

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: Dr. Kate Bowler is on the faculty of Duke Divinity School. A year ago she had an article in the “Sunday Review” of the *New York Times*. She began:

On a Thursday morning a few months ago, I got a call from my doctor’s assistant telling me that I have Stage 4 cancer. The stomach cramps I was suffering from were not caused by a faulty gallbladder, but by a massive tumor.

I am 35. I did the things you might expect of someone whose world has suddenly become very small. I sank to my knees and cried. I called my husband at our home nearby. I waited until he arrived so we could wrap our arms around each other and say the things that must be said. I have loved you forever. I am so grateful for our life together. Please take care of our son. Then he walked me from my office to the hospital to start what was left of my new life.

But one of my first thoughts was also *Oh, God, this is ironic*. I recently wrote a book called “Blessed.”

Kate Bowler’s area of study is the Prosperity Gospel, which she defines as “*the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith.*” So you can see the irony of her tragic situation. She’s not a proponent of the Prosperity Gospel but she knows it inside out, and she connects it to the broader American take on life. She writes,

This is America, where there are no setbacks, just setups. Tragedies are simply tests of character.

It is the reason a neighbor knocked on our door to tell my husband that everything happens for a reason.

“I’d love to hear it,” my husband said.

“Pardon?” she said, startled.

“I’d love to hear the reason my wife is dying,” he said, in that sweet and sour way he has.

My neighbor wasn’t trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. Because the opposite of #blessed is leaving a husband and a toddler behind, and people can’t quite let themselves say it: “Wow. That’s awful.” There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.

- B. Turn to **Eccl 9**, where we will definitely *not* hear, “**There is a reason for everything.**” The Teacher in this book has said again and again that “*everything is meaningless*”—*just so much smoke—for all of us who live under the sun*. That phrase, “*under the sun*,” occurs six times in this chapter. All that we’re going to read today is from an *under the sun* perspective. Now listen to **vv.1-6, enshrouded in black.**

I. **WHETHER WE’RE GOOD WITH GOD OR NOT, OUR DESTINY IS DEATH (9:1-6)**

- A. You’d think God would show the favor of life to those who seek to please him. After all, **v.1** concludes “*that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands.*” But then **v.2** says that “*All share a common destiny,*” no matter whether they’re good or bad, religious or profane. *Illus.:* The first funeral I ever attended was Adrian Fagerland’s. I was 14. He was 49, the father of four

of kids, and a godly leader of our church. He was crushed in a farm accident. What was the sense in that?!

- B. **V.3**, *“This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all.”* As one translation puts it, *“This is as wrong as anything that happens in this world.”* [TEV]. *Illus.*: I remember another funeral. Dorothy Evans, the wife of our Trinity president, Harry. She just collapsed in a drug store on their way home from church. The funeral was full of Christian hope. As she had wanted, there were trumpets. But when her husband stood to speak what I remember him saying is, *“Death is always an enemy.”* It is always evil. Death is *“as wrong as anything that happens in this world.”*

V.3 continues, *“The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.”* It is difficult to be sure just what the Teacher means. He might be saying, *“In life, everyone’s heart carries misery and madness.”* Or *“The evil that makes sure death gets us all is also in us all, infecting our hearts with a kind of moral madness. That’s life! And then we die.”* Then this cheery observation: **v .4**.

- C. As grim as life is, it beats death. *Illus.*: I spoke with a young friend on Friday who was remembering his atheistic days. He said, *“I believed that we lived and then we died, and pretty soon no one would remember our name or anything about us. It wouldn’t matter at all that we had lived. Our lives are meaningless.”* I said, *“This is a little freaky! Listen to these verses I was just studying: vv.5-6...”*

There’s that phrase again: *“under the sun”*? If all you can see is what is *under the sun*, death is enemy that always wins.

Well, just when we're about ready to go eat dirt, the Teacher as much as says, *Cheer up! Life is worth living.* **Vv.7-10...**

II. HERE "UNDER THE SUN," GO ENJOY GOD'S EVERYDAY GIFTS (9:7-10)

- A. **V.7...** Our food and wine—all the good things we have to eat and drink—are God's gifts. He's already stamped them with his approval. People who live well enjoy them. Not because they're gourmet quality necessarily but because they're simply good gifts.
- B. **V.8...** That means dress for a celebration. When God gives you an opportunity, shed your work clothes and put on something nice. Polish your shaved head or dab on your best perfume and enjoy life's parties.
- C. **V.9...** He doesn't mean to say, "*Since life is meaningless anyway you might as well enjoy your wife!*"! He means life is brief, a passing mist, but if you are blessed with someone you love, enjoy your marriage. God has given you these days so make the most of them.
- D. **V.9b-10...** The Teacher has a way of making you feel like a cog in a machine in one breath and then some kind of artist in the next! Doing a job "with all your might" is the mark of someone who has not given up on their work life.

Illus.: This week, a year after that *New York Times* article, **Kate Bowler** has a new book coming out, a memoir titled, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved.* She's a Christian—a Christian facing death. Last week's *TIME* magazine had a fascinating interview with her. She was asked, "*Why did you decide to keep working as a professor?*" She replied,

If we just keep going, it does make the world a little bigger for us, and it really does show people who you really were. When the world shuts down, then you

realize, these are my plot points. This is my one job, this is the one man I love, this is my one kid. Infinite possibilities can be exciting, but sometimes even more beautiful is doubling down on the life that you have.

- E. Do you think this counsel would work to make life rich and meaningful for people who do *not* reverence God? After all, this advice is not unique to the Bible. In fact, the Gilgamesh Epic, written over a 1000 years before this said virtually the same thing. As did an ancient Egyptian inscription. But it seems to me that, for a thinking person, to enjoy these things without thoughts of God would still eventually lead back to a sense of futility. Food, parties, marriage, work. All good, to be sure, but they just can't satisfy a person's deepest yearnings. *Illus.*: About the time I was graduating from high school the singer, **Peggy Lee**, recorded a haunting hit song. The singer tells of witnessing her family's house on fire when she was a little girl, seeing the circus with its trapeze artist, and falling in love for the first time, only to be left. After each spoken story, she sings,

*Is that all there is, is that all there is
If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all ... there is.*

Then the last verse:

I know what you must be saying to yourselves, "If that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all?" Oh, no, not me. I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment, for I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you, when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath, I'll be saying to myself...

Is that all there is, is that all there is

If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing.

- F. The Teacher's counsel only works well for those who reverence and trust God. These everyday gifts are then wrapped in gratitude and meaning. Since the Teacher has said this same kind of thing several times already I've been trying harder to do this—to enjoy God's everyday gifts. It isn't so easy for me because I've always had trouble living in the moment. I'm typically already thinking—maybe fretting—about the next thing. For quite awhile now I've been praying that God would give me a glad heart and slowly learning to enjoy life's everyday pleasures has been a spiritual discipline for me. They have made me more grateful to God. They've made me a better Christian. And it is our grateful of enjoyment of life's ordinary gifts that beckons to those around us who find so little satisfaction with what they have.

Well, now the Teacher drops another heavy in **vv.11-12...**

III. LIFE IS INEVITABLY UNCERTAIN (9:11-12)

- A. Again, what he describes is what is true *“under the sun.”*
- B. **V.11** says that in any sphere of life what seems a sure thing can be undone by “time and chance.” That'll be proved at some point during the upcoming Olympics when a champ falls to the underdog. Somewhere tonight someone who was once voted *Most Likely to Succeed* will go hungry.
- C. **V.12** says that *“no one knows when their hour will come”* because life is booby-trapped.
- D. So if the tortoise might win the race instead of the hare, if a wimp somehow whips the champion, and the scholar with the promising career ends up panhandling on a street corner, what's the point of trying? If life is booby-trapped

by evil times, what's the point of living? We fast-forward to the conclusion of Ecclesiastes:

*Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.*

It is the fear of the LORD evidenced in obedience to his commands that gives us the wisdom to bear life's uncertainties and booby-traps .

Derek Kidner, a wise commentator, writes, *“This book pushes us toward a synthesis which lies mostly beyond its own pages.”* In other words, Ecclesiastes raises the questions which require us to read further in the Scriptures to put the pieces together—especially in the New Testament. That's what Ecclesiastes did for Dan North in the story of his life which he told us last week.

Do you recall how the gospel of Mark ends? Mark tells us about Jesus' resurrection and how the women went to the grave where they are given the good news by angels. But do you remember the last verse? *“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”* What kind of ending is that?! Mark was doing something very similar to the Teacher in Ecclesiastes—pushing us toward answers without giving them to us explicitly.

In both cases, we can't help but think, *“Wait a minute?! That's not the way it is!”*

There is a curious story that wraps up this section. It seems like it doesn't really fit; an afterthought or something. **Vv.13-18...**

IV. A PARABLE: “WISDOM IS BETTER THAN STRENGTH” (9:13-18)

A. This little story resembles a couple OT stories but it seems to have a kind of “once upon a time” quality to it. *“There*

was once a small city...” Why a powerful king would want such a small outpost, or why he’d go to such trouble to take it, isn’t explained. What if this isn’t about a real situation. In fact, what if this is a parable (as several scholars suggest)?

- B. One, **H. C. Leupold**, suggests it is a parable where tiny Israel, faced with mighty enemies, is challenged to be like the “poor but wise man” who by wisdom defeats the “powerful king.” We know that wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD and there are several times when God teaches Israel that if they will simply trust him, despite the overwhelming odds against them, God will deliver them. And he did! He still does, though not always as we wish.
- C. As I thought about this story being at the end of this chapter it struck me that in the passage above, death is like that “powerful king” who surrounds us and builds siege works against us. We face the inevitable destiny of death. But those who are wise—who trust in the living God—find that God has defeated death and that Jesus Christ holds the keys of the death and hell. So that now we can say, *“For me to live is Christ, and to die... is gain!”*

CONCLUSION

If our only perspective on life is what we can see and surmise *“under the sun,”* death comes out the winner, and the best we can do in this life is enjoy our meals, celebrate now and then, enjoy our marriages, and put ourselves into our work. That’s good, but that’s all there is. Our good deeds and religion won’t get us one more day against the timetable of death. **Under the sun.**

My mom used to sing a song around the house. It’s one of those old songs that somehow stuck in my brain.

I’m going higher, much higher someday

*I'm going higher someday.
Over the clouds and beyond the blue sky
Going where none ever sicken or die.
Loved ones we'll meet in that sweet bye and bye.
I'm going higher someday."*

That's life above the sun.

TIME asked Kate Bowler, "*Did Christianity fail you?*" She replied,

Sometimes it felt like that, in part because of the stuff people said using the Christian faith to be incredibly trite. Christianity also saved the day. You really want a brave faith, one that says, in the midst of the crushing brokenness, there is the something else there, the undeniable, overwhelming love of God.