

## **“Eat, Drink, and Enjoy Life”**

MJCF July 21, 2024

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

I don't usually follow ice hockey games, but just recently I heard that the Edmonton Oilers (a Canadian team) had made it to the finals against the Florida Panthers, (an American team). Of course, I was cheering for Canada. :) Unfortunately, the USA team had already won three games. Whoever wins the most games out of seven would be the champion and receive the coveted Stanley Cup. So, all the other team needed was to win one more game. I wasn't able to actually watch entire games, but I got interested when I saw that the Canadian team started winning! Soon, they had won three games in a row to tie the series. A lot of Canadians were excited. Unfortunately, they lost that final game. As I looked at the responses of the fans after each game, it was interesting to see that they often complained about the referees when their team lost. It didn't matter if the referees made a mistake or not, they had to blame someone else for their team losing. If a referee made a mistake in their favor, of course they wouldn't say anything, maybe being happy to benefit from a bad judgement.

Even when we try our best, we all make mistakes. Along with that, life just isn't always fair. When things don't go well, we often want to know why. Most of the time, we can find a reason, but some things are beyond our understanding. Why does so much evil exist in the world? Why do rich people often get away with doing all sorts of bad things, while the poor often get punished, even when they are not doing anything wrong? We hear about injustice happening all around us.

Today, we continue our look into the book of Ecclesiastes with chapter eight. The writer laments how the wicked may prosper and have a long life, while the righteous are not treated well. Yet, he also concludes that whether life seems fair or not, in the end it's better to be righteous and enjoy the life that God has given them. Rather than complain against God, like the hockey fans complained against the referees, there is a better way to live. We can intentionally look above our circumstances and put our hope in God, trusting that God is ultimately in control.

Although parts of Ecclesiastes 8 are difficult, even for biblical scholars to understand, scholars pretty much agree that the author, Qohelet is lamenting that those who do evil aren't always punished, and those who do good are often punished instead. Verse 14 summarises this idea well. “There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.” We also notice a common theme here, used throughout the book of Ecclesiastes - the use of the Hebrew word “hevel” which is often translated as “vanity,” “meaningless,” or “emptiness.” But the word basically means “vapor.” In this passage, he uses it in a negative sense, like describing a foul smell. Like a bad vapor, things are not always right in the world, but also like vapor, many things are also temporary and will eventually disappear. Even if evil is praised and rewarded while good is punished, it will still be better off in the end for the righteous, those who seek to follow God's ways.

Qohelet holds a tension together by first saying in verse 12 that sinners could “do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives...,” and then in verse 13, “but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days....” On the one hand, this is what we often see in our world, evil seems to win, but on the other hand, we can trust that God is still in control. Someday, there will be justice, truth, and mercy. Evil will not last, but it will be well with those who fear God (or those who put their faith in God). We just don't know when it will happen. Only God knows.

In verse 15, Qohelet “commends enjoyment” saying, “there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.” Here common themes that we've seen before in Ecclesiastes are repeated; the phrase “under the sun” meaning in our life on earth, the encouragement to find enjoyment in God's simple gifts such as eating and drinking, the theme of “toil” or our working in our lives, and the phrase, “days of life that God gives” which emphasises how life is short.

So, instead of living with constant frustration over all the injustice and problems we see in our world, we are encouraged to instead raise our focus to God, starting by enjoying simple things like

food and drink. There is so much that out of our control, and we may be tempted to just give up. Instead, with our focus on God, we can learn to trust that God is ultimately in control, we can give thanks for all the gifts we're given each day, rather than just focus on our problems, or what we lack. With an attitude of trust in God, we gain wisdom. We start to see areas where we can make a positive difference in the world, perhaps even helping to create something good in an area where there has been injustice.

This makes sense to me, but I struggle to think of "eating and drinking and enjoying myself." In the book of Luke, Jesus seems to suggest that we shouldn't "eat, drink, and be merry." He tells a story of a rich man being judged by God because he feasted every day but would not share anything with the poor man, Lazarus. In another one of his stories, Jesus talks negatively about a rich man who stores up several years of supplies in barns so that he can finally sit back, "eat and drink and be merry." In these stories, the problem is that the rich men were focused only on satisfying themselves, eating and drinking all the time. That's different than what Qohelet is talking about here when he encourages us to eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves. He is saying it's good to receive and enjoy God's gifts in life, despite challenging circumstances that we may be facing. It is healthy to celebrate God's goodness to us. That's what we do each year when we feast on Thanksgiving. That's why we pause to give God thanks before we eat each meal. It means moving our focus away from ourselves and bringing it to God.

I've sometimes wondered, is it OK to eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves when we so often hear of people who are suffering, with nothing to eat and no safe water to drink? I'm regularly reminded of people in Gaza who have been deeply suffering because of the war. I know Jesus Christ calls us to care for those around us who suffer. We are to care for the people around us, rather than just focusing on our own enjoyment. Jesus helped all who came to him, having compassion on everyone he met. But, there were still many people in the world who continued to suffer, due to things like poverty, disease, and oppression. That didn't stop Jesus from taking time to attend dinner parties, enjoying times of eating and drinking with the disciples as well as the outcasts of society.

Jesus showed an attitude of joy and energy in his life, even in the face of hardship, because his focus was always on trusting in God and following God's will. At his last supper with the disciples before his terrible death on a cross, Jesus prepares the disciples with encouragement to remain with him and experience the love, peace, and joy of God through him. In John 15, verse 11 he says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Even though there will be hardships for the disciples in the future, the joy that comes from Christ will be their energy. The joy we receive from God doesn't change according to our circumstances. History shows that many of the disciples even faced martyrdom because of their confidence in God and desire to continue sharing the good news that God reigns, that out of love God sent us Jesus, who died and rose again, and that in him we have forgiveness rather than condemnation because we cannot be perfect. How is the joy of the Lord Jesus Christ in your life? Let's continue working on deepening our relationship, trying to recognize more and more deeply just how much God has done for us.

When we give thanks to God for God's gifts, we give honor back to God as the one who provides for all we need. It is good to celebrate God's goodness to us as the writer of Ecclesiastes encourages, starting with the simplest things such as eating and drinking. We just need to take care that we do not begin to selfishly overindulge ourselves. We also need to do what we can to care for those around us. God calls us to share what we have with those in need. Rather than be overwhelmed by the great needs all around us, we can watch for the leading of God's Spirit in order to see what we can do.

Eat drinking and enjoying God's gifts involves an attitude of gratitude and of trust. There is so much in life that is out of control, so much that is unjust. Rather than despair, let's put our trust in God, the one who is ultimately in control. Let's pray.

Almighty God, you are our Creator. Thank-you for your love and your great power, as shown through your Son Jesus. O Lord, our world so often feels out of control. There is so much

injustice. Innocent people often suffer, and then there are those who seem to get away with doing all sorts of wrong things. Have mercy on us, O God. Help us to trust that you are ultimately in control. May we have the courage to do what we can to work for good in our world, in the opportunities you give us. And, help us to never forget to give thanks for all your gifts to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.