well-known TV personality and married into a famous political family. In the midst of that, she came to Christ. She found our church because she was diagnosed with cancer and undergoing treatments at Stanford. Rio has a tremendous impact for Christ in her country. She has spent days in cancer wards sharing the Good News with children and the poorest of the poor in her country. Yet I found out just this last week that she is back in the hospital. We're praying, of course, for her recovery, but it doesn't look good. We wonder why would God chose to allow this to happen to a young woman who is making such an impact. But this is one of the hard facts of life. The same fate awaits the righteous and the wicked.

*Second, he observes that death is linked to the sin*

*within each one of us.* That's what he means in v. 3 when he says, **"Furthermore the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards, they go to the dead."** Sin is the reason for death in the first place. Romans 5:12 says, **"Sin came into the world ... and death through sin."**

The universal lie of our day which is thrown at us all the time through the media is that we deserve to live. But this relentlessly approaching termination of our life reminds us that that is not so. In the eyes of the God we don't deserve to live. Because of sin we deserve to die. If we're allowed life beyond death or even live a long life, it's a gift of God's grace, not something we earned.

The reality of death, the Teacher says, brings about a kind of insanity or madness within man. Brooks Alexander writes about this:

"Just as death is, humanly speaking, a final and total separation, so the awareness of that end shatters our attempt to find some sense or value in the pattern of life here and now. As that final entropy creeps backward into our every experience, it brings with it a conviction of brokenness, anxiety and alienation that penetrates to the heart of our being."

There is a kind of insanity that grips us until we find an answer beyond ourselves that will give some meaning. Of course, some people take the opposite approach and just say, "What's the use? If I am going to die, why not just get it over with now." This leads to the third thing he says about death - *death means the loss of hope and opportunity.* That's why it's still better to live than to die. In v. 4 he says it's better to live than die because while we're alive there is hope. That's why a live dog is better than a dead lion. In that culture, dogs were despised. They weren't cute little pets, they were dirty scavengers. But lions were considered strong and regal. But what good is a dead lion? I'd rather be a live dog, the Teacher says.

When he says in v. 5 that **"the living know they will die, but the dead don't know anything,"** he doesn't mean there is no life after death. He's saying that it's better to live than die because while you're alive you have the awareness and the opportunity to make choices that you don't have when you're dead. When people die the opportunities to love and to hate and feel are gone. The Teacher is emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities while we live, because when we die those opportunities are lost. Do you know what the most significant opportunity each of us has is? The opportunity to respond to the invitation of the gospel. Jesus says, "He who believes in me will live even though he dies." But the opportunity to respond to that invitation is lost after death. Scripture says that it is **"appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment"** (Heb. 9:27). Once we die, judgment comes and the opportunity for salvation is lost. That's why Scripture also says, **"Now is the acceptable time...now is the day of salvation"** (2 Cor. 6:2). So while we're alive we have the opportunity to make that crucial decision.

**D. Life is unpredictable:** The fourth fact of life that he gives us is that life is unpredictable. Look at vv. 11 and 12.

**"I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. Moreover, man does not**

**know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net, and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them."**

Notice how hard work and talent don't ensure success. The race is not to the swift, the battle is not to the warriors, bread is not always to the wise, etc. That's true, isn't it? Those who are "most likely to succeed" don't always succeed. Have you ever known someone who had everything going for them and they ended up going nowhere? Sometimes it's because of their own poor choices, and sometimes it's because some unforeseen tragedy snuffed out their life. I think of those shuttle astronauts who represent the very best of humanity. Each one of those people were brilliant and at the very top of their disciplines, and yet as v. 12 says, **"like fish caught in a treacherous net, and birds trapped in a snare,"** they were suddenly killed. There is a lie out there that says if we just work hard enough, if we just put our minds to something, we can make it happen. That's based on the lie that we're in control of our own lives, but the writer boldly says, "You can't always predict the outcome of your life. You're not in control."

**E. Life is unrewarding:** The last fact of life he gives us is that life is unrewarding.

**"Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it, and constructed large siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, 'Wisdom is better than strength.' But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good."**

Notice how wisdom is often unheeded and unrewarded. He says there was a little city with hardly anyone to defend it that is besieged by a great king and a great army. But there was one poor wise man in the little city and by his wisdom it was delivered. But then he says that no one remembered the poor wise man, eventually his words were not heeded, and just one sinner could come along and destroy all his good work. Wisdom may be valuable but it's also vulnerable.

These are the facts of life, and they're not easy to live with. Life is mysterious. Life is unfair. Life is short. Life is unpredictable. And life is unrewarding. That's a rather gloomy picture of life, isn't it? How do we live with this? How do we find meaning and fulfillment in the face of such realities? Although we can't ignore the facts, there are some things we can do to make life meaningful and fulfilling.

## II. How Shall We Then Live?

**A. Trust God.** The first one is hinted at back in 9:1. He said, **"righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God."** Although we can never quite predict what life will bring us, we can trust that we're in God's hands. Though we can't discern the depths of the mysteries of life, eventually we must agree with God's words, **"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,"** (Isa 55:8). That is one of the most difficult lessons to learn in life. We think that because God

tells us certain things about himself we can figure out what he's going to do. We have to resist that. God says, **"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,"** (Isa 55:9). The good news is that we know God will never act contrary to his character; he'll never contradict what he said, so we can trust him.

I can remember wrestling with this as a college student. There were things happening in my life that I just didn't understand nor did I like. And then I came across a couple of verses in the book of Romans. In Romans 11:33 the Apostle Paul cries out, **"O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"** Later in Romans 16:27 he calls him **"the only wise God."** I realized that I wasn't supposed to understand what he was doing. "How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable are his ways!" But with that I came to see that I could trust in his wisdom and his knowledge. He's not just the "only wise God," he is also the "wise only God." All that he does is wise. You may not understand, but you can trust him.

**B. Enjoy life while you can:** When we do that, we can then move on to the second thing. In vv. 7-9 he tells us,

**"Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun."**

As he has so often in the book, he tells us to enjoy life. This is a command, by the way. "Go then," he says, "Eat your bread...drink your wine..." He tells us to dress in white garments. Back then white garments were the clothes you saved for special occasions, times of celebrating and feasting with friends and family. He says we should pour plenty of oil on our heads. Oil was used for a variety of things, but here he may be referring to using it as a kind of perfume or shampoo that was used in times of rejoicing.

But that's not all. My favorite comes in v. 9, **"Enjoy life with the woman you love all the days of your fleeting life..."** This is a wonderful affirmation of married love. We see this throughout the Bible. Proverbs 5 says it this way, **"Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times."** You know, some commands are easier to obey than others! By the way, notice he did NOT say, "Rejoice in your youthful wife." He said, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth!" That's an important distinction. Rejoice in that woman you have been committed to through the years, the one who worked you through school, bore your babies, and puts up with your smelly socks. Sometimes we live under the illusion that in God's economy sexual love between a husband and wife is a necessary evil. But Scripture says nothing of the kind. Hebrews 13:4 says marriage is honorable and the marriage bed is undefiled.

So enjoy life, he tells us. Notice the reason he gives at the end of v. 7, **"...for God has already approved your works."** What a great statement. So often we don't enjoy

what we have because we feel guilty about it. We think that he's more pleased with us when we abstain from the pleasures of life. No doubt there are times to abstain and discipline ourselves, but understand you're accepted by God and he approves of you enjoying the blessings of this life. He is much more pleased when we just thank him for his gifts than when we feel guilty about them. This is especially true for those who know God's forgiveness and who have been approved by God on the basis of what Christ has done.

**C. Work hard:** The third thing he tells us to do in light of the facts of life is to work hard. Look at v. 10. **"Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going."** Once again, he reminds us that the opportunity for work is gone once we die. "Sheol" does not mean hell, rather it means the grave. When we go to the grave, our work as we now know it is over. Certainly he's talking about all kinds of work; not just our jobs, but the work of serving him.

Jesus said something in this regard in anticipation of his own death. In John 9:4 he said, **"We must work the works of him who sent me, as long as it is day, night is coming, when no man can work."** Death is the end of our opportunity to work and bear fruit. Paul put it this way in Galatians 6:10, **"So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of the faith."**

Joni Eareckson Tada tells the story about Tyler Law, age nine. He was in the hospital getting ready for surgery on his cancerous arm when he asked the nurse who came to get him with a wheelchair, "Can I walk?" "Sure," she said, as she and Tyler's parents fell in line behind Tyler. The three of them watched as Tyler marched about ten paces ahead of them. He was raising his bad arm in the air and pumping his biceps in and out. When they arrived at the prep room his dad asked, "So what was that arm-pumping thing all about?" Tyler answered, "Oh, I just wanted to get as much use out of it as I could in case they have to cut it off."

Tyler lived on the brink of losing his arm and so took every opportunity to use it for that which it was intended - movement. Muscles tightening, tendons flexing, joints moving, neurons firing. Not a second of using that arm would be lost while Tyler still had the chance.

As followers of Christ, you and I are called to put to work that which we have been given while we can. Some of us are too cautious about avoiding burnout or overextending ourselves. Use your time. Use your money. Use your spiritual gifts. Seize the opportunities to share your faith. God's purpose for us is not later, it is now.

#### **CONCLUSION**

How do you live with the facts of life? Trust God, enjoy his blessings, and work as if there is no tomorrow. The facts of life are not easy, but as a friend of mine used to say, he didn't say it would be easy, he just said it would be possible.

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