

Learning to Live in a Broken World

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[0 : 00] All right, the Bible is full of questions, isn't it? The psalmists ask God questions, the prophets ask Israel questions, the disciples, the Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers, rulers, all ask Jesus questions, and quite often Jesus responds, doesn't he, with questions of his own? What we have in Ecclesiastes 7 is another two questions answered, right? At the end of chapter 6, the teacher asks those two questions and then helpfully answers them as we go through chapter 7. We'll get there in a moment, but before we get to the teacher's question, let me ask you a question.

What are you most afraid of? What is your deepest fear?

Do you scream at the sight of a spider? Maybe the thought of being in a tight, enclosed space fills you with dread.

Maybe you don't like heights and teetering over the edge of a cliff would turn your stomach inside out. I don't like cows. I don't trust them. I think they're out to get me.

And if I ended up fighting one, I'm pretty sure I'd lose. Maybe it's the thought of public speaking, or snakes, or flying, flying, that fills you with terror at the very thought of it.

[1 : 48] There are lots of things that people find terrifying in this world, aren't there? Maybe some of those resonate with you. Maybe you've got others. But with perhaps the exception of some of the most severe phobias, there is one that trumps them all, isn't there?

I don't like cows. But if you put a gun to my head, I'm going to walk straight into a cow shed.

Because while cows are scary, death can be terrifying, can't it? As I was looking at this passage through the week, I was reminded of a conversation I had with someone just a few months ago.

We were still in Edinburgh at the time, and we had someone over at our flat, and they were appalled, aghast, at my apathetic attitude towards music. And in response, he simply said, I couldn't not listen to music.

He said, I couldn't not listen to music. And then he added this. Because if I didn't, I'd have too much time to think.

[3 : 09] And I get scared when I think too much. I wonder if that feeling resonates with you at all. Sometimes space to think is a scary thing, isn't it?

Because we start to consider the big questions of life. What am I actually doing with my life? Where am I going? What's the purpose of it all?

What's going to happen when I die? And sometimes we very quickly realize we don't have many answers.

And so what do we do? We turn on the music, don't we? We pick up the phone and start scrolling. We pick up a book and start reading something, anything to distract our minds from uncomfortable thoughts.

But it's not just individuals who turn on the music, is it? It can be whole societies. We live like death doesn't exist for us. We can handle it on the news and in TV shows, but we don't let it get too close, do we?

[4 : 26] We don't see dead bodies. We don't smell them. We don't touch them. We don't even use the word when it's people who are near to us. People on the TV die.

Loved ones pass away. They move on. They go to a better place. But death is still there, isn't it? And although we might try and ignore it, it never lets us get too far in life without rearing its ugly head once more.

And it is an ugly head, isn't it? Death is an intruder in God's good creation. Every person sitting in a funeral knows that, even a humanist one.

Everyone in the room knows something is not right here. This is not the way it was meant to be. There is an intruder in creation, and it rips people away from us that we wish never to be parted from.

It is not good. Death is an enemy. But here's what we'll see the teachers say at the beginning of chapter 7. Better the enemy you know than the one you don't.

[5 : 57] For many, it is not known, is it? We run from it. We hide from it. We try and escape it. That's what the teacher wants to fix this evening.

And he has our good in mind. Just think about it, right? The scariest places, the scariest places to go are the ones where we don't know what's waiting for us around the corner, aren't they?

I mean, why in horror movies are you afraid as the camera moves slowly through a creaking old house in the darkness during a thunderstorm?

You're not scared because you know what's around the corner, are you? You're scared because you have no idea what's there. That's when it's terrifying.

That's when the fear is building. What we most often fear is what we do not know. And for many people, death is at the top of that list, isn't it?

[7 : 09] Thus far in Ecclesiastes, the teacher has made us well aware that we are all one day soon going to die, isn't he? He's not allowed us to forget that.

But what do we do with death when we don't know what fate it holds for us? How terrifying a place is that to be?

Well, the teacher is here to answer our questions for us, or to help us, maybe I should say, answer the questions that the rest of the Bible gives us. I mentioned earlier that there are two questions that chapter 7 answers, and they're both there in the last verse of chapter 6.

Just look there with me. Question one, who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow?

Question two, who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? What is good during this life?

[8 : 18] What is good in the present? And what's to come in the future? Two questions, right? So let's take them each in turn. We'll spend the vast majority of time in question one, because that's where the teacher spends the vast majority of his time.

So first, what is good to do in the present? The question of what is good at the end of chapter 6 is answered by all the betters of chapter 7, okay?

Good and better are the same word in Hebrew. One may actually already be familiar with it. It's tov. Mazel tov. Mazel tov. Good luck or something similar.

So what is good is running right through this first part of chapter 7. And the way to begin life, living life well, if you hadn't already guessed it from what's been said, is, in verses 1 to 4, learning to deal with death.

That is what is good to do in the present, now. That might go against our instincts, mightn't it? If you took the two questions the teacher asks and guessed which one will deal with death, we'd probably assume the latter, wouldn't we?

- [9 : 41] That's certainly how I used to live my life. Death is a problem for a future me to deal with. Present me is here to have a good time, to enjoy life, to make the most of it, to have fun.
- Death can be dealt with at a later date. But not according to the teacher, not according to God's words. We've mentioned David Gibson's commentary a few times from the front during this series.
- I unashamedly do it again. It's an excellent book. But the subtitle of the book is Learning to Live by Preparing to Die.
- Learning to Live by Preparing to Die. It's a great summary of Ecclesiastes. It's a brilliant summary of the first half of chapter 7. Just look at the second half of verse 2 with me.
- For death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart.
- [10 : 49] We learn to live by getting ready to die. I wonder what you think of the teacher's message so far.
- On first reading, the instructions for a good life can sound a bit dreary, can't they? I mean, look at all what he says in just those first few verses.
- The day of death is better than the day of birth. Better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting. Frustration, not sort of like vexation or sorrow, is better than laughter.
- On first reading, what a buzzkill. Like, come on, teacher. Let's enjoy life for a bit. But here's his point, okay?
- If we're not preparing to die, we're just living life on the run. So look at verse 4.
- [11 : 49] The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. I spent the last five years of my life in Nidri, the housing scheme in southeast Edinburgh.
- I absolutely loved it, okay? But amongst the many joys, there were more somber times too. There were a lot of deaths in the community, often relatively young men, sometimes very young men, who died usually of drug overdoses.
- Some of them we knew quite well. They were always tragic funerals. But they would come and have the funeral in the church and then hire the local miners' club for the rest of the day.
- If you drove past a few hours later, on the face of it, it might look like these are people who are having a good time.
- They are laughing and singing and shouting and dancing. They are in, as the teacher calls it, the house of pleasure. But what's actually going on there? It's a distraction, isn't it?
- [13 : 16] It's an attempt to flee from reality. They are living life on the run. The coffin goes into the grave and everyone runs off and has a few pints.
- If we drink until we can't think, we won't worry about what we've just seen. That is a blatantly obvious example of what the teacher is saying not to do.
- But don't look down on them too quickly because it is no different to you picking up the headphones and trying to tune everything out, shutting out the noise.
- We all have our ways of trying to escape reality. So here's what the teacher wants us to do.
- Stand in a funeral and take seriously the message of the coffin in front of you. Death is an enemy, but it is also a preacher.

[14 : 33] The teacher's not saying spend your day reading the obituaries and newspaper or have BBC News on 24 hours a day. He's absolutely not saying that at all. What he is saying is you must, you must, if you want to live well under the sun, you must understand that death is your destiny under the sun.

That's why he says in verse 1, the day of death is better than the day of birth. Again, the words of David Gibson, not because death is better than life, but because a coffin is a better preacher than a cot.

One of those will make us face the difficult questions in life, won't they? One of those will make us stop and consider what we're doing and where we're going.

What are we doing with the short days of this life? And if we want to live life well, we need, we need to have an answer to those questions.

So what are we to learn as we consider the day of death? As we go with the wise into the house of mourning? As we come into the funeral and see the coffin before us?

[15 : 50] Two things I think the teacher wants us to take away as we look on the coffin at the front of the church. He doesn't say these explicitly, but I think it's where he wants us to get to.

Two things. That will be me soon. And that won't be me forever. That will be me soon.

And that won't be me forever. The teacher's not let us forget, has he, that death is not far away. And that's helpful to a point, isn't it?

Remembering life is brief will stop us from living for more in the way we might otherwise be tempted to do. and instead do the best to enjoy what we have. But that will be me soon on its own is still a terrifying thought, is it not?

If that will be me soon and that's it, then it piles enormous pressure, doesn't it, onto every moment of this life.

[17 : 08] If that will be me soon and that's it, I better get the most out of every single second I have. It puts a crippling stress on us as we try and make every single minute count because it might be our very last.

That is still a pretty terrifying way to live, isn't it? No wonder we still pick up the headphones. We do need to know that that will be me soon, but we also need to know that will not be me forever.

If you are in Christ, whatever fears you may have, if you believe in Jesus, and those fears are something we've all had at some point, let me remind you and assure you that for those in Christ, death is not the end.

There is a life to come and that life will be immeasurably better, good. Now, you might be looking at Ecclesiastes 7 and thinking, I don't see the teacher talking about resurrection in these verses, but this book, right, is not written in isolation, is it?

You'll get to the end and tell us to keep commandments. What commandments? These Old Testament saints, they knew that death was not the end, right?

[18 : 44] We sung from Psalm 16 earlier, didn't we? A wonderful psalm. David knows God won't abandon his soul to death. death. So when the teacher tells us to learn from the funeral, he's not telling us to panic about how few years we've got left.

He's teaching us to remember how few our days are now compared to how many our days will be then.

He's teaching us to remember how few our days are now compared to how many our days will be then.

And we have a wonderfully more complete picture of that than our Old Testament brothers and sisters did, don't we? How can you face death as a Christian?

You can face death because in Christ death has no power over you. No power over you.

- [20 : 01] As surely as you believe Jesus was raised from the dead, so will you be raised from the dead. We prepare to die by putting our hope in Christ.
- We do not need to fear because we know what will come in life after under the sun. Right?
- Go and read the last chapters of Revelation. Read them again and again and pray that God would bring them to life in your mind.
- Know what is waiting for you in Christ. Know what is waiting for you on the other side of the grave and you will no longer fear it like the world does.
- Let's be absolutely clear. Death will still bring pain in the present, but when we know what lies beyond, when we can stand in a funeral and look at the coffin and be ready for that to be us, that is what is good to do in the present because then, right, then we realize that life under the sun is breath, isn't it?
- [21 : 32] breath, but it is a breath that will be followed by eternity. And when we see that, life under the sun becomes so much more enjoyable because there is so much less pressure on it.
- I used to go on holiday and try and pack as much into every single week as I could. That wasn't very long ago at all.
- You can ask Mary how our first few holidays of marriage went. She came off four nights of night shifts and I'd be trying to pack the diary full of everything to see and do everything there was to do in that part of the world.
- And if things didn't go to plan, I'd get frustrated, I'd get disappointed, a little impatient. But that's because I was living as if this life is all there was.
- And I felt I needed to make the most of every single moment. When we live as if death is the end, we put enormous pressure on squeezing every little drop of joy out of life under the sun.
- [22 : 55] But brothers and sisters, life under the sun is a breath. It is a breath. And there is something so much greater to come.
- When I go on holiday now, if it rains all day, every day, that's absolutely fine. Because one day very soon, I am going to die. And then one day very soon after that, I'm going to rise again in an immortal body, life in a renewed creation.
- And I'm going to get to enjoy it forever and ever and ever. And I'm not going to miss that holiday anymore. We no longer need to run.
- We don't need to turn up the volume when we know where we're going. Those who learn from the house of mourning are not morbid.
- They are deep and deliberate. And their life and their hope transcend the fleeting things of this world. That is the better way to live, says the teacher.
- [24 : 08] That is what is good. He says much more in the verses that follow. We don't have time to cover them in great depth, but there are proverbs, right?
- And each and every one of them is packed full of wonderful meaning. Proverbs are well worth meditating on, right? The more you ponder on them, the more they give.
- But I think in the verses to come, right, the theme continues. Okay, death is the great shadow over everything that we love to try and escape from. But the teacher continues to show that what is better is embracing the things we often want to run away from.
- Verse 5, we don't like rebuke, do we? We want to run away from it. We want to have our egos stroked and get told we're doing brilliantly all the time. But the teacher says learn.
- Learn from death. Learn from painful words. We can run from poverty or hard work by cutting corners or taking bribes. We run from the infuriating way of the present, of reality, when we're impatient and angry because things aren't the way we want them to be.

[25 : 31] Verse 10, we run away from the present by wishing we were in the past. wasn't life better when? But the teacher says stop running.

Stop trying to escape and start learning. Prepare to die, listen to rebuke, love justice, practice patience.

If you want to live life well, look at what you most often run from and turn and start learning. That's what is good to do in the short years of this life.

And while you might not laugh as much as the funeral goes down at the pub, you will enjoy life more because you're not trying to paper over the cracks.

And you will enjoy life meaningfully because you'll remember that it is just a breath and eternity is just over the horizon.

[26 : 36] learning to live by preparing to die. That is what is good in the present. We've spent most of our time there, but let's turn very briefly now and consider what is to come in the future.

What is to come in the future? I should have put next to that subheading on the slides. What is to come in the future under the sun? That is the question that the teacher asks isn't it at the end of chapter six?

Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? Who knows the future? The answer isn't us, is it?

But neither is it nobody. Verse 13 of chapter seven, consider what God has done. Who can straighten what he has made crooked?

When times are good, be happy, but when times are bad, consider this, God has made one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.

[27 : 45] Who knows what is to come in the future under the sun? None of us. Not a single one of us. Because God alone, doesn't he, controls the times and the season.

God alone knows the end from the beginning. And God has made some things crooked. Life under the sun is messy, isn't it?

It is broken. It's one thing this book has made abundantly clear so far. There are good times and there are bad times.

There are times for laughing and times for mourning. There are times for breaking down and times for building up. God has them all on his hands.

We do not. And here is why I think this question comes here. We've just seen, haven't we, how to live a good life.

[28 : 47] We've just been shown what is good. We learn to live by preparing to die, but the teacher wants to make sure we know, as we go out from here this evening, that learning to live is no guarantee of an easy or smooth life.

We all struggle, don't we, with God's sovereignty in a broken world. Why? Why, when the world is in the hand of a good and sovereign God, is it such a crooked place?

God knows, and God alone knows. So don't be disheartened if you try and live your life well and find it falling apart around you.

Know that that is not a sign of divine displeasure. It is a crook God has placed in your roads, and he alone knows why, but he does know why.

Teacher says, enjoy the good times when they come, but on the bad days, look to God, and look what God does.

[30 : 07] Consider, consider, as the call of these last few verses, on the bad days, remember what God has done.

Remember, on your bad days, that God used the worst day in human history, the day of Christ's crucifixion, to bring hope and happiness to the world forever.

Your bad days won't bring as much good as that, but they are no less part of God's sovereign plan, God. And he alone knows the end from the beginning.

We might not be able to understand the ways of God, but we can trust him and tremble before him.

The teacher wants to drive out our fear of death because he wants us to fear God. cast aside all their fear and trust in him alone.

[31 : 15] That is how to live well. That is how to live wisely in a broken world. We learn from what we want to run from. We prepare to die.

Remember that we will soon be in a coffin and we will soon never be in a coffin again. We learn from the wise. We embrace the presence. We might wish it were different, but God has made it so for a purpose and we can trust.

We can trust his sovereign plans. Look no further than the cross when we need reminded of the good God can bring from bad days.

Learning to live in a broken world means preparing to die and trusting God. God will be to die and let us pray as we close before we sing our final hymn together.

Father, we thank you that in Christ death has been defeated and that we can say with Paul, death, where is your sting?

[32 : 41] Oh, death, where is your victory? glory. Lord, we pray that you would help us to know that and to live that each and every day of our lives.

That it wouldn't just be something we know and believe, but something that affects the way we live. Knowing that this life is but a breath and one day soon it will come to an end.

God, but for those of us who have put our trust and hope in your Son, it will only be the beginning. Father, we rejoice at the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

We rejoice that we do not need to fear death. And we pray that you would help us instead to fear you by trusting in your sovereign plan.

Lord, we go through good days and we go through bad days. Help us to enjoy the good times, but in the many bad days that come our way, help us to trust in you, knowing that you have used the worst day of all to bring good for all your people, and that you are always working out your good and gracious sovereign plans in our lives, even when we cannot understand them.

[34 : 04] So, Lord, may we all be prepared today, and we all trust in you. In the name of your precious son, we pray.

Amen. Amen. We're going to close by singing the...