

Walking In Freedom

[Ecclesiastes 9:7-10](#)

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The Book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon who had been blessed by God with great wisdom. But in spite of all his wisdom, the thing that just vexed Solomon was death. Ecclesiastes is riddled with his musings about it. In chapter 9, verse 2, he begins by reminding his readers that this same fate of death is waiting for all: the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, those who sacrifice and those who do not.

Solomon just hates that! It doesn't matter how good you are in this life, once you're dead, you're dead. In verse four he claims even a living dog is better than a dead lion. In verse five he reminds us that in time even the memory of the dead is lost. And in verse six he states that when you die, so do all your passions. Your love, your hate, even your envy dies. It all ends up with you in Sheol. The Hebrew notion of Sheol is not the same thing as hell. It is simply a place of death, or the grave, where as Solomon says in verse ten, there is no work or thought, no knowledge or wisdom.

Now you would think that with this rather despairing, repeated reminder that we all end up in the grave, Solomon would then say, "So what's the use? Why bother being good or just, or caring for others? Why bother with hard work or dreams?" But that's not what he says. Instead, he says in verse seven, "So eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved of what you do."

Some of our Bible commentators have suggested that Solomon is saying essentially, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." But I don't think so. I think he is saying something much more profound than that. The key to understanding his exhortation to joy is found in the phrase, "for God has long ago approved of what you do." That doesn't mean God approves of all human choices. It means that long ago God approved of your passion to live with joy.

From where does the longing to find joy come? From the one who formed you in his own image. That's why joy is approved. As Solomon says in verse eight, "So let your garments always be white," which was the color of ancient festival garments. In other words, "So dress up." In verse nine he tells us to "Enjoy life." And in verse ten he says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might."

Rejoice in your blessings while you have them and work while you can, Solomon says, because your joy and your work have been approved by God. In fact, they are glimpses of his own image in which you were created long ago.

When God created the world, he rested on the seventh day. The purpose of this rest was not because God was tired, but because he wanted to enjoy his work and call it "good." In the Hebrew culture, the Sabbath served as a liturgical means of renewing this identity of being a people made in God's image. As God rested to enjoy his work, so did the Hebrews regularly stop working every week long enough to lift their heads and give thanks for their blessings, while they had them, and to renew their calling to be God's partners in creativity while they could. Before they ended up in Sheol.

Here was the problem that confronted all the Hebrew people and drove Solomon nuts. How do you rejoice with a merry heart when life is so fleeting? How do you work with joy when you know your work won't last? How can you be grateful when you are staring at the grave? The answer to that question is called the New Testament.

When we move from the Old to the New Testament we find that the Early Church stops worshiping on the Sabbath and begins to worship on the first day of the week, Sunday. That was the day of resurrection. The

reason they made that shift was that on Easter, Jesus Christ defeated death for us. No longer do we, like Solomon, believe we have a few fleeting years to make something of life. Nor do we believe that we have to do the best we can with this life until we get to eternity in the next life. What the cross and resurrection proclaim is that eternity has broken into our finite existence today. Heaven and earth have come back together.

This revolutionizes our understanding of time. The Early Church began to claim that time isn't just linear and horizontal, as the Hebrews thought, but it is vertical. It doesn't just move from a past that is irretrievably behind us toward a future in which only the grave is waiting. No, the Church lifted up its head to see that eternal time is breaking in from above us. This makes all time sacred, and it gives your life and your work an eternal significance that is never lost. No matter how ordinary life may seem, it is still being lived under the extraordinary grace of heaven, which beckons us to move not just ahead, but up toward our risen Savior, from one degree of glory to the next.

While the Hebrews rested on the Sabbath to renew their calling to work in God's good garden while they could, we in the church gather to worship on Sundays to remember that in Christ we have discovered a new life we can never lose.

The greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, spent his Sundays preaching to the prisoners of the local jail. These sermons have been collected into a marvelous little book entitled, *Deliverance to the Captives*. In one of those sermons he told those men who were under a sentence for their guilt that the death of Christ on the cross was not an act of God's wrath or judgment against us. Rather it was born out of his love and desire to free us from the sentence of death. In Barth's own words, "In the death of Jesus Christ, God has cleared away, swept out and let it go up in flames, smoke and ashes, the old man in us, that we may live a new life of freedom."

The cross and resurrection are God's answer to the problem that bothered Solomon so much. You aren't limited to doing what you can while you have life. You have been freed from your guilt and from the sentence of death. You have been given a new and eternal life that begins today. So you are free to be fully alive.

Hans Holbein the younger was one of the great artists of the Reformation. He produced about fifty woodcuts called the Dance of Death that depict how death comes for all of us. In each of these woodcuts, death is seen coming as a skeleton for people of all stations in life: the pope, bishops, kings, nobles, peasants, merchants, the old, and even a child. In each of these woodcuts the individual portrayed is just fixated on the skeleton of death. But in a mural that he painted in Basel, at a place called the Dance of Death Square, Holbein also depicted an old saint holding a human skull. The different thing about this mural is that it also contains a crucifix. The saint is holding the skull lightly in his hand, but his gaze is fixed upon the cross. You can see the hint of a smile on the saint's face.

Why do we worship on Sunday mornings? To declare our freedom from the fear of death. We will always hold death lightly in the church, and will not become fixated on it, because our eyes are focused on Jesus. Death is not the end for us. That is what the story of Jesus is about. In Christ your life has been given undying significance as long as you live vertically.

As Holbein was claiming, popes can just be popes, merchants can just be merchants, children can just be children knowing that they don't have to save themselves. If Jesus is the Savior, you don't have to keep knocking yourself out, as Solomon would say in vain, to earn significance. You are free simply to live life, knowing that in Christ your life already matters. When life is viewed vertically, all our choices are conducted under heaven and all our lives are made sacred. All heaven rejoices every time a painter pulls out a paintbrush, every time a salesperson closes an honest deal, every time a congressman writes good legislation, every time a mother wipes a runny nose, and every time a child skips down the sidewalk for the sheer joy of it. It is all under heaven, and thus, it is all sacred.

So after all God has done for you, by grace, in Jesus Christ, why would you still be living under a sentence of death? Why would you live without freedom? The door to your cell is open, so why would you continue to stay inside it?

In Christ you have been given the freedom that Solomon could only yearn to find. You are free to follow your dreams knowing that Christ will use them for his glory. You are free to make mistakes knowing that Christ will use even mistakes for his glory. And you are free to make choices knowing the most important choice was made 2,000 years ago, and you will never choose your way outside his salvation.

As you have probably heard by now, I have recently made a choice of my own to resign as your pastor. This September I will begin a new ministry pursuing writing and scholarship as a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This is a move to a different lifestyle that I have long yearned to make. You are probably also aware that I have some medical issues that have encouraged this move. But I am not dying. I am not even sick. We all respond to stress differently -- me, I tend to throw blood clots. So I know that I need to find a quieter life to preserve my health. But I am not making this move just because of my health or because I am afraid of dying.

I am making the move in freedom. Again, this is a move to a quieter, more reflective life that I have long wanted to make. Recently I have started listening to my own preaching and realized I can. I have been like a little boy who wants to jump into the deep end of the pool but is afraid. So I have stared at the water for a while. The health issues have just given me a little bump on the rear to pitch me into my own dreams.

I just love the people of this congregation. I have buried your spouses, baptized your babies, and married your sons and daughters. I have traveled with you through the highs and lows of your lives and been honored to climb into your pulpit to proclaim God's grace through it all. After all of that, the decision now to leave you has been heart wrenching for me. But as I said in the letter we mailed to you, this church has always belonged to Jesus Christ, the only Savior, and I know I am leaving you in his very good hands. Ten years ago, none of you had heard of me. Twelve years ago, most of you had not heard of Bryant Kirkland. There will be someone else you may not have heard of who will take our place, just as we did for those who came before us.

In the meantime let my leaving be an illustration of our freedom in Christ. You don't have to kill yourself to be significant.

O God, after the cross and resurrection there is nothing we can do to add more significance to our lives. In freedom, then, teach us to live our lives glorifying and enjoying you forever. Amen.