

Seize the Day!

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[0 : 0 0] Well, Susie and I watched a film the other night called Living. I don't know if you've seen it. It came out about this time last year. It's about a man maybe in his 60s. He's kind of reached the peak of his career. He's respected, even feared, by the people who he works with. But his life has pretty much ended. He's still getting up, still going to work, still breathing, still walking, but he's stopped living until something happens that brings him back to life. Now, I wonder what you think it is. If you were writing the script, what would it be? If it was a romance, he'd fall in love. If it was a comedy, perhaps he'd switch lives with some kind of rich playboy, something like that. Well, in this story, what brings him back from the dead is actually much more realistic than those things. He goes to the doctor, and he is told he has eight months to live. And with his days now numbered, he goes out to find ways to live them to the full in his work, in his play, in his relationships.

I won't spoil the rest of the film, but I do commend it to you. It's a film that the teacher would love because it captures perfectly the verses that we've just read and one of the big take-home messages of the book, which is there in chapter 9, verse 10, Luke. Here it is, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. What would you do if you knew you were dying? Well, you are. So what are you doing?

Don't put off living life for another day. Verse 1 tells us the teacher's beginning to give us his conclusions. Okay, here's what he wants us to take out into the rest of our lives. But if we know the teacher by now, then we won't be surprised to hear him conclude that in the end it doesn't all tie neatly together. Here's chapter 8, verse 17 in the ESV, just hear the teacher's head banging against the wall. Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that it's done under the sun. Whorever much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. Hear it, bang, bang, bang. Here's his big finding, that what we're searching for cannot be found. He can take us as far as we can go and we still hit a brick wall. We cannot get our heads around what God has done, what he is doing under the sun. The door to his control room is closed. And even if we could see inside, we would not understand it, how the day-to-day coincidences and challenges and conversations and celebrations and chaos of your life and my life, how they mesh with ultimate realities, how they fold into and flow out of God's eternal decree. We cannot find it out. In the end, we will end up crying.

At best, we will end up crying all the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable, incomprehensible, impenetrable his thoughts and his ways. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor? Have you ever had the experience of someone come to you and listen to your problem, what's going on in your life, and they say, let me tell you what God's doing here. Okay, let me tell you, God's doing that in your life because this and that. They sound so confident, they sound so wise, they sound so insightful. The teacher says, listen, there's nothing so foolish as someone who tries to speak for God about things he has not told us.

[4 : 3 1] Giving our opinion on why God must be doing this or that thing in somebody's life or our own life. It's a little bit like somebody who's just learning the rules of chess, telling a grandmaster what he must do next. Okay, the beginner knows how the pieces move, but the grandmaster can see the game playing out in 50 different ways in front of him. There's no comparison. Friends, we do not get to tell each other. We don't get to tell ourselves how this or that thread fits into God's eternal and infinite tapestry. We are not God. We do not know what he knows. And least of all, when it comes to death, I think that's why he reaches for death again in chapter 9. It's the great dead end, isn't it?

We stare blankly at it. We're lost for words. We can know the cause of death, but why it comes to those it comes to you? When and how it comes is beyond us. How and when and why will you die?

God knows, but you don't. And yet you will. All share a common destiny, verse 1. The same destiny overtakes all, verse 3. So, grasp that, says the teacher. Grasp that. And here's the twist. You grasp life. You grasp life.

Only when you stare into the evil of death can you seize the goodness of life. That's the message of these verses in front of us tonight. Two points. Let's firstly stare into the evil of death.

Let's stare again at verses 1 to 3 with me. So, says the teacher, I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows where the love or hate awaits them. All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean. Those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful. As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all.

[7 : 01] Get that six pairs of people. Six you would love to be friends with. Six you wouldn't want to know. All end up in the grave. There's lots of ways that death is wrong, but this is the way the teacher wants us to get tonight, that death doesn't discriminate. We've tricked ourselves into thinking that death is something that happens when we're older, but there is no age limit is there for dying.

Children die in the womb. It's hardly anything that makes less sense than that is there. And anyone who's been through a loss like that could tell you that that loss is just as profound, just as deep, just as grievous, if not more than any loss that there is.

Lots of us know families, don't we, where young men, in the prime of their life, just drop dead. Just like that. They were talking, they were smiling, they were living.

The next minute they were dead. The next week they were being buried. We can legislate for every part of life, but we can't legislate for death. Death. The law says you have to be 16 to have sex, 17 to drive, 18 to drink, but there is no age that you cannot die.

We invent life-saving drugs and surgeries. We can eat healthy and stay in shape, but death will still find us. Death doesn't obey our laws. Death doesn't listen to our red lions.

[8 : 43] Death doesn't listen to our red lions. You do not have to be 80 to die. And even then, death can confound us. Some of you know my grandma is very, very unwell.

Well into her 80s, she was taken into hospital a couple of weeks ago for the first time in her life. And she was diagnosed with liver cancer.

And get this, she's never drunk a drop of alcohol in her life. Heavy drinkers can die with their organs intact, and grandma's got liver cancer.

Sometimes death laughs in our faces. It does not respect us. It defies our logic. It doesn't offer an explanation or an apology.

It takes who it wants, when it wants, how it wants, and it leaves. And we're left staring into the darkness. And all we get back is silence. Multiply that by everyone who's ever lived and everyone who's alive today.

[9 : 46] And do you see the evil? This is the evil. In everything that happens under the sun, the same destiny overtakes all. Have you seen it yet?

One day you will have a story like that. I didn't want to go this way. I thought I would get more time.

We all think it happens to other people. It will happen to you, says the teacher. Don't look at the person sitting next to you. Look at your own death. And be confounded by it.

God knows how and when and why, but you won't see it coming and you won't know what to say. It might be in 50 years. It might be in five minutes. But that's your destiny, he says.

That's where you are going because that is where everyone goes. The good and the bad.

Remember Lucy Latbey? Well, take this in.

[10 : 50] Her destiny is the same. The same. As the babies whose lives that she took. The same as the parents whose babies she took.

The same as the nurses she worked with. The same as the doctors who caught her out. She will share a grave with her victims. And the teacher wants us to stare into that grave.

To see the evil that happens in this life that we all end the same way. Hamas and their hostages. Teachers and torturers.

Preachers and porn stars. Friends, death doesn't discriminate. Death dashes any thought of a fair or a logical outcome in this life.

And life isn't much better. The righteous and the wise in what they do are in God's hands. But no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. If your trust is in Christ, your life is held in the hands of the everlasting God.

[11:57] The one who knows the end from the beginning. But even that doesn't keep you from being hurt. Or being hated. You try and work out how it all fits together.

Try and work out how it all fits into a grand plan. Why life is so hard. Why death is so impossible. And you will never get to the bottom of it, says the teacher.

We cannot find it out. And so the teacher's point is this. Stop trying to understand your life.

Stop trying to get it. And put your life back in God's hands where it's safe. And leave it there with him.

You'll cry your eyes out before you've seen the big picture. You'll die before you get it. So put it back in his hands.

[12:56] Stop trying to understand. And rest in the simple truth that he has got you and the whole world in his hands. That there is a grand master plan behind that brick wall that we cannot see, but he knows.

I've called this point one. And in a way, it's not a point at all. It's an empty point. These verses undo the tidy knots that we've tied around life and death, don't they?

If anything, we're less clear than we were before. So if we feel like our lives are coming undone and we're just left holding a load of loose threads, well, the teacher's work is done.

Because now he wants to show us how it all goes back together. When you get so far with your IKEA flat pack and then you discover you've put it together wrong, you've grown.

Hmm. You sit there. But you know what you have to do, don't you? You have to undo it. You have to take it apart again and put it back together the right way.

[14:04] And in so many ways, that's what the teacher's doing with us. Taking our lives apart in order to put them together again the way it's meant to be. So on to our second point, putting life back together.

Stare into the evil of death and seize the goodness of life. Stop trying to understand your life, he says, and live. Now we've seen this perspective before in this book, but never, I think, so strongly as in verse 4.

Anyone who's among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. Better to be a live, normal person than a dead celebrity.

For the teacher, life is better than death. But hang on, you say. Wait a minute. Is this the same guy who's told us that funerals are better than birthdays?

Is this the same guy who's told us that unborn children are better off than oppressors and the oppressed? So how can he now say the living are better off than the dead?

[15:13] It's a really important question because it gets us to the heart of this book. Because for the teacher, death is so central to his thinking because it's only when we know we're going to die that we can really start to live.

It's not a contradiction to say that funerals are better than birthdays, but life is better than death.

Because it's at a funeral that you really learn to live. If you want to come away with a fresh appreciation for life, go to a funeral, not a birthday party.

So Ecclesiastes is not anti-life. It's very pro-life. But the only way to show us how to live is by confronting us with our coming death.

Lots of you will have seen the Dead Poets Society. New teacher, Mr. Keating, gets the class to line up in the hall and look at the class photos of students from the past.

Gets them to look right into their eyes and he says to them, These boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen closely, you can still hear them whisper their legacy to ye.

[16:30] Carpe diem. Seize the day. Seize the day. Make your life extraordinary. Mr. Keating and the teacher of Ecclesiastes both went to the same school of teaching.

He's had us stare into the evil of death so that we can take it in properly when he now says, Seize the goodness of life. You are going to die. So seize the day.

Why are the living better off than the dead? Because the dead have had their time. Cut short though it was, but there's no getting it back. Verse 6.

Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished. Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Their opportunity to live life has passed.

But not for you, he says. Now that's so radically different from what we're used to hearing in church, isn't it? If this life is so much better, what about heaven?

[17 : 35] Doesn't Paul say, I would prefer to be with Christ, which is better by far? Hasn't the teacher left us longing not to have to live life under the sun?

Isn't the life to come better than this? Well, yes and no. Yes, to be with Christ is better by far. But heaven is not our final destination. God is a wonderful thing. God is a wonderful thing. Us divided from our loved ones. Our souls divided from our bodies.

Gathered into the presence of God. That is a wonderful thing, but it's not our permanent home. God made us body and soul creatures. In a good universe, a physical world with appetites and senses and nerves and a beautiful and complex and fascinating and thrilling world to live in.

The goodness of touch and sight and hearing and taste and smell, it is a gift from him to ye. Bodies and minds that fail, sickness, death, decay, had no part in his world before we sinned against him.

[18 : 55] So, death is not good. Get this, dying is not better in God's world. To be with Christ is better.

But best of all, to be with Christ in the flesh. In a world made new, your body resurrected, made whole, reunited with your soul, reunited with those you love.

Because Jesus died and rose again, that is what all who trust in Jesus will have one day. But it is not what we have now, and it is not what the dead have now.

You can think of the new creation as the banquet. And life here and now as the appetizer. The dead are between courses.

They've finished their first course. They are waiting for the banquet. But me and ye, we're still getting to eat. We're still on the appetizer.

[20 : 09] An appetizer to make our bodies and souls drool for that one day feast. And the teacher wants you to know, the appetizer is so, so good.

That's what he's getting at in verse 7. That's not a license to do whatever we feel is right and to cross lines. It is a reminder that God's creation is a gift from him to us.

Go, eat your food with gladness. Drink your wine with a joyful heart. For God has already approved what you do. In the beginning, God looked at his finished world, and what did he say?

It is very good. And the maker's seal of approval is still on our world. Listen to David Gibson on this. When God made the world, he made it good, and no amount of being a Christian can ever change that.

Sin fractures everything. It means we cannot understand everything. But sin does not uncreate everything. Christians have more reason to live life to the full than anyone because we know the Creator.

[21 : 19] We know that there is a reason and a purpose for us being here. We know that he has made all things good. And what's more, the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands.

We here, if we're in Christ, have more reason than anyone to really go for life because we know that our lives are safe in his hands. He holds our days. And he has put you here for a breath of time.

He has given you a heartbeat to live in this created world. We don't know how long for, but we know he has created us to delight in his creation and to praise and thank him for it.

So, it says the teacher, seize the day. Seize the day. With all the strength God gives you, drain every drop out of life that you can.

Go, eat your food with gladness. Drink your wine with a joyful heart. Always be clothed in white. Always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life.

[22 : 29] Enjoy life with your wife whom you love. All your days, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. How disappointed would you be if you gave someone a gift and they said thank you and they put it on the shelf and they never unwrapped it?

And you say, well, are you going to open it? And they reply, no, but I'm very grateful. Well, friends, God gifts us gifts to take out of the box and enjoy.

Food and drink are not collector's items. They are for eating and drinking. The teachers showed us already that we don't get any satisfaction out of God's gifts if we cling on to them as if our lives depended on it.

If we invest our value and our identity in the things, whatever it is, money or music or work or sex or any created thing, the gifts will destroy us from the inside out.

But if we see and understand that the gifts are but a breath given to us by our creator for us to enjoy for a heartbeat in the grand scheme of eternity, then we will be free to enjoy them for the very short time that we have them.

[23 : 50] The teacher's point is that today, today, you and me have opportunities that we will not have when we're dead. So take them.

Take them soon. Take them now. Grasp life. Go out for a curry. Open the expensive bottle of whiskey. Get a new dress.

Go on the holiday of a lifetime. Take up a sport. Watch a movie. Do a course. Get a new job. Learn an instrument. Join a club. Learn a new language.

Get married. Train for ministry. Start your business. Spend time with your friends. Talk to your mom and dad. Tell people about Jesus. Get a dog.

Have kids. Go on a mission trip. Whatever your hand finds to do, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your strength. Go for it.

[24 : 51] You would love to know what appetizers in this life make you hungry and thirsty. What is it? What is it that you have grasped? What is it you are enjoying?

You know, I think we hear so much about the risks and dangers in life that we forget the teacher's perspective, the reality for us all is that we are all one day going to end up on the wrong side of risk and danger, aren't we?

If you have a drink, your organs might fail, but you could never have a glass of wine with dinner and still get liver disease. You could climb up. If you climb up rock faces, you could fall down, but you might never go up a cliff and still get hit by a lorry.

If you commit to a relationship, you might get hurt, but you could never let anyone get close to you and still get taken advantage of.

Friends, we could never take any real risk. And at the end of our lives, what will still happen to us? Now, if we treat life as a gift from God, we won't use that as a ticket to sin.

[26 : 03] We won't spend our lives recklessly or carelessly. But if we understand the gift and we know the giver who has given it to us, then we won't waste it either.

Our bodies and our minds were not to be kept in the box. They are to be used, stretched, worked. It comes with risk. It also comes with reward.

Now, again, that's not to say that you have to stop what you're doing to live life, that you have to somehow change your whole lifestyle. Maybe you do. But verse 10 says, whatever you get up for tomorrow, whatever is in your diary this week, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

The guy in the film, *Living*, do you know what he does after a couple of months? He goes back to work. He goes back to work. And he goes back to work with a passion. His colleagues can't believe he's walked through the door.

He does everything as if it was his last day on earth. What difference would people see at home or in your class or in your course or in your work if you turned up tomorrow morning to do what is in your diary to do, but you did it with all your might.

[27 : 21] Whatever it is, a meeting, a lecture, getting ready for school, changing nappies, whatever. All of you present in that moment, in that task, with those people, giving yourself to the day as you never have before.

What would our families look like if every member of the household, husbands and wives, mums and dads, kids, all decided that they would get the most out of whatever God had given us to do that day?

What would our church look like if we all resolved to give the best of ourselves to one another and get the very best out of our time together, out of our life groups, out of our Sundays?

What would life look like for you if you didn't let the days slip past you and didn't let the opportunities pass to live life to the fullest that God allows you?

The teacher has reminded us tonight that we don't know how many days we have left to do that. So make the most of them. You know what we do know is that we have less days to do that than we did yesterday.

[28 : 40] Your days are numbered. Seize the goodness of life. In a way that only the teacher could, he brings death around just one last time so he's sure that we've got it.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

Friends, let's recognize that life under the sun, life here and now, it's never going to be the banquet. But it is all you can eat appetizers until then.

So tuck in. Enjoy what you can. Share it. Take it. Because one day you won't be able to. But one day after that, one day after that, and we will be seated at the banquet table of the king, dressed in white, Christ himself at the head of the table, food and drink aplenty as we have never tasted it in this world.

A physical world of physical delights with our physical Lord and Savior, where we will eat and drink and laugh and sing and live forever with the Lord in his new world, where the giver and his gifts will be that much closer, that much sweeter to us than anything we have tasted here and now.

[30 : 12] So set your heart on that day and seize every single day that you have until then.

Let's pray that we take to heart God's wisdom this evening. Our Father, you are a good God who gives good gifts.

We praise you for your creation, which is incredible. Lord, forgive us when we get so bogged down in what we think is life and look past your goodness and past your gifts.

Lord, give us hearts of thankfulness, we pray. Lord, help us, we ask, to get the best and make the most out of the days that you have given us on this earth. Lord, you created us to live.

You created us for a relationship. Lord, you have given us so many good things to enjoy. Lord, help us, we pray, to save them and to give you thanks for them and to learn wisdom in these few days, Lord, of our limited lives.

[31 : 34] This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.