



On Finding Happiness

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With this second lesson on human emotions, we explore the biblical concept of happiness. As modern psychology has uncovered, this emotion is very complex and multifaceted. Both modern western perspectives and ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman perspectives recognized the range of sensations and modes of thinking that can fall under the general label of happiness.

Once more we turn to a lexicographical study to get some perspective on the range of words translating attitudes, viewpoints, and actions as happy, joy etc. The Hebrew Old Testament has two commonly used words that can be translated with English terms related to happiness: שמח (*samach*) and שמחה (*simchach*). *Samach* occurs 148 times and has a wide range of meaning: The core meaning "to rejoice, be glad" shades off into 1) (Qal) "to rejoice; to rejoice (arrogantly), exult (at); to rejoice (religiously)"; 2) (Piel) "to cause to rejoice, gladden, make glad"; 3) (Hiphil) "to cause to rejoice, gladden, make glad". The New American Standard Bible, for example, will use the following English words in translating *samach*: "cheers 1, give them joy 1, give happiness 1, glad 53, gladden 1, gloated 1, happy 3, has...joy 1, joyful 1, made me glad 1, made you glad 1, make my glad 1, make the glad 2, make them joyful 1, make us glad 1, make glad 2, makes a glad 2, makes his glad 1, makes it glad 1, makes...glad 1, makes...merry 1, merry 1, pleased* 1, rejoice 48, rejoiced 17, rejoiced had given 1, rejoices 4, rejoicing 1, take pleasure 1, very happy 1."

Simchach shows up some 87 times in the Hebrew Bible, and the core meaning of "joy, mirth, gladness" possesses three basic categories of meaning: "1. mirth, gladness, joy, gaiety, pleasure; 2. joy (of God); 3. glad result, happy issue." Once more, the NASB uses the following English words to translate *simchach*: "delight 1, exceeding joy 1, extremely* 1, festival 1, gladness 34, happiness 1, joy 38, mirth 1, pleasure 6, rejoice 1, rejoiced 1, rejoicing 6."

Five additional Hebrew words are capable of being translated by the English word "happy" and related terms: אשר ('ashar; 15x); אשר ('esher; 42x); אשר ('osher; 1x); טוב (towb; 352x); and יתב (yatab; 112x). This quick overview of the Hebrew Bible provides just a glimpse into the diverse and complex ancient Jewish perspectives about this human emotion we usually label as happiness.

The Greek New Testament will focus on the adjective μακάριος (*makarios*; 49x) for the core idea of "happy." The NASB will then translate this Greek word with the following English terms: "blessed 1, blessed 46, fortunate 1, happier 1, happy 1." But some sixteen different Greek words relate to the idea of "joy." And some ten Greek terms come through translation into English as "rejoice."

David P. Scaer in the article on "joy" in the *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* has a helpful summation of the biblical perspective:

Happiness over an unanticipated or present good. In the Old Testament joy (Heb. sama [שָׂמָּה]) covers a wide range of human experiences—from sexual love (So 1:4), to marriage (Pr 5:18), the birth of children (Psalm 113:9), the gathering of the harvest, military victory (Isa 9:3), and drinking wine (Psalm 104:15). On the spiritual level it

refers to the extreme happiness with which the believer contemplates salvation and the bliss of the afterlife. Unexpected benefits from God are expressed in terms of common experiences. The psalms express the joyous mood of believers as they encounter God. Believers rejoice because God has surrounded them with his steadfast love (32:11) and brought them to salvation (40:16; 64:10). David rejoices that God has delivered him from the hand of his enemies (63:11). Joy is a response to God's word (Psalm 119:14) and his reward to believers (Isa 65:14) and their strength (Ne 8:10).

Fundamental to the Old Testament understanding of joy are God's Acts in history, the most important of which is Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Exod 18:9-11). Israel's return from the Babylonian exile (Jer 31:1-19) to Jerusalem is above the highest joy (Psalm 137:6). The restoration of Israel will be an occasion for joy (Psalm 14:7) in which nature shares (Psalm 98:4-6). Joy characterizes Israel's corporate worship life (Deut 16:13-15; 2 Chron 30:21-22) in which the individual participates: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1). Whereas for the believer the secular joys common to human existence are distinguished from spiritual ones, they are not separated. Spiritual joys are expressed by the metaphors of feasting, marriage, victory in military endeavors, and successful financial undertakings. The joy of the harvest is used to describe the believer's final victory over his adversaries (Psalm 126:5-6). Christ's coming is described by the joy of the harvest and dividing up captured military booty (Isa 9:2-7). In turn, spiritual joys elevate the secular happiness of believers. Secular successes are regarded as unexpected benefits from God.

Old Testament imagery for joy is carried over into the New. Jesus joins the joys of marriage and spiritual ones by describing John the Baptist's reaction to his coming as the joy (chara [carav]) of the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29-30). This is accentuated by this pericope's proximity to the Cana wedding miracle where the water changed to a superior wine relieves an embarrassed host (John 2:1-11). Wine, a source of joy, anticipates eschatological joy of which Christ is an endless source (Psalm 104:15). Joy is associated with the nativity. The birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah is an occasion of joy for his father and others (Luke 1:14). The angel's greeting (chaire) to Mary followed by "highly favored," a word of the same family in Greek, may be taken as a command to rejoice as the Redeemer's mother (Luke 1:28). Shepherds hear that news of the birth of Christ is an occasion for great joy for all people (Luke 2:10). Luke's cycle is completed with the disciples returning with great joy after Jesus' ascension (24:52). The Magi, upon finding the infant Jesus, are "overjoyed" (Matt 2:10).

Joy belongs also to the realm of the supernatural. Angels rejoice at an unbeliever's conversion (Luke 10:20). Luke places three parables together in which God, in two instances with the angels, rejoices at the redemption. Upon finding the lost sheep, the shepherd rejoices (15:3-7). The woman rejoices upon finding the lost coin (15:8-10). The prodigal son's return brings rejoicing (15:11-32). The parable of the man who liquefies his assets to purchase the treasure hidden in the field teaches us that God has joy in bringing about the atonement (Matt 13:44). This parallels Jesus who with joy "endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Heb 12:2). Also for believers, trials and persecution are occasions for joy (James 1:2). Peter and John found their scourging an occasion for "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). Suffering brings joy as believers are united with Christ in his suffering (1 Peter 4:13-14). Paul speaks of his joy in the midst of affliction (2 Cor 7:4-16). It is a part of faith (Php 1:25). Joy expresses the relationship between the apostle and his congregations and an opportunity for thanksgiving (Rom 15:32; Php 2:28), with each rejoicing in the other. God's kingdom is described as "righteousness, peace and joy" (Rom 14:17). Certainty of salvation is a cause for joy, as the disciples are commanded to "rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Fellowship with Jesus brings continuous joy (John 15-17).

With this "big picture" of biblical perspectives in view, we can now turn to the passage in Ecclesiastes to examine one piece of the biblical jigsaw puzzle portrait on happiness. The passage under consideration is not the one in the Smyth-Helwys Formations series. Inadvertently I picked up on chapter three in a study a few weeks back. The lesson quarterly listed chapter nine as the OT study. Since we missed that study, I want to pick up that passage for this study, and in some ways it may be more appropriate for the theme of happiness than chapter three of Ecclesiastes.

I Context

a Historical

Since the historical background for chapter nine is the same as for chapter three, I will repeat the external history aspect from that earlier lesson. In trying to determine the historical setting for Ecclesiastes, let me draw upon the insights of James M. Efird, "Ecclesiastes," *The Old Testament Writings*, (iPreach):

Another of the speculative wisdom books is that of Ecclesiastes. Commonly known as Koheleth (i.e., one who calls or speaks to an assembly) the identity of the author of this collection of speculative musings is quite unknown. He seems to have been a teacher in a wisdom school, but exactly where is highly debated. Suggestions range any where from Phoenicia to Alexandria in Egypt to Palestine to Jerusalem, but the most probable place is Jerusalem. And the time of writing is also debated. Most scholars, however, date the work from 300—200 B.C.

It is well-known that the book of Ecclesiastes had perhaps the most difficult time of all being admitted into the canon of the Old Testament. The skeptical nature of its contents and the sometimes depressing tone of the arguments give to the work an aura of “anti-orthodoxy.” Had it not been attributed to Solomon and had it not been for the last few verses (12:9-14) added by Koheleth’s students the book would not have been included among the authoritative writings. Many find in it only extreme pessimism and negativism, but upon close scrutiny there is more positive material than one may have thought at first glance.

Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach) adds some additional insights:

Name and Place in Canon.

The Hebrew title of the book is “Koheleth” (“Preacher”; see below in 1:1), and Ecclesiastes is the LXX translation of it. After a good deal of controversy, Eccl. was included in the Writings, the final section of the Hebrew Bible. It is one of the 5 Scrolls and is read in the synagogue on the 3rd day of the feast of booths.

Date and Authorship.

Although the book is attributed to Solomon (see below on 1:1), language and style indicate a 3rd-cent. B.C. origin. In spite of some opinion to the contrary, it is probably basically the work of one author, his disciples being responsible for certain additions, including the 2 epilogues (12:9-11, 12-14).

Perhaps helpful to understanding this background would be the text of the two concluding epilogues of the book:

12:9-11 (NRSV).

9 Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. 10 The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly. 11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd.

12:12-14 (NRSV).

12 Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. 13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

These texts underscore the importance of the wisdom tradition among exilic and post-exilic Jews. Unlike many who want religion to provide clear, simple and authoritative answers to all of life’s problems, the Jewish wisdom tradition recognized that life is full of mysteries and simplistic answers seldom, if ever, are correct. Thus the reflections of the Teacher challenge us to not become overly dogmatic in our religion, and to always be open to life’s mystery and unanswerables.

b. Literary

James M. Efird (“Ecclesiastes,” *The Old Testament Writings*, iPreach) has a helpful summation of the basic themes of Ecclesiastes, which help to set our passage in its larger context:

It is a standing comment among interpreters of Koheleth that the book defies outline and organization. There is little agreement either as to the central theme of the book. If there is one, most commentators believe, it has to be the overarching idea of despair, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The simple fact is that the book is a loose collection of sayings from this wisdom teacher which are somehow connected with the meaning of life. The sage attempts to be realistic about the world and its nature. Is there meaning in life? If so, where? Can one be happy in the midst of a world like this? If so, how? He attempts to make sense from the nonsense of life!

The first few verses (1:2-11) set the stage for the remainder of his reflections. Koheleth argues that there is in the world a certain regularity which demonstrates little except the futility of change. These ideas are then followed by what seems to be an attempt to find purpose and meaning in life. Such meaning can be sought in wisdom,

work, pleasure, power, and wealth, but none of these separately nor all together can give final fulfillment and purpose of life. All of these pursuits are useful but ultimately break apart on the harsh reality of the world as it really is.

The things which should assist one in having a good life are “out of synch.” One seeks for justice in the courts, but it is not there. One seeks for fairness for all people, but it is not there. One seeks to accumulate certain things to pass along, but all this labor can be for naught if the next generation does not appreciate the effort and the gift. Not even theological and cultic “orthodoxy” can give a true sense of purpose, because they are too neat while the facts of the world are not.

In spite of all Koheleth’s pessimism, however, which most interpreters emphasize, there are also elements of hope in his teaching. He believed that making the best of one’s work would bring some sense of direction and purpose even if that is not immediately evident. He saw in the cyclical nature of certain aspects of life, not only a monotonous humdrum, but some glimmer of hope. There are, for example, some things one can count on in this world, whether they are good or bad. That gives at least some degree of stability to life and something to plan around. Perhaps his most interesting expression and one giving a challenge to those who live in the world is found in 9:4b: “. . . for a living dog is better than a dead lion.” The principle here is that where there is life, there is hope.

This emphasis upon the struggle of the individual against the world permeates Koheleth’s sayings but is frequently overlooked by many interpreters. To find such a thread of hope recurring throughout the different teachings is somewhat surprising since Koheleth was still operating with the old concept of Sheol in terms of life and death. There would be no possibility, therefore, for injustices and unfairness to be made right in the future. The person has to accept the world as it is now, work as diligently as one can, enjoy life as much as possible (though Koheleth is not a hedonist by any stretch of the imagination); such an approach will give that individual some direction and purpose for living and make life as meaningful as it can possibly be.

Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr. (“The Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, iPreach) helps put our passage in its immediate context with these observations:

8:16-9:12. God’s Ways Are Inscrutable. The central thesis of the book, already advanced in 3:9-15, is repeated in 8:16-17: man’s study of the work of God cannot lead to a knowledge of the purpose of life. Honest observation shows that fortune does not necessarily come to the good (9:1-6) and that life’s prizes are not necessarily gained by ability (9:11-12). Death’s overtaking of all is the only sure thing (9:3-6, 10b), and wisdom dictates making the best of things (9:7-8). Again the author does not categorically deny meaning (vs. 7b), but demands honesty on the basis of observation.

II. Message

The passage breaks down into three units of material: (1) vv. 1-6, Life’s Unfairness, (2) vv. 7-10, Life’s Enjoyments, (3) vv. 11-12 Life’s Uncertainties. The positive aspect in these verses is in the middle section, vv. 7-10. On either side are statements reflecting the harsh realities of everyday life, as it is usually lived out both in that ancient world, and in our world as well.

a Life’s Unfairness, vv. 1-6

NASB

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. 2 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

NRSV

1 All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them 2 is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an

NLT

1 This, too, I carefully explored: Even though the actions of godly and wise people are in God's hands, no one knows whether or not God will show them favor in this life. 2 The same destiny ultimately awaits everyone, whether they are righteous or wicked, good or bad, ceremonially clean or unclean, religious or irreligious. Good people receive the same treatment as sinners, and people who take oaths are treated like people who don't. 3 It

who is afraid to swear. 3 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. 4 For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. 5 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. 6 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.

oath. 3 This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. 4 But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. 6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

seems so tragic that one fate comes to all. That is why people are not more careful to be good. Instead, they choose their own mad course, for they have no hope. There is nothing ahead but death anyway. 4 There is hope only for the living. For as they say, "It is better to be a live dog than a dead lion!" 5 The living at least know they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, nor are they remembered. 6 Whatever they did in their lifetime – loving, hating, envying – is all long gone. They no longer have a part in anything here on earth.

Notes:

The seeming pessimism of these verses challenges a naive optimist to re-examine his approach to life and living. The thought flow revolves around two key points: (1) "the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God" (v. 1, NRSV) and (2) "whoever is joined with all the living has hope" (v. 4, NRSV). As the study notes comments in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (p. 953f., Heb Bible) summarize, "all people face the common fate of death, regardless of their character. Yet life is better than death, and one should enjoy life whenever one is able to do so." God rules supremely, according to the Teacher, but the outcome of that power in terms of judgment and blessing in this life are unknown, as the NLT catches the senses of verse one, "no one knows whether or not God will show them favor in this life." At first glance this seems to contradict much of what is found elsewhere in the Bible, in both testaments. God is portrayed as possessing both righteousness and love that result in his punishing sinners and blessing those deemed righteous. God's people can depend upon the consistency of His actions with his character. Yet here, the Teacher (in Hebrew, Koheleth or Qohelet) declares that no one knows how God will treat him.

Why such a perspective? One of the answers to this question arises from the larger context of the entire book itself. As Kathleen Farmer ("Ecclesiastes," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*) observes, "The phrase 'under the sun' plays a significant part in the development of Qoheleth's argument. In spite of what traditional wisdom teaches, Qoheleth's experience tells him that justice does not always happen 'under the sun' (3:16; 7:15; 8:14; contra Prov. 10:2, 16; 11:4, 31, etc.), that sinning does not necessarily shorten the life of the sinner nor does righteousness extend the life of the righteous (Eccl. 7:15; 8:12–14; contra Prov. 10:27)." The Teacher's vantage point is an observation of how most folks live out their lives and how society tends to function. Although his religious view is that God is in control, he evaluates how that works from a pragmatic observation of the patterns of living of people around him. He sees little or no difference between the fortunes of those who are sinful and those who are righteous. The ultimate leveler is death, which is everyone's fate whether good or evil (v. 3).

W. Sibley Towner ("Ecclesiastes," *New Interpreter's Bible*, iPreach) has some helpful comments on the list of people in verse two:

The list of "righteous" people in v. 2 has a somewhat antiquarian flavor. Perhaps Qohelet reached out for examples from the ranks of the superreligious. By his time, for example, sacrifice had begun to yield to prayer as the most basic act of personal piety. As for the swearing of oaths, including the curious custom of placing the hand on the genitals of the other oath-taker (see Gen 24:2-9; 47:29), the practice was coming into increasing disfavor in the later period of the Hebrew Bible and in the intertestamental period. Qohelet did not personally recommend it (5:5). Josephus⁹⁰ says that the turn-of-the-era Essenes banned oath taking, except for the binding vow taken upon entry into the covenant community. Nor did Jesus look upon the practice with favor: "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No,

No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (Matt 5:37 NRSV). In the background of this development stands the ninth commandment, against false testimony (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20), which was Israel's safeguard of the integrity of sworn witnesses in court. Qohelet's point may be that even people who have become so scrupulous about the truth that they fear to take an oath have destinies neither more nor less positive than the moral leper who has sworn an oath and then violated it. Against the standard but flawed reward-and-punishment mentality of his day—and every day—he asserts that what one does has no bearing on what finally happens to one. "The same fate comes to everyone" (v. 3): Everyone dies.

Thus his conclusion to this matter is "Everything that confronts them is vanity,..." (vv. 1b-2a, NRSV). This statement in the original Hebrew and the early translations is difficult to understand with certainty. As Towner notes, "The last clause of the verse, which literally reads, 'Everything is before them,' is combined by the NRSV with an amended version of the beginning of v. 2. The NIV rightly decides to avoid the emendation and keep the two verses separate, making clear that the task of v. 2 is to expand on the gloomy theme of the common destiny of all humanity." The Bible in Basic English (BBE) renders the expression this way: "all is to no purpose before them." For the Teacher, the contradiction between God being in control and that seemingly making no difference in blessing/punishing is difficult to swallow, as verse three affirms: "It seems so tragic that one fate comes to all" (NLT).

Although we as Christians live in hope, that hope is eschatologically oriented. That is, our hope for justice is focused on divine judgment after death. Although we on occasion sense God's blessings in this life -- and maybe His judgment as well -- we can learn from the Teacher to not over simplify the way life is lived out in this world. In moments of honesty all of us have wondered and maybe questioned things because we see evil around us succeeding, and good people suffering horrifically. No clear sense of justice can sometimes be detected in our society. Human efforts at meting out justice through our legal system are often flawed, and justice all too often seems to belong to those having huge sums of money to pay for the best legal defense that money can buy.

How then are we to respond to the inequities of life on planet earth? One answer that the Teacher provides in verses four through six is simply, "be glad you're alive and not dead, since while living you have some hope for good things happening to you." But that hope of better things is weak, as his aphorism "a living dog is better than a dead lion" asserts. Dogs were viewed very negatively in Jewish tradition because they seldom served as house pets and most often were wild, street dogs who roamed the countryside searching for food. The positive aspect for the living is still to know that the bad stuff will cease at death, since there's nothing after the grave. The dead don't realize this, because they don't exist any longer: "the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost" (v. 5, NRSV).

But for the Christian there is another answer:

51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's declaration in [1 Cor. 15:51-57](#) stands in stark contrast to the view of death by the Teacher in our passage. For him the only positive aspect of death was the end of the negative experiences of living. Living provided only a glimmering of hope for positive things happening during this life. All of this came to a grinding halt with death, however. But Paul voices the larger view for Christians who see in death a new, more wonderful beginning through a life with Jesus in eternity. The resurrection of Christ is our guarantee that we will also be raised and share in this wonderful life. As Paul wrote to the Philippians (1:21-26, NRSV), "21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again."

The abiding lesson from the Teacher in 9:1-6 is a reminder of the harsh realities of life in a sinful world, as well as the sometimes 'hiddenness' of God in not meting out justice for good and punishment for bad in

this life.

b. Life's Enjoyments, vv. 7-10

NASB

7 Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. 8 Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. 9 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. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in where you are going.

NRSV

7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. 8 Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

NLT

7 So go ahead. Eat your food and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this! 8 Wear fine clothes, with a dash of cologne! 9 Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you in this world. The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly toil. 10 Whatever you do, do well. For when you go to the grave, there will be no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom.

Notes:

The basic conclusion drawn by the Teacher about how to live life in light of the seeming absence of divine justice is to enjoy it to its fullest. This doesn't have the [Epicurean](#) philosophical view in mind that was captured years ago in the old Budwiser beer commercial, "You only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can get." For the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) the ultimate goal in life is happiness and one should do what makes him/her feel good, more than anything else.

The Teacher speaks of life enjoyment in three basic areas: (1) food and dress, vv. 7-8; (2) one's wife, v. 9; and (3) one's work, v. 10. Sibley Towner ("Ecclesiastes," *New Interpreter's Bible*, iPreach) has some helpful summary observations:

In response to the gloomy future sketched in vv. 1-6, vv. 7-10 sound the affirmation of Ecclesiastes that the goal of humankind is to seek joy in all endeavors. Because all passions are extinguished by death (v. 6), it is imperative to seize the hour for happiness now. Appended to the injunction to eat, drink, and be merry is the extraordinary remark that "God has long ago approved what you do."

Thus we encounter the lesson theme of 'happiness' in these verses. The joys described by the Teacher are basic to human existence, whether one is righteous or evil. One can be so thoroughly unrighteous as a pagan infidel and still experience what the Teacher alludes to in these verses. Just because one is righteous doesn't guarantee the enjoyment of life as described by the Teacher. Sometimes I think we Christians, and especially we Baptists, may have trouble enjoying such basic things as described here. In particular, enjoying them to a full extent.

The Teacher reminds us in his subtle way that "God has long ago approved what you do" (v. 7b, NRSV). Again, Towner brings to our attention an important interpretative issue with this statement:

At issue between the NRSV and the NIV is the meaning in this verse of the word **כבר** (kubr, "already"). Using the perfect or completed tense, the Teacher claims that God has accepted or approved the hearer's deeds. (The same Hebrew verb is used when God accepts an offering; e.g., Deut 33:10-11; Amos 5:22). The use of the perfect (completed) tense is not definitive inasmuch as Qohelet sometimes uses it to refer to present and uncompleted acts as well (e.g., "gives," 2:26; "exercises authority," 8:9), but the word "already" seems intended to underscore the completedness of the divine decision. Thus the verse appears to be giving the hearer a blank check to spend on a life of gaiety and pleasure. The NIV tries to avoid this implication, it seems, by discerning the nuance "now" in the word kubr and by using an imperfect or uncompleted sense of the verb "accepted," "approved": "for it is now that God favors what you do." The NRSV comes closer to the literal understanding: Long ago God declared it to be

morally correct that human beings should enjoy bread, wine, and life itself. It is not that God foreordains or approves of everything that one might do, but that God created human life good from the beginning and wills that human beings take legitimate pleasure in being alive.

To be sure, the “this world” focus of the Teacher limits his perception of joy and happiness to these basic experiences common to humans in general. For those with a larger perspective that includes eternity, a much fuller view of happiness and joy emerges. Although it might be labeled the spiritual side over against a ‘secular’ happiness advocated by the Teacher, I prefer to understand it in the same way as that of the Teacher. His view arose out of the understanding of God’s sovereign control and approval of basic experiences of happiness in this life. When that same view of God is maintained and added to it is the wisdom of Jesus and the apostles, happiness for the believer becomes measured not only by this world, but by eternity as well. The ultimate experience of happiness will come in the life after death for the believer in Heaven with God and His people. But in this life experiences of joy and happiness go much deeper than these basic ones described by the Teacher, and even these experiences have a different tone. At the heart of this lies the literary form of the [beatitude](#) in both the Old and New Testaments. God pours out His blessings upon His people both now and for eternity as a response to their devotion and faithfulness to Him. Happiness flows into the depths of a person’s very being and permeates his/her life, thus giving it a special tone and aura.

c. Life’s Uncertainties, vv. 11-12

NASB

11 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. 12 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.

NRSV

11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. 12 For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

NLT

11 I have observed something else in this world of ours. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise are often poor, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being at the right place at the right time. 12 People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a snare, people are often caught by sudden tragedy.

Notes:

Like the bottom piece of bread in that steak sandwich, this unit of materials returns to the somewhat negative theme found in the first segment. The delicious steak is tucked between these two slices of harsh reality. James Crenshaw (“Ecclesiastes,” *Interpretation: A Commentary*, iPreach) summarizes the essential thrust of these verses:

Chance governs human lives, according to Qohelet, and it does no good to strive for excellence in the belief that pleasant results will follow. No one can plan for the unexpected or compensate for randomness. In the end, an unwelcome intrusion will suddenly terminate life, so that human beings resemble fish taken in a net and birds captured in a trap.

Life on this planet is exceedingly unsure and subject to calamity. Daily we pick up the newspaper and read of young lives being tragically snuffed out. Thus we need to remember:

Happiness is like coke—something you get as a by-product in the process of making something else. —ALDOUS HUXLEY, *Point Counter Point*

We *can* find happiness in this life, but, as Eric Hoffer (*The Passionate State of Mind*) said, “The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness.”