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WHEN THERE’S CILANTRO IN YOUR TACO

Ecclesiastes 9:3-10

Laurie and I were walking along a sidewalk that ran along the beach while we were on vacation. There were quite a few people out walking along the sidewalk. As we were walking by a few people at one spot Laurie noticed one guy who obviously had sustained a significant injury to his leg and was limping around in one of those walking boots they use rather than casts these days. Pointing to his wounded leg Laurie said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” His response was quite unusual. He said, “Don’t be sorry. You should congratulate me. This is a blessing.” That was a bit surprising. Who thinks having an incapacitating injury while at a lovely vacation spot is a blessing? As surprising as throat comment was his explanation of it was even more so. As we were walking away he said, “The easy life is a curse.” I thought that was pretty funny. He meant having the time and resources to try to make your life seem full through a continual stream of activities and adventures ends up being a burden. Our society portrays that as true fun, as the good life. This guy said having an injury that gave him an excuse to get off the merry-go-round and just relax was a blessing. In Ecclesiastes there is always the question of how we can have a fulfilling life when all of the things the world suggests to us end up being empty and futile. We will continue thinking about that question today, especially in light of what the world is really like.

In verse 3 the Teacher gives us yet another glimpse of the human condition when one views life strictly from an “under the sun” perspective, meaning trying to understand it only from what we see happening in this world. As he has shown continually since the beginning of the book, this approach to life results in a hopeless, futile and empty perspective. This verse tells us, “The same destiny overtakes all.” This echoes what he said in verse 2, “All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad.” This is sadly true. A person who was as terrible as a human can be and a person who is as good and admirable as a human can be, both end up the same way. They live their few years on earth and then they die. That doesn’t seem right. Shouldn’t the good person have a better conclusion to life than a monster?

The Teacher goes on to say of people that they are “full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live.” That’s an awfully gloomy view of the human race. It is deeply at odds with the perspective that we often hear in our country that people are basically good. Solomon says, “I beg to differ. They are insane and full of evil.”

Are we really that bad? Well, consider that humans throughout history have dealt with arguments over all manner of things by going to war. We settle differences by killing each other. After thousands of years of history, we are still doing this. It’s insane. Look at how people have fought and argued and divided over the covid virus and its treatments. It’s crazy.

As for that business about people being full of evil, all you have to do is look around. While we were on vacation Laurie and I stayed at one location for 3 nights, and a second location for 6 nights. The first one was a condo. It presented us with one challenge. When we wanted to go to the beach or the pool, what should we do with wallets? Every place we stay these days includes a warning on security telling us not to leave valuables in a room. But taking our wallets with us presented a problem when we wanted to go for a walk on the beach in our swimsuits. When we moved from there to a hotel one good thing about that was the hotel room had a safe in it. We could leave valuables in the safe when we went out. Why do we have to concern ourselves with things like that? Why do hotel rooms need safes? Why do the authorities tell you when you drive to a beach not to leave valuables in your car? It’s because there is a decent chance someone will break into your car and steal anything valuable. That’s because the human race is full of evil. Every aspect of our lives is negatively affected by the fact that human beings can’t be trusted a lot of the time.

The heart of our insanity and of our evil is the same. It is a built in, powerful default belief that I am the center of all things. Not, I, Rick Myatt, but I, the self. It is obvious that this is not true. I know that in my mind. But something inside all of us operates pretty much with that premise every day. We wake up obsessed with my life, my desires, my thoughts, and I am controlled by that all day long. That is true of every single one of us. It is crazy, and it is the source of all the evil we see in the world around us.

So here we are, crazy people with a darkness inside us, surrounded by similar crazy people, living in a world where whether we do good or evil, we all end up with the same fate. That seems to take away the incentive for doing good. It leaves us in a truly messed up place. Back in 1963 Stanley Kramer produced and directed a very funny Academy Award winning movie called *It’s A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. That could have been the title for this section of Ecclesiastes. As he does throughout this book, the writer gives us some ways to deal with this crazy world. He gives us some truth to live by. We will see it in Ecclesiastes 9:3-10.

LIVE WITH A JOYFUL HEART

Verse 7 tells us to “eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart.” In other words, be happy with what you have and have joy every day of your lives. Rejoice, be characterized by joy and gladness, whatever you have to eat and drink. Verse 8 follows this up with the somewhat puzzling statement that we should, “always be clothed in white.” What does that mean? How is wearing white going to help with anything? I’ve got a couple of white dress shirts, some white T shirts and some white shorts, am I supposed to wear those all the time? Is that going to make me better or make my life better? It’s kind of a problem for me because I’m sure to get stains on anything white that I wear. And wasn’t there once a rule that you weren’t supposed to wear white after Labor Day or something? Or is this like some sort of cult where everyone wears white robes?

Seeing that this appears to be a curious command that is hard to understand, some Bible scholars suggest that wearing white is a symbol of purity. It means having a pure heart and staying morally pure. That, they say, is crucial to living in this mad, mad, mad world. However, that doesn’t fit in the context. The author was discussing gladness and joy in the heart, so an image of purity would be out of place.

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes Tremper Longman hits on what I think is the real intent of this command. He says the Hebrew term should not be translated “white clothes,” but “bright clothes.” If you go to a funeral you wear somber clothes, primarily featuring the color black. The clothes this verse suggests are a total contrast. These are brightly colored clothes that suggest celebration and fun. Maybe for us guys it’s like he said always wear a nice, loud aloha shirt.

This fits in the context, which has to do with gladness and a joyful heart. Verse 8 talks about anointing one’s head with oil, which was something that might be done at a dinner party, a time of fellowship and joy. Wearing brightly colored clothes as a sign of joy and celebration makes much more sense.

Verses 7-8 are about rejoicing in life no matter where you are or what life is like. It is about choosing joy as your way of living and your response to all of life. I thought about these verses when we were on our flight home from our vacation. For much of our lives Laurie and I were used to getting meals on airplanes. Back in the good old days, even flights of only 2 or 3 hours usually included some sort of food. That has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Now it is the exception to get a meal on a domestic flight. We’ve had to accept that if you have a 5 or 6 hour flight across the country or to Hawaii, you’d better bring some food with you, because you’re going to get hungry and they won’t feed you. So we were surprised by our recent trip when we actually got food on the flight, both going and coming home. Kudos to Hawaiian Airlines.

The food wasn’t especially good. We had a “breakfast sandwich” on the way out, which consisted of some eggs and a thin sheen of cheese spread inside a roll. It was a “chicken and mushroom sandwich” in the evening on our flight home. That sandwich consisted of a tiny bit of chicken, a little bit of cheese and one slice of mushroom enclosed in an onion roll. It wasn’t much to be excited about, but they did also give us a small bag of Fritos, and I love Fritos. As I ate my meal I reflected on how things used to be. There was a meal we got back in the day on a number of flights. It was the same meal, but it had a number of different names. It was Hawaiian chicken, or island chicken, or chicken and rice, but it was all the same. We used to make jokes about it, and we used to complain about airline food. I don’t do that anymore. If I got “island chicken” on a flight today I’d rejoice and feel like I was dining in a fine restaurant. I now shake my head at how we once took such a fine meal for granted.

While I was somewhat wistful about the “good old days” when we got island chicken my reaction to getting that chicken and mushroom sandwich was, “This is great!” I rejoiced in actually having something besides pretzels or peanuts to eat on that flight. That’s what the Teacher is telling us to do. Eat your food with gladness, have joy in your heart, even if there’s just a smattering of eggs and cheese in your breakfast sandwich. And have that be your response to wherever you are in life and whatever is happening.

This is consistent with what we see in much of the Scriptures. Psalm 68:3 says, “May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful.” That tells us to be glad and joyful. Psalm 149:4-5 say, “The Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory. Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds.” God delights in his people, and so we should be singing for joy. The New Living translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:16 is, “Always be joyful.” In fact an identifying mark of a follower of Jesus should be joy, because one of the fruit of the Spirit of Christ is joy. If we have the Spirit of Jesus at work in us he produces joy, not by giving us external circumstances that make us happy, but by producing joy inside us no matter what is happening around us. Our joy is a result not of something outside of us, but of the Spirit in us. We bring joy to our circumstances rather than derive it from them.

But this command leaves me with two questions. The first question is, how does that help with living in a mad, mad world? The second question is, how am I supposed to always have joy in my heart? How does being joyful and glad help us deal with the fact that everyone, good or bad, has the same destiny, and how does it help with the evil and madness of this world?

We saw last week that we have to come to grips with death, the destiny of every human. Because God sent his Son to die for us and conquer death so that we don’t need to fear it, by faith we are able to not be dominated by it. We don’t know how many days we have on this planet, but we know that each one is a gift from God. So we focus on rejoicing in the day we have, because we don’t have to fear death and because each day is a precious gift from God. Laurie and I love vacation. Who doesn’t? We have often talked about how we hate when you get to that last day of vacation and you hate that this is the end, that the next day it’s over and you have to leave. But I remember a vacation we had when we went to the big island of Hawaii. It was the first time we had been there, and we had a wonderful time. But as is always the case, we came to the last day of our time there, and it was sad. But we weren’t that sad, because the next day we were leaving to go to Maui, our favorite island. That’s why we can rejoice even though we face death like everyone else. It’s because for us, death is like going to Maui. The trip is not over. That frees us from the depressing and discouraging fact of death.

Living in joy each day also helps us to get over the craziness of other people. Whatever they do, we don’t need to worry about it. Instead we can see that God is greater than them, so we can simply focus on what he has given us today. This also helps with the dissatisfaction that we often have in the world that ultimately comes from envy and competition with others. Living joyfully today puts an end to that.

But that brings us to that second question, which is, how do we live with a joyful heart in a crazy world where much that occurs is not joyful? How are we supposed to have joy when our circumstances would not naturally produce that? First we must walk in the Spirit. That means we trust in God’s grace, we believe what God supplies is enough for us each day, and we ask him to exert his presence in us, giving him control of our lives. It means we live with him in every situation.

Galatians 5:22 says that joy is a fruit of the Spirit of Christ, so that means as we live in the Spirit he will produce joy. Philosopher Teilhard de Chardin said, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” Philosopher Dallas Willard said God is the most joyful being in existence. Where he is there is joy. As we live in him it will produce joy. Columba Marmion said, “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us.”

We can rejoice and be glad at all times because we have something not just good, but awesome to rejoice about. We are loved by God! We know him. We are forgiven. We have eternal life! These things are the most important, most valuable things in life. If we didn’t have them this world would be dark, depressing and hopeless. But we have these gifts that are priceless beyond measure. This is cause nor celebration. It should mean down at the bedrock of our soul there is happiness. There is glee because the biggest issue of life has been solved for us.

Another aspect of having joy involves choosing to accept and rejoice in whatever God has given us. There is an odd thing about negativity, and that is it can color everything else in negative hues. We can find something negative in just about everything if we choose to do so. And unfortunately, once we see it, it tends to block out anything good and positive. All we can see is that negative. It blocks out the enormous good that we have.

I kind of see the negative as the cilantro of life. Have I mentioned that I hate cilantro? Yeah, I guess I have. Laurie and I went into a restaurant we like and ordered fish tacos. They have yummy fish tacos. We made sure to specify that they include no cilantro. When we got our food I eagerly took a bite, and immediately detected…cilantro! For me, cilantro overwhelms everything else. I know most people like it, but it makes me gag. One little bit ruins the taste of everything. If there is cilantro, that’s all I taste. I looked inside my taco, and sure enough, somehow, just a couple of little leaves of the offending herb were there. I warned Laurie, who also despises the stuff, although not quite at my level, and we carefully investigated our tacos. We just found a few tiny bits of the poison and removed them, then proceeded to thoroughly enjoy our meal.

For us, so often the negative that we look for and find is like that. Its presence overrules everything else so we cannot enjoy and often can’t even see the good that is there. It will help us if we will not let that happen. It’s like going to Disneyland and finding out the carousel is not working, then being so disappointed by that you can’t enjoy the rest of the park. Wait, you have Thunder Mountain, Space Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean, and so much more to enjoy. Why let one small disappointment ruin all the other good? We can’t always remove negative things the way we removed cilantro from our tacos, but we can choose to still see and enjoy the many good things in our lives.

There is one other thing we can do to increase joy, and that is, we can choose it. Sheryl Sandberg is the COO of Facebook. She gave the commencement speech at Cal Berkeley 5 years ago. In it she said, “I am not here to tell you all the things I’ve learned in life. Today I will try to tell you what I’ve learned in death.” Her husband had died suddenly from heart issues. She talked about the brutal pain of grief and how it was all consuming, almost swallowing her life. At times she had difficulty getting through her speech. But she said, “I learned that in the face of the void, as in the face of any challenge, you can choose joy and meaning.”

Abraham Lincoln said, “Folks are usually about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” Rick Warren said almost exactly that, “You’re as happy as you choose to be.” The late Henri Nouwen said, “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.” Given that in the Bible God *commands* us to be joyful, it clearly must be true that we can obey or disobey that command. We can make the choice to be happy.

Researchers have discovered some interesting things about joy. They did a 30 year longitudinal study at UC Berkeley in which they examined the smiles of students in yearbooks. They then followed those students as they went through life. They found that how big the smiles of those students were, accurately predicted how fulfilling and lasting their marriages were, how high they would later score on tests of well being and happiness, and on how inspiring they would be considered to be by other people. An even more unusual study was conducted in 2010 at Wayne State University back in Michigan. They measured the smiles of players on baseball cards. They found that the span of players smiles correlated with how long they lived! The bigger the smile, the longer the life.

Choosing joy is pretty much going to come down to deciding that the good things we have in God, as we will see, are so wonderful, so joyful, that we rejoice in them and are thankful for them every day, regardless of what else may be happening in life. It is kind of like saying, “Hey, this is amazing. I’ve got a chicken and mushroom sandwich to eat on this plane. This is terrific.” It is saying that even though if you offered me that sandwich for lunch today I would probably say, “Uh, no thank you. I can do better.”

REJOICE IN GOD’S LOVE

There is a little statement at the end of verse 7 that we must not miss. The Teacher told us to eat our food with gladness and to have a joyful heart. Then he told us why. Did you see that? “For God has already approved of what you do.” The word “for” means this is the reason we can have joyful hearts. God has approved of what we do.

Psalm 147:11 says, “The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” The word translated “delights” in that verse is the same Hebrew word translated “approved” in Ecclesiastes 9:7. In other words, God doesn’t just approve of you and what you do, he delights in you! He has unfailing love for you.

Before we went on vacation we asked Michael and Carissa if we could get anything for them while we were away. Michael wanted some cookies they have there. Carissa is pregnant, feels terrible and didn’t want anything. But she asked if we could get a stuffed turtle toy for little Wesley. So we did some shopping for a stuffed turtle and found several, none of which seemed quite right. But then we found one we thought would be perfect. A few days after we got home Laurie went over to help take care of Wesley for the day and she took the requested items. When she gave Wesley the turtle he immediately hugged it. He would not let go of it. Whatever they did that day, wherever they went, he had that turtle with him. When it was nap time the turtle went into his bed with him. Laurie sent me a picture of him with his turtle. That little guy, little Wesley, is absurdly cute. I have no way to explain how much I delight in that little dude. We could not have hoped for a better response to the little gift we gave him. But I realized that had he had the reaction to the gift that I expected, which was to like it, but to quickly consign it to a spot among his many toys and move on to something else, I would delight in him just as much. I don’t delight in him because he had such a precious reaction to the gift we gave, but because he is my grandson, and I love him with every atom of my being.

That is how God feels about you, his child. In Christ, you are loved with a love that Paul described as surpassing knowledge. In other words, there’s no way to comprehend how limitless, how vast, how unconditional his love for us is. Nothing can stop God from loving us. Because he loves us so unconditionally, he delights in us, infinitely more than I delight in Wesley, which is beyond expression.

I don’t love Wesley like that because he has earned it, because he is such an amazingly good, mature and loving person. I love him because he is my daughter’s son, and for no other reason. God’s love is better than that. He loves us, he delights in us, because we are his children in Jesus Christ. It is not because we earn it.

In his book, *Soul Survivor*, Philip Yancey wrote about Mohandas Gandhi. He was a remarkable man who had a huge impact in this world. He lived an impressive life. Though not a Christian, Gandhi was drawn to Jesus and his teaching. He actually tried to live by Jesus’ teachings, and his discipline and efforts would put most of us to shame. But there was one big problem. The problem was he never understood grace. As a Hindu, he believed he had to rid himself of all passions, all desire. He said, “I must reduce myself to zero.” But he admitted he failed. He struggled to reach that goal. He said, “If one is to find salvation, he must have as much patience as a man who sits by the seaside and with a straw picks up a single drop of water, transfers it, and thus empties the ocean.” No one has that much patience and persistence. Laurie and I just flew over part of the Pacific Ocean. We flew for more than 5 hours at a cruising speed of 446 knots, which is 514 miles per hour. There was nothing but water below us the entire way, and it has an average depth of over 12,000 feet! And that was just part of the way across the ocean. Yeah, empty that just one drop at time. To attempt such a thing is to have a deadly, utterly defeated, joyless life.

The great news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is not about us attempting, like Gandhi, to make ourselves a zero, a task as onerous and deadly as emptying the ocean one drop at a time. It is about through Jesus Christ and his work for us, God forgiving us, accepting us, loving us, delighting in us just as we are. We often have trouble believing that God really can love us. But this verse tells us he actually delights in us. And Paul reminds us in Romans 8:38-39 that nothing will ever change that. Nothing will ever separate us from his love that is in Jesus Christ.

I think it is astounding that Solomon even says God already approves of what we do. He was referring to us eating our food with gladness, having a heart of joy. God wants us to be joyful. It makes him happy when we have joy. Again, as a grandparent, I totally get that. I love it when my grandchildren are happy and laughing. That’s how God feels about you.

This is why we can have joy every moment of every day, even when life is going totally sideways. There is nothing more joyful than being loved. That is the best thing that can ever happen to us. And this passage reminds us that we are loved more than we can ever imagine!

GO BIG OR GO HOME

We can see one last thing that increases joy in our lives. It is in verse 10. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” The expression, “Go big or go home,” is often used in sports to mean give it everything you have. Don’t go half way. Pour every ounce of effort, strength, determination and passion you have into it, and if you can’t do that, don’t even bother playing the game. That’s what Solomon tells us to do here. Wherever you are, this day, whatever you are doing, go all in. Give it everything you’ve got. Don’t worry about the future, don’t get distracted by other things. Go 100% after it today.

To have joy in life we need a great passion that is worth giving everything you are and everything you have to accomplish. Mario Andretti is one of the great race car drivers in history. He is the only driver to win the Daytona 500, the Indianapolis 500, and the Formula One World Championship. He was asked in an interview what is most important for a race car driver. He mentioned some of the things that are necessary to excel in that field, but he said the most important thing is burning desire. “If you want something so badly, you have that burning desire, then you aren’t distracted by fear or risk or anything else.”

This is a very helpful part of living in a mad, mad world. Have a goal, a purpose in life that is worth giving everything for. Then throw yourself into it each and every day. Don’t worry about the future. As Jesus said, each day has enough troubles of its own, so wherever you are, whatever you do, pursue your purpose With reckless abandon. Yes, there will be crazy people out there doing crazy things. People will do all manner of mischief and evil. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is you giving your all today to what it is God has given you to do.

Anna sent us a little video she took on Friday evening. Laurie let our granddaughters borrow her ukulele. Toby and the girls were sitting around the fire pit in their back yard. Toby was playing the Uke and singing and Cara and Ella were singing along with him. What I noticed was the exuberance with which they sang. I’ve seen that exuberance often from Ella in particular. She throws herself into whatever she is doing. There are times when she is so full of zeal she will just start running around the house, just running for the pure joy of it. We aren’t going to be like a 5 year old. I don’t have that much energy. But we can live with that exuberance, that passion in what we do. Live focused on today. Rejoice in our God. Focus on the purpose of your life and give this day all you’ve got.