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THIS JIGSAW PUZZLE HAS A LOT OF PIECES

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes instructions for either assembly, use or care of products can be unusual. One clothing item had this instruction for care. “100% cotton. Machine wash warm, inside out with like colors. Only non-chlorine bleach. Tumble dry medium. Do not iron. Do not dry clean. Do not feed after midnight. Made in China.” Uh, what now? Do not feed after midnight? I never feed my clothes after midnight. Who does? Someone clearly is a little confused. Laurie has a skirt that has care instructions that read, “Hand wash cold, do not bleach, iron flat, or give it to your Mom.”

Some of the directions are funny. The directions for a skin care product for men said, “Directions: Men don’t need directions.” One long set of assembly instructions had this step: Side step: Make nachos. Optional, but recommended. But the most confusing set of directions was on a label I saw for some medicine. Here is what it said: “Every night before food once daily to be taken four times a day, three times a day, every three times daily take one, take two, take three. Warning: follow the printed instructions you have been given.”

How are you supposed to decipher what that is supposed to mean? Unfortunately, life also presents us with things that happen that leave our heads spinning. How are we supposed to understand all the things that happen to us in a world dominated by Murphy’s Law? How do we make sense of it and get through it all? I cannot explain everything that happens in our lives. However, there are two keys that will help us sort through life and its challenges in Ecclesiastes 7:1-14. These are two crucial pieces of wisdom that can give us a way to approach life that will help us make sense of it. Here are a couple of important things for us to do.

FACE THE REALITY OF DEATH

The initial verses in Ecclesiastes 7 seem awfully dark. The message sounds hopeless and almost bitter. “The day of death is better than the day of birth.” It’s better to die than to be born? Wow, that’s rough. How bad does life have to be to think it would be better to die than to ever have lived? Verse 2 says, “death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.” Well that’s cheerful. Then in verse 3 Solomon says, “Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is food for the heart.” Excuse me, but in what world is frustration better than laughter? While we were on vacation one evening Laurie and I were preparing to go out to dinner, but it took us repeated tries to leave our hotel room. We were on our way out when I realized I didn’t have my wallet. I got it, then as we were about to go out the door Laurie said, “You have the car key, right?” No, I didn’t. I retrieved the key. Again we headed for the door when Laurie realized she didn’t have a face mask, which was required where we were. She got a mask and we finally made it outside or room. As soon as the door closed Laurie said, “Uh, do you have a key to the room?” No, I didn’t. She didn’t either. We had just locked ourselves out of our hotel room. I had to go to the front desk and get another key. Finally we were all set and we headed out to dinner. We didn’t get far. The parking garage at the hotel had an automatic gate at the exit. You had to hold your room key up next to a sensor to open the gate, which I did. But the gate didn’t open. I tried repeatedly to no avail. Now there were cars behind me waiting. I had to get out of the car and wave at them to back up, so I could back out of their way. It was extremely frustrating and I can assure you that it was not better than laughing. I was not laughing I was stressed and frustrated. I would choose laughing over being frustrated every day of the week and twice on Sunday.

What is all this dour stuff about? Solomon is reminding us that we actually learn and grow from the times when we are frustrated because life is hard, more than we do when everything is fun and easy. Several people told me they were looking forward to hearing stories about what disasters we had in our travels. The Myatts traveling on airplanes during a time when COVID restrictions are still in place. What could go wrong? Here’s the shocking truth. Nothing did. It was some of the smoothest travel we’ve ever had. So there are no big lessons or funny stories.

Nothing is more frustrating than death, because we are so helpless before it. What the Teacher said in verse 2 is absolutely true and it points us to a crucial reality. Death is the destiny of everyone and we should take that to heart while we are alive. In other words, it is crucial that we come to grips with the undeniable, final reality for all of us. We’re going to die. No medical or religious exemptions for this one. This is not a mandate by some government agency. It is an absolute fact of life, and it is a depressing, tragic one. Death looms over all our lives.

While this seems like an exceptionally gloomy perspective, it is, in fact, a source of crucial wisdom. The writer of Ecclesiastes took a good hard look at the realities of life. Death is the most certain of those realities, which means we have to have some way of coming to grips with it. The Teacher didn’t want to leave us in a hopeless, meaningless and futile existence. He wanted to give us insight and wisdom that enable us to live satisfying, full lives even as we navigate the wild rapids of this world. We have seen that in previous sections he interrupts discussion of the confusion of this world with nuggets of wisdom that help us deal with it all. That’s what he does here. He’s telling us we have to have some way of dealing with death in order for us to have a fulfilling life. The point of these verses is that we will never be prepared to be fully alive, we will never have a satisfying life, until we have come to grips with the frustrations of life and especially death. Let’s think about what dealing with the idea of death does for us.

It makes us face the truth that we need hope. While I was studying this passage, one evening Laurie and I watched an episode of a show on TV called *The Resident*. Now that we have a son who is a doctor medical shows have been of some interest to us, even though they are never realistic according to Toby. One of the actresses who played a lead character on the show wanted to leave the show. I applaud her decision. She had a child and she wanted to spend her time with her family. Good for her. But she was one of the two focal characters in the show. She couldn’t just disappear. So the writers decided the character had to die. They chose a car accident as the cause. So they had several episodes that focused on that character’s death and its aftermath. I found the last episode in that group to be depressing. What made it so sad was they portrayed the grief and the desperate desire of those mourning her loss to have some hope. But what they came up with was utterly empty and no comfort at all. Because Hollywood refuses to consider the good news of the Gospel, they have no hope whatsoever. They are left flailing in a sea of grief, grasping at straws. It is profoundly unsatisfying and unhelpful. But what came through loud and clear was that people are desperate for hope, even when they deny that there is no hope.

A few years ago actress Amanda Peet appeared on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. She had a conversation that maybe unnerved Colbert a tad, because it got a little too real. She was talking about a show she was in where she played a character struggling with a mid life crisis. Colbert said, “You’ve got a lovely life. What do you know from the mid life crisis? Is this a stretch for you?” She said adamantly, “No! Forty-four is…quite something.” Colbert said, “You don’t look like a personal crisis to me. What is your crisis?” She said, “I fear death.” Clearly nonplussed, Colbert said, “Okay…well… keep it light. We all die. It’s the late night talk show, keep it light, keep it light. Maybe you’ll go to heaven. You’ll die and go to heaven.” Peet said, “Okay, that’s where I need help. You’re Catholic, right? I’m Jewish.” Colbert said, “What do you believe?” She responded, “I need to know what to believe in.” Colbert said, “Like, what happens when you die?” She said, “Yes. I don’t want to be a bag of dust.” Colbert said, “I don’t really know. I don’t know what happens. I kind of believe, I kind of want the pearly gates and all that.” She said, “This is not inspirational.” He said, “Not helping?” He was trying to be funny, but no, it wasn’t helping.

Laurie recently noticed this suspicious looking spot on my head, and I’m not referring to my face. She thought I needed to have a doctor look at this concerning spot. I’ve had a couple of skin cancers removed. They are a nuisance, but they are not a serious threat. This did not look like that. This looked like the kind that can be serious, the kind people can die from. I didn’t do anything about it for a while. I thought about why I was hesitating. I realized in part it was because I wanted to sort of live in denial. Maybe it will just go away. I was afraid of what it might be. But I also realized that wasn’t working. First, it was dumb, but second, as much as I tried to not think about it, the awareness of that thing was always lurking in the background. I realized as much as I didn’t want to hear bad news, I was never going free of it kind of haunting me, until I dealt with it. So I made an appointment to see my doctor. Good news, he said it was nothing to worry about. But the point here is that as the concern for that spot nagged at me in the background, the specter of death is never going to be far from us until we have some answers for it. We won’t be truly free, and it will drain joy from us.

We need to have some answer for this most fearsome, implacable and inevitable of all foes. Our culture has no answers. It offers brave but empty talk, wishful thinking, superstition, sentimental but hopeless and unhelpful ideas about death. We need something better, something real. That’s where the good news of Jesus Christ comes to our aid. Rigorous investigations of the accounts of Jesus defeating death reveal that the by far most likely historical reality is that Jesus did, in fact, rise from the dead. He promised that those who believed in him would live even though they died. That means we have solid, historical reason to hope that death is not the end for us. As he promised, we will live again after we die.

This doesn’t completely take away our concern with death. It still causes us some unease, for it is still the unknown. But as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:55, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” In verse 57 Paul wrote, “Thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We have hope, reasonable, solid hope!

That’s huge, but it’s not all that facing the truth about death does for us. Death actually puts life in perspective. We are forced by it to see what matters and what doesn’t in life. I have mentioned this before, but this was a powerful impact the death of our son, Joel, had on Laurie and me. It caused us to see that most of what we stress over, much of what we pursue and obsess about in life is insignificant in light of death.

Another thing death does is if we face it is cause us to think about what we want to be. Laurie and I like to do jigsaw puzzles during the winter months when the days are short and the evenings are chilly. It can be a bit daunting when you have a 1000 piece puzzle. Those puzzles always come with a picture of the scene you are trying to put together. In order to see where the pieces fit you need to know what it is supposed to look like when you’re done. The same is true of life. You have to go to the end and ask what you want the picture of your life to look like to know how the pieces should fit.

In verse 2 the Teacher says it is good to go to a house of mourning. Yeah, that’s what I like to do for a good time. Go to a funeral home, or to the home of people who have just lost a loved one. Why would he say this? It’s because a funeral is a good place to begin to get the picture that the jigsaw puzzle of your life should look like. At a funeral typically several people talk about their memories of the departed person. When you listen to that, what do you think? Somewhere in there you will likely think, “I wonder what they’ll say about me at my funeral?” That’s the question we need to ask. What do you want people to say about you at your funeral? That’s the picture that will remind you of how the pieces should fit today.

I always wanted to be a great athlete, but never was. I’ve conducted a funeral where the thing that was most said about the deceased had to do with his athletic prowess. It was pathetic. It was so empty. That’s what his life amounted to? It was pitiful. Don’t we want our life to count for something much more than that? I want people to say that I really did love God and tried to be like Jesus. I want those closest to me to say that more than anything, I loved them with all my heart. I also have reflected on how it helps at funerals when people can recall funny stories about the deceased, and the laughter helped relieve the sadness. I would like people to have funny stories about me, that they remember that I laughed. I would want them to say I brought joy to their lives.

If that’s what I people to remember about me, what does that mean for me today? I need to live emphasizing those things right now. I need to love God, try with all my heart to be like Jesus, to love those close to me with passion, and I need to laugh and do all I can to bring joy to their days. It doesn’t matter how successful I am by people’s standards, how much money I have. I don’t care if people note those things at the end. I need to focus this day on the things I want to have said about me at the end. Thinking like this is not morbid, it is one of the most practical and helpful things we can do.

Finally, coming to grips with the reality of death enables us to live fully in the present today. It focuses our minds on what it is to have this day to live. It is the only one we can count on. Tuesday was our last day of vacation in Hawaii. In the morning we got a call from our hotel. It was a recorded message informing guests that there was a high surf advisory that day. They asked guests to not go in the ocean because the surf was dangerous. I love swimming in the ocean there because the water is warm enough that you don’t get a heart attack from diving into it because it’s so cold. Plus it is so clear. This was our last day. I wanted to make the most of it. I decided that though I wouldn’t be stupid about it, if it was at all possible I was going to swim. I wanted to squeeze that last bit of joy out of it. So I did, with no problem. Remembering that our time here is limited reminds us of what a blessing it is to see the sun shining, to hear the birds singing today. What a blessing it is to be with your spouse, to enjoy your children and grandchildren. It reminds us of how glorious it is to see the stars shining in the night sky, or to just go walk on the beach with the waves crashing on the shore. It is special just to be alive, and it should fill us with gratitude and joy in the presence of God.

KNOW THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN

There is another crucial truth that enables us to fit the pieces together in the jigsaw of our life. We see it in verses 13-14. “Consider what God has done: who can straighten what he has made crooked?” What does that mean? How does God make things crooked? You get a clue as to what he’s talking about from verse 14. When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other.” The bad times are the crooked things we wish could be straightened out.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.” What does it mean for God to make your paths straight? A few years ago I did a wedding up in the redwoods near Santa Cruz. The wedding was on a Saturday afternoon. So Laurie and I had to catch a flight out of San Jose that evening in order to make it home so we could be here for church on Sunday morning. On the way to the wedding location we had taken mostly freeway. But as we were talking to people at the wedding several told us there was a much faster way to get to San Jose. There was a two lane highway through the mountains that cut at least a half hour off the travel time. That was helpful. So we took that route to the airport. What no one told us was that while the trip through the mountains was beautiful, that road was as twisting as a coiled spring. Neither of us is extremely prone to motion sickness, but we’re not immune to it either. This road had both of us feeling much less than our best, and we kept hoping that we would finally get to the end of all that twisting and turning. It was a big relief when we finally got out of the mountains and could see a straight road ahead. Proverbs says that as we trust in God he will straighten out that crooked road ahead. We don’t want our lives to be a winding, twisting torturous drive that makes us sick, and that passage in Proverbs says God will straighten it out. But Proverbs are statements about what is generally true in life. What that doesn’t mean is that there will never be any twists or turns in the roads of our lives. This passage in Ecclesiastes tells us there will be some crooked sections of the road. Not only will there be some crooked sections, God actually puts them there, and you can’t straighten them out no matter how hard you try.

All of us will try to make the road as straight as we can, and we try to avoid those crooked parts. But God is sovereign, and when he determines that for whatever reason we need to drive through 10 miles of bad road, we will not be able to take a detour and miss it. That one statement in verse 14 is profound. God has made the one as well as the other, the hard times as well as the good. Job understood this. In Job 2:10 after Job’s life had utterly blown apart and his poor wife said out of her pain, “Curse God and die,” Job said, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

We say, “Well, duh. Of course we should accept good from God and not trouble. Hey, he claims to love us. If he loves us he’s not going to give us trouble.” Job disagreed totally. He said we should expect to have both good from God and trouble. In Job 1:21 he said, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”

Thomas Boston, the influential 18th century Scottish pastor, theologian and philosopher, said, “There is a certain train or course of events by the providence of God, falling to every one of us during our life…and that is our lot, as being allotted to us by the sovereign God…There is no perfection here, no lot out of heaven without a crook.” He makes it very clear that even the crooked parts of the road are from God. That’s what Solomon tells us. Be happy when times are good, but remember even the crooked part of the road is from God.

That one statement in verse 14 that God has made the bad times, the crooked times, as well as the straight, is hard for us to accept, but is profoundly important. It changes how we think about our circumstances in a hopeful way. It means that these hard things that happen in our lives are not random or accidental, but that are within God’s control. They do, indeed, happen for a reason, and that reason is to bring about our good. Ephesians 1:11 says God, “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” In other words, God even controls the flip of the coin.

Job wrestled with all the crooked things that happened in his life and didn’t see how God could have justly allowed them. But then when he saw the truth about the character and the sovereignty of God he said in Job 42:2, “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” In Isaiah 45:7 the Lord said, “I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster. I, the Lord, do all these things.” The Lord is in all of it, the prosperity and the disaster. The late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, “There is a plan for every life in the mind of God. We must never regard our lives as accidental.”

This passage, along with others, points us to the presence of God and reminds us that he is sovereign. That gives us hope because it tells us there is meaning in all that happens. Even the crooked things that we wish would not happen are driven by a good purpose from God. We struggle with what possible good could come from some of the terrible or painful things that happen. Yet there is good that God brings out of the difficult things in our lives. We need to remember these things.

Sometimes the crooked things happen in our lives to show us some wrong, some sin, in us. Years ago there was a man in the church I served at the time who had been a pastor in another church and had a thriving ministry. He was stunned when one day his boss, the senior pastor of the church, informed him that he was letting him go. It came totally out of the blue. He never had a hint that something like that was coming. Why would he, since everything seemed to be going so well? That launched him into an ordeal that lasted for a couple of years. He was unemployed during a difficult time in the economy, and could not get a job, no matter what he did. It was gut wrenching for him. His family struggled just to survive financially. But at one point in the middle of that ordeal he made quite a statement to me in a conversation. He said that as awful as his struggle was, he knew there was a good purpose in it. He said he had come to realize that he had been quite proud and had been focused on some wrong things in ministry. He said the experience had humbled him and it felt like his eyes were opened. It never would have happened without that painful experience. God used that hard time to work some significant change in his heart. The deepest rooted flaws in us are usually things we hold onto with all our might, and often the only way that God can break our hold on them is through pain.

God may use the hard things of this world to wake us up, to stir up passion for him and to draw our hearts away from the things of this world. It is so easy to become totally consumed with the wins and losses, the hurts and the joys of this world that it completely obscures the kingdom of God in our hearts. Often it takes something hard, something grueling to open our eyes to the Lord. It takes putting us in that place where all we have left is to cry out to the Lord to bring us back to loving him above all else.

Sometimes God will use the hard things of this world to direct our steps in directions we would not otherwise have gone. There was a young man, age 13, who lived in Haiti. Back in 2010 when an earthquake hit there his family’s house collapsed. He and his mother and brother survived, but were trapped in the debris for hours. His legs were pinned and went numb. He was unable to walk for several weeks after the event. After that event his family decided they needed to get him out of Haiti. Through the work of a charitable organization he was sent to live with a family in the United States. Here he was able to play high school basketball, then went on to play one year at the University of Kentucky. Following that year he was drafted by the NBA. His name is Skal Labissiere. He said the earthquake was an awful event, but, “For me, God used that experience to open doors.”

I saw that in my own son’s life. After Toby graduated from college he pursued being a football coach. He loved it, and was good at it, but he eventually had to give up that love in order to make a living. He went through a frustrating period where it seemed nothing was working out. I recall one evening he was at home sharing frustration with us and saying, “It just feels like God has abandoned me. Every door gets slammed shut in my face.” It was a tough time for him, and it was hard on his parents. But through that he came to the idea that what he really wanted was to become a doctor, something that at the time seemed impossible. God used the hard time, a crooked time in his life, to put him on a new path.

God may have us go through difficult times because it is a way he can use us for his glory. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul said that we have the treasure of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in jars of clay, in ordinary people like us. He said he did that to show that this all surpassing power is from God, not from us. How does God display that all surpassing power in us? Awesome miracles, impressive abilities that blow people away? No. In verse 8 he says, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair.” We show the power of God by going through the hard times, the ordeals, and not being crushed or perplexed by them. We endure with grace, peace, joy, love and hope and that shows how awesome God is.

It is possible that God may have us endure trying, confusing, painful ordeals because the very process of us enduring them with the Spirit of Christ brings him glory. In Philippians 2:17 Paul wrote, “Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” He was in prison. He was being treated unfairly. He had been harshly treated on many occasions. But he said he was glad, because God was using him to minister to others. If this is what it took, so be it.

Knowing God is in all these things makes a huge difference. Imagine trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle not only without knowing what the picture is supposed to be, but without even knowing whether there actually is a picture. That’s us without God sovereignly working in our lives. There’s no picture, no purpose, no sense to it all, so we have no way of fitting the pieces together. But because we know that God is sovereign, we know that there is a picture. We won’t always know what the picture is, but as we stay faithful to him we know that there is a picture, and as we saw in 3:11, it will be beautiful. There is hope!

APPLICATION

LET THE END ENABLE YOU TO SEE

We don’t have to deny the reality of the end or run from it. In the resurrection of Christ we have hope, hope that drains death of its most painful sting. So we can look it in the face and let it open our eyes. It opens our eyes to the big picture, the picture of our life. It helps us see what matters so we can better understand where the pieces of our lives fit. It helps us see what doesn’t matter so we don’t waste our lives pursuing or stressing over that which is not important. It helps us see how precious and beautiful each day is, so we can live each day with all the passion and enthusiasm God created us to have.

LET GOD’S REIGN ENABLE YOU TO WILLINGLY ACCEPT

Knowing that God rules means that we can and should squeeze the most possible joy out of every good thing he gives us. In the good times, rejoice. But knowing that God rules also means that even the times of adversity are in his control. Even these things are a gift from him. Why did this thing happen to me? I don’t know. I may never know. But I know it is a piece of the puzzle that God is putting together as my life, and as such it has a big role to play. Maybe God is using it to shape your heart and character. Maybe he is using it to get your eyes off your own comfort onto his kingdom and your love for him. Maybe he is using it to direct your next steps in life and you will find that it was crucial to your life being complete. Maybe he is using it to touch other people’s hearts through you. Whatever the case, you can be at peace, you can accept the hard thing while trusting God, even giving thanks to him, because it is part of his sovereign puzzle that he is putting together in your life.

But I can’t see it. That doesn’t mean God’s purpose isn’t there. While on vacation Laurie and I did some snorkeling. There is a fish in Hawaii that I find interesting. It is a very long, very slender fish that is silver. It swims juts under the surface. What I find interesting is as you are out in the water with your head above the surface you can look down and see none of those fish. The water is clear. You can see the bottom 30 feet down quite well, and there are no fish to be seen. Then with your mask on you duck your head under the water, and suddenly you see lots of these fish. They’re all around you, close enough to touch. Pop your head back up out of the water, and you see no fish. Duck down again and there they are. What I took from that is though you may not see something, that does not necessarily mean it is not there. I couldn’t see those fish, but they were definitely there. We may not see what God is doing in the crooked times in our lives, but that doesn’t mean his purpose is not there. It is there, and it is good, so we can trust in God and his purpose, no matter what happens.