

Smelling Salts

Ecclesiastes Part 9

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14 1-19-2014

Summary: The deepest joy comes from living in reality, not the stupor of trivia. So God gives us smelling salts to wake us up: the fact that we are creatures, not God, death, grief, the unreliability of wisdom, and the unreliability of intension and beginnings. Just trust God with the twists and turns of life, accepting both happy and hard days from Him.

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Ecclesiastes 6:10 Whatever exists was given its name long ago, and it is known what man is. But he is not able to contend with the One stronger than he. 11 For when there are many words, they increase futility. What is the advantage for man? 12 For who knows what is good for man in life, in the few days of his futile life that he spends like a shadow? Who can tell man what will happen after him under the sun?

7:1 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of one's death than the day of one's birth. 2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, since that is the end of all mankind, and the living should take it to heart. 3 Grief is better than laughter, for when a face is sad, a heart may be glad. 4 The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in a house of pleasure. 5 It is better to listen to rebuke from a wise person than to listen to the song of fools, 6 for like the crackling of burning thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This too is futile. 7 Surely, the practice of extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe destroys the mind. 8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning; a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit. 9 Don't let your spirit rush to be angry, for anger abides in the heart of fools. 10 Don't say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this. 11 Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, 12 because wisdom is protection as money is protection, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner. 13 Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what He has made crooked? 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man cannot discover anything that will come after him. 15 In my futile life I have seen everything: there is a righteous man who perishes in spite of his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who lives long in spite of his evil. 16 Don't be excessively righteous, and don't

be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Don't be excessively wicked, and don't be foolish. Why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you grasp the one and do not let the other slip from your hand. For the one who fears God will end up with both of them. 19 Wisdom makes the wise man stronger than ten rulers of a city. 20 There is certainly no righteous man on the earth who does good and never sins. 21 Don't pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, 22 for you know that many times you yourself have cursed others. 23 I have tested all this by wisdom. I resolved, "I will be wise," but it was beyond me. 24 What exists is beyond reach and very deep. Who can discover it? 25 I turned my thoughts to know, explore, and seek wisdom and an explanation for things, and to know that wickedness is stupidity and folly is madness. 26 And I find more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, her heart a net, and her hands chains. The one who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner will be captured by her. 27 "Look," says the Teacher, "I have discovered this by adding one thing to another to find out the explanation, 28 which my soul continually searches for but does not find: among a thousand people I have found one true man, but among all these I have not found a true woman. 29 Only see this: I have discovered that God made people upright, but they pursued many schemes."

Introduction: The Fog of Trivia

This world has a way of lulling all of us into a state of living in a kind of fantasy land. It is a fantasy land where the most important things in life are mostly forgotten, and the trivia of life dominates. Our most important relationships, our standing before Almighty God, the condition of our souls – matters of life and death – all that kind of fades to the background of our priorities, and some of it even begins to detach itself from reality, so that officially we believe it's true, but at the practical level those things almost start to seem like fairy tales.

And in their place rushes in the trivia of life. Your Bible starts to gather dust while your TV remote gets worn out from use. Anything goes wrong with your body and you immediately go to the doctor, but your soul shows symptoms of deadly disease and you just put it out of your mind. Your mind is jammed full of knowledge about sports or fashion or cars or diets – all kinds of things that won't exist 100 years from now, but you are content to be clueless about realities that will affect your living conditions for all eternity. And it's not that we want to live empty, shallow, trivial lives. There is just something about this life and this world that lulls us into a kind of spiritual stupor.

The main purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes is to teach us how to enjoy life. And one of the keys to enjoying life is finding a way to snap out of that stupor. The stupor of trivia seems really fun, but it makes you a shallow person, and shallow people are only capable of shallow happiness. And that kind of happiness actually makes for a mostly unhappy life because it is destroyed by every little hardship that comes along. Solomon is not satisfied with that. He wants us to have a deep and profound joy that is so deep that it is unfazed by the hardships of life. But to get us there he first has to teach us to appreciate the things in life that God has provided that wake us up from our trivia stupor.

When someone passes out and people are trying to get him to come to, they put smelling salts under his nose. Smelling salts are a shock to the system and they make you wake up and become alert. That is exactly what the Preacher is going to do for us in this section. He is going to give us some spiritual smelling salts to wake us up to reality, because it is only when we are alert to reality that we can have the deepest kind of enjoyment of life.

Smelling Salt #1 – You Are Not God

In our ongoing verse-by-verse study through Ecclesiastes, this section we hit today begins and ends with the same topic – the sovereign control of God. Lesson #1 in enjoying life – don't try to fight against providence.

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We Lack the Power

Ecclesiastes 6:10 Whatever exists was given its name long ago, and it is known what man is. But he is not able to contend with the One stronger than he.

To give something a name in this context means to determine what it is and what its role will be. So the most fundamental principle we need to understand about our role is that it is determined by God, and it can't be changed (except by God Himself).

We Lack the Knowledge

One of the most important keys to enjoying life is to learn – don't try to fight against providence. You'll lose. It is ridiculous to try to resist God's plan for two reasons – one, because we lack the power, and two, because we lack knowledge.

11 For when there are many words, they increase futility. What is the advantage for man?

Romans 9:20 who are you, a mere man, to talk back to God?

Do we really think there will ever be a time when we win a debate with God? Do you think there's a chance that one day God might say, "Oh, now that you put it that way, now I can see it. Now I can see now that making Jesus the only way to salvation was a big mistake."? "That painful ordeal I allowed to happen to you as a child – My bad. I should have known better."? No. If we think God is doing the wrong thing, all our brilliant arguments are nothing but wind. And the more we talk, the bigger the waste of everyone's time, because we lack knowledge of the future.

12 For who knows what is good for man in life, in the few days of his futile life that he spends like a shadow? Who can tell man what will happen after him under the sun?

When God says, "Here, this is what is best for you in the long run," and we argue with that – "No, I think that would be best" – what could be more absurd? How could I possibly think I know better than God what would be best for me when He knows everything and I don't even know what will take place ten seconds into the future, much less what the ramifications will be 50 or 100 years out?

Enjoy Your Little Space

So what is he saying here? To borrow a line from the movies, "A man's got to know his limitations." Life is great when we play the role of man, and God plays the role of God. But when we step out of our role, and try to usurp God's role, that is when things get really messed up for everyone, including us. If you have a young child in your house, that child will be happiest if he plays the role of a child. He will be cared for, fed, taught, protected, taken care of, and things will be great for him. But the moment he decides he wants to play the role of dad, and be in control of the household, from that moment on he is miserable and everyone else in the house is miserable. And it is the same way when we try to promote ourselves to God's role instead of being content to just play the role of a created, dependent human being.

The greatest joy in life is found in the space God has allotted to you. God has assigned to each one of us a certain space, and that space is defined by those things over which God has given you control. And that little space is going to always be the sweet spot of joy for you that will produce the maximum enjoyment of life.

Most people are worried that they are occupying too small a space. They want more. They want to enlarge their boundaries, get more resources, climb the ladder, have more friends, more power, more

influence, more knowledge, more everything. And if God grants you more, that's fine. But what so many people fail to realize is that more is not always better.

One of the biggest detriments to enjoying life is getting into a realm that is larger than what God has allotted to us. It kills joy because it is overwhelming. It places you in a position of trying to be in control of things that God has not placed in your control, and that is frustrating. Think of a little kid who says, "Dad, I want to drive." So the dad puts him on his lap and lets him steer. My kids loved that. But I think the girls loved it more than Josiah did, because they were content to just steer. They couldn't reach the pedals or the shifter, so the only thing I gave them control of was the steering wheel. And they were fine with that. But Josiah wanted to control the speed and acceleration and he wanted to shift and everything else. So for him it was a little frustrating.

It is frustrating to try to be in control of things you don't have control of. And that is what so many of us do in life. God has given us each control over certain things. But we are not content with that and we try to grab control of things that God has not granted us power over. And life becomes an exercise in futility. Our feet are dangling off the seat two feet away from the gas pedal, but we want control over the speed. Our hands only reach halfway to the stereo but we want control over the station. And we miss out on all the fun of just steering the car because we have our sights on something else.

Ecclesiastes is a book about how to enjoy life, and so one of the big lessons the Preacher needs to teach us is not to derail enjoyment of life by trying to play a bigger role than the role we have been given. So the first smelling salt that will help wake us up from the stupor of trivia is to discover that we are not God. Ninety-nine percent of life is totally outside of our control. God is in charge of that, and our only concern is this little space God has allotted to us. Just enjoy that space. And enjoy not being God.

Enjoy Not Being God

I know in my head that I am not God, but something deep down inside me is not always getting the message. Something inside me seems to think I am supremely important, and that I deserve glory and honor, and that people are my servants, and that I should never have to deal with inconvenience. And as long as that thing inside me thinks that, I am not going to have the joy I should have. Nothing will destroy your joy like trying to be God. God's job is to be in control of everything, and when you try that, it is an incredibly aggravating exercise because things and people don't cooperate. And you don't have the omnipotent power that is required to be in control even when people and things don't cooperate. And so your life becomes a whole lot of frustration.

Smelling Salt #2 – Death

Now, the way a smelling salt works is by shocking the system. And that is what he does starting in chapter 7.

Depth vs. The Superficial

7:1 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of one's death than the day of one's birth.

That is smelling salt #2. In what way is a good name better than perfume? It is valuable at a much deeper level, right? Perfume can make you smell a little better for a brief time – less than a day. A good name can bring you benefits for a lifetime, and then bring your children benefits after you are gone. A good name can help you in just about every aspect of life, because it affects the way people think about you. A good name reflects your character. Perfume doesn't – it is completely superficial. So the first half of this verse compares two valuable things: one that has deep, enduring, important value and the other that has fleeting, shallow, superficial value. And I think his point is to say that the second half of the verse is drawing the same kind of comparison. Your birth day was good in a superficial way; your death day is good in a much more profound way. We love the day of our birth. We expect everyone around us to

celebrate the anniversary of the day of our birth. But the day of your death is an even better thing to spend your time thinking about because it will keep you from getting caught up in the natural insanity that we all tend to fall into where temporal, earthly things seem important and spiritual, eternal things don't.

2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, since that is the end of all mankind, and the living should take it to heart.

You will learn more about life at one funeral than at a dozen birthday parties. At a funeral, the dream world of trivia can suddenly be seen for the nothingness that it is. And for a brief time all those worthless things that normally seem so important to you lose their importance. And the things that seemed ethereal and unreal— things that have to do with life and death and God and conscience and Judgment Day and faith and sin and forgiveness— suddenly all that goes from being a sketchy cartoon to vivid, full-color reality.

If you went to the doctor tomorrow and he said you have six weeks to live, what do you think would be going through your mind? Trivia? The battery life of your cell phone? No. Death is the smelling salt that wakes us up to remember, “Oh yeah, my good name and reputation mean more than my hairstyle. And my family relationships mean more than my reputation. And my standing with God matters more than my family relationships.” It all comes into focus. And we need that focus in order to live the right way.

But you don't have to get the six weeks to live diagnosis to get that. All you have to do is go to a funeral, look at the casket, and remind yourself – “I am going to be in one of those.” And it is really not all that far off. The statistics say that three of us in this church will die this year. So it could be very soon. But even if nothing happens to cause an early death, very few make it much past 80.

Psalm 90:10 Our lives last seventy years or, if we are strong, eighty years, yet the span is but trouble and sorrow.

You will probably live to about 70 – maybe 80, but if you make 80 those last 10 can be pretty rough. That was in Psalm 90. Life expectancy in the US right now is 78.6 years, so things haven't changed. That is really not much time.

“How is that supposed to increase my joy?”

Grief Is Good

3 Grief is better than laughter, for when a face is sad, a heart may be glad.

Lit. In sadness of face is gladness of heart.

The point is that it is *by means of* a sad face that you arrive at a glad heart. In order to get to a really glad heart you have to pass through a time of sadness. When painful things happen, we grieve and mourn. We have a sad face. And then the Lord carries you through that time, and you come out the other side with profound experiences of His presence that you never could have experienced any other way, and your joy is far greater than ever before. But you cannot get that deeper joy until you go through that sorrow. But fools won't go through it. They hold it off. They won't weep. They just want to laugh. Is laughing bad? No, there is a time for laughing. But there is also a time for weeping. Fools want to laugh at everything. They want to turn everything into a joke – make everything light hearted. When calamity comes, they won't face it. They won't pass through the sorrow. They hold it off with a second glass of wine, or a pint of Hagen Daz, or a movie or work or recreation. In the Bible you see wise people eating and drinking during times of celebration. But what about times of sorrow? Very often they tend to fast. But fools eat and drink and dance their way through times of sorrow. And the result is they never do pass through the grief, which means they never get to the other side where far deeper joy is available. They don't understand that a sad face is sometimes really good for the heart.

4 The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in a house of pleasure. 5 It is better to listen to rebuke from a wise person than to listen to the song of fools, 6 for like the crackling of burning thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This too is futile.

He just gives us a whole series of proverbs that are all making the same point. The house of pleasure, the song of fools, the cackling laughter and light-hearted chuckling of the world – that will carry you so far from reality that the happiness of your life will be no more real than the laugh track of a sitcom. Have you ever heard a sitcom that is playing in the next room? You can't hear the dialogue – you are far enough away that all you can hear is the laugh track? Every few seconds there is this outburst of chucking over and over. When that happens I just think, "Man, I don't want to live my life in a laugh track." I don't want my happiness to be that shallow and superficial and lame. And that is the Preacher's point. He wants to break us out of the laugh track of the sitcom of this world by thinking about big, serious things – like death, or the rebuke of a wise man.

Correction is Treasure

When someone corrects you, it is tempting to ignore it, because it really does spoil the party of shallow happiness. This is another example where grief must be embraced in order to get to joy. Any rebuke is hard to take, but especially rebuke from someone you really respect. And to preserve our shallow happiness, we respond in a number of different ways. We might just ignore it. Or we might get defensive – start thinking through all the reasons why our failure was reasonable and understandable. Or we might go on the attack. Start picking apart all the things wrong in that person's life.

"Who is he to rebuke me? He's not exactly firing on all cylinders in his own life."

But if we resist all that and just take to heart what the person says, yes, it will spoil our shallow, temporal happiness. It will be a sad, hard, painful day. But it will be a smelling salt that can wake us up to reality so we can deal with the problem and become more pleasing to God so we can have deep and profound joy.

Psalm 141:5 Let a righteous man strike me--it is a kindness; let him rebuke me--it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.

Smelling Salt #3 - Wisdom Is Fragile

So the first smelling salt to wake us up to reality so we can enjoy life – the news flash that we are not God. The second wakeup call – death and grief. Now a third one – look at v.7.

7 Surely, the practice of extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe destroys the mind.

Extortion involves using sinful means to get money. Bribing is when you give money to accomplish sinful things. And both of them are examples of how money can corrupt wisdom. The desire for earthly treasures can tamper with the brain. You can have a mind that is just running like a top – the head of your class, smartest person around, and a sinful desire can come along and make that brilliant brain of yours malfunction in a hundred ways. It is amazing how a desire can make even the most intelligent person think like a moron. There are people who normally have incredible ability to accurately interpret Scripture, but then they come to some area where they want the answer to be a certain thing, and suddenly their skills of interpreting are worse than someone who has been a Christian for only one day.

You would think wisdom would be something you could count on. But just like everything else, wisdom can be a fleeting thing. You can have it one minute and lose it the next. You can have a judge who is brilliant at figuring out who is innocent and who is guilty. He has one of the great legal minds of all time. But then someone offers him a huge bribe. Now, suddenly, he is rendering a verdict that a foolish judge would render. You can have all kinds of wisdom in one area, but if someone hits your soft spot – some greedy desire you have, that can change the way your brain interprets data and you become a fool.

Wisdom is something that has a lot of value, but it is unstable. No one knew that better than Solomon. The wisest man on the planet saw his wisdom slip through his fingers on multiple occasions when he saw something he really wanted.

Smelling Salt #4 – Good Beginnings Are Not Reliable

The Proof Is in the Perseverance

8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning; a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit.

Why is the end of a matter better than the beginning? Because the purpose of beginning something is to get to the end. Starting is great, but finishing is better. Are weddings impressive? Is it impressive when two people make a vow to stay together for life? Not as impressive as my mom and dad, who made those vows in 1958, and now, 55 years later they are still just as married as ever. The end of a matter is better than the beginning because reality is better than intention. Finishing is better than starting.

Fools and wise people start the same. They have the same intentions and same plans and you cannot tell the difference between the two until hardship comes. The fool is the one who says, “Oops, this got hard – I quit.” The wise person perseveres and finishes.

1 Kings 20:11 One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.

First fight the battle, then talk to me about how tough you are.

So what is it that keeps fools from finishing? Very often it is impatience. Impatient people give up because they are so easily upset. They begin things left and right, but rarely do they see anything through to the end because they cannot deal with upsets.

Patience Instead of Pride

Therefore, it is better to be patient than ... *proud*? Isn't that interesting? You would think he would say, “It's better to be patient than impatient. But instead, he sets pride as the opposite of patience. Solomon is so filled with these helpful little insights. You would not naturally assume that if you have a problem with impatience, the root cause is pride. But it is helpful to know that. If you find yourself having a short fuse, you are easily irritated or annoyed; you get frustrated a lot, you have a hard time giving people second and third and fourth chances – all of that is a symptom of pride in the heart. It reveals a heart of self-importance.

“I shouldn't have to deal with irritations, because I'm a VIP.”

And what causes pride? Pride comes when I get so immersed in the trivia of life that I lose sight of my place in this world. I forget that I am a puny little created being, not the majestic Creator. When I lose the big picture and get caught up in the trivia of life, and sink into the stupor of the fantasy world of the temporal, guess who the god of that little world ends up being? Me! I am the most important figure in that world, and so I start to develop a sense of self-importance. How dare all these little peons around me create inconveniences for me! Don't they realize how important my life is?

So when pride takes root in the heart, you are going to have an anger problem. Last week we found that one major cause of anger is greedy desire in your heart. You think you need something in order to be happy, someone prevents you from having that thing, and you get mad. That is one major cause of anger. Another major cause is pride and self-importance. And that is a foolish way to live.

The Folly of Prideful Anger

9 Don't let your spirit rush to be angry, for anger abides in the heart of fools.

If you are an angry person, you are a fool. There is no wisdom in letting offenses and irritations and inconsiderations and insults get you upset. Think about it. When you are angry do you tend to do smart things that really benefit everyone, or dumb things that you end up regretting?

Fools are hotheads because they have such a short term view of everything. All emotion is the result of your assessment of a situation weighed against the values in your heart. And fools are way too quick in their assessments of situations. I heard a guy recently tell the story of one time when he was driving with his two year old daughter, and he had to hit the brakes and from the back seat he hears his little girl say, "Idiot!" The guy was such a hot head on the road that he had inadvertently trained his two year old to think that any time you hit the brakes you shout "idiot." If someone cuts you off, and you make a snap decision that the person is an idiot. Is that something you know for sure? Isn't it possible that person is just as good a driver as you, and they inadvertently cut people off less often than you do? Isn't it possible that something happened to his car right then and he can't accelerate? Or he just got news that his wife is leaving him and he is so distraught he can't concentrate on driving? There are countless possible explanations for what just happened other than him being an idiot or even a poor driver.

And beyond all that – one of the marks of wisdom is that you do not make any assessment or decision sooner than it has to be made. The longer you wait to draw a final conclusion the better because it gives maximum time to gather data. Fools make assessments sooner than it is necessary to make them. So what is the deadline on passing judgment on the driver in front of you? Does that have to be done right now? No, it doesn't have to be done at all. So why give your attention to it? Wise people take a long-term view in assessing things; fools make snap assessments. And going through life making snap assessments will destroy your ability to enjoy life. If you want maximum joy, slow down in your assessments of situations. Your spouse just gave you a look, or speaks in a certain tone of voice, and one second later you are having some kind of emotional reaction – slow down. You have assessed the situation too quickly and rashly. If you're experiencing an emotional response that means you have already assessed the situation – slow down! You are focusing on beginnings instead of endings. Fools do that, and it ruins their ability to enjoy life.

Don't Prefer The Past

People like that will very often live in the past. Those are the people who are always complaining about how things are so bad now compared to the good ol' days. That is folly.

10 Don't say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this.

Grumbling about how the past was so much better is foolish for several reasons. That is foolish for several reasons. First of all, it is usually not even true. When you think the good old days were better than these days it is because of selective memory. You are thinking of certain things that were better, but you are forgetting about other things that were worse. The good ol' days were in Genesis 1-2. Then came sin and the fall and ever since then it is just one form of trouble after another.

Second, even if those days you are thinking of were better, what value is there in grumbling about it? All that does is make life now more miserable.

And most importantly, when you grumble about the way history is going, you pass judgment on God's providence. What are you saying? Did God used to be better at providence? Did God used to be better at running the world? Is He in a slump now in our day?

If God did wonderful things in the past, the proper response is not to grumble about the fact that they are long gone. What is the proper response to God's past goodness? Gratitude! One of the biggest reasons for depression and joylessness is the failure to receive joy from God's past goodness through gratitude.

Use Wisdom

So we trust in God's providence. But does that mean we just sit back and let it happen and do nothing? No. We still need to use wisdom.

11 Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, 12 because wisdom is protection as money is protection, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves (lit. shades) the life of its owner.

Money is helpful. If you need something, having enough money to get it helps. That's obvious – of course money helps. But wisdom is just as helpful. Just as money can protect you from a lot of things, so can wisdom. Most people would nod in agreement, but not very many people live like they really believe that. You watch the effort people put forth to get money and compare it to their efforts to get wisdom and there is usually no comparison.

Conclusion: Take What God Gives

By now we should be fully awake. We have had all these smelling salts put under our nose and now we have snapped out of our stupor and we are alert to the fact that God is God and we are not. Now what? Now – trust Him.

Submit to Providence

13 Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what He has made crooked?

We are right back where we started – you can't fight providence. Wisdom is powerful, but it has its limits. No amount of wisdom will ever unlock the secrets God has kept hidden, nor will it enable us to shape life according to our desires or control our existence or make our future predictable. If God has made something crooked, not even all the combined wisdom and power in the whole, wide world can straighten it out.

If you fight against God's plan, you will lose. But if you submit to it, you can have joy. What do you do with the unexpected hiccups and hardships and twists and turns in your life? Why do strange, unexpected, twisted things happen in your life? Because God made life crooked. When mankind rebelled against God, God cursed this world and that curse made life crooked. And only a fool thinks he can straighten what God has bent. When you are driving down a canyon coming out of the mountains and you have all the curves in the road, only a fool pulls over and gets out of his car and says, "This should be straight! Why, oh why, is this not straight like the roads in Kansas?" and then gets back in his car and tries to drive in a straight line. Life is not going to straighten out just because you complain about the curves. If your life is crooked, you will be a lot happier if you just learn to take a left.

God calls us to enjoy life, but that cannot be done when you are out of sync with God's purposes. Why? Because the boundaries of God's sovereign plan are like a brick wall. And running up against a brick wall is hard on the face. Life is so much more enjoyable if you just turn where the brick wall turns. And learn to see all those twists and turns as coming from God.

It's All from God

14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man cannot discover anything that will come after him.

The most childish doctrine there is, I think, is the idea that pleasant things come from God and painful things come from the devil. I call that two-second theology. People who never really spend more than about two seconds thinking through doctrine think that way. Happy things come from God (or Santa Claus or whatever you want to call him), and hard, crooked, painful things come from some other source – or no source at all. It has to be that way because I have thought about it for two seconds and I cannot think of any reason why God would send hard things. All too often people want to believe God is in control when pleasant things happen, but not when hard things happen.

But if you think about it for more than two seconds, what are the implications? You end up with a situation where God is in control of almost nothing. If human decision making is involved, then God is out of it. And if hardship or difficulty is involved, God is out of it. What does that leave? You have just created a world where God is involved in almost nothing, which means almost everything that happens to you is meaningless. Is that biblical? When you read the Psalms, do you see a God who is uninvolved with the hardships of life, or who is no longer in control when evil people do evil things? When the psalmists cry out to God in those times does God say, "Sorry, not My department. That's out of My hands"? No – if there is ever a time when I need to know that God is in control it is in those times! And that is why Scripture reminds us so many times that both the happy days and the hard days are from Him.

Job 2:10 ... "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

Did the trouble in Job's life involve sinful decisions by sinful people? Yes. They came and stole all his possessions.

"But didn't all that come from Satan?"

Yes, but it also came from God.

Job 42:11 ... They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him

1 Samuel 2:6 "The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.

Amos 3:6 When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?

Genesis 50:20 You meant it for evil; God meant it for good.

Acts 4:28 [The people who murdered Jesus] did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Lamentations 3:38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

It is like God is saying, "How many times do I have to tell you? It all comes from My hand!" Is God the author of evil? No! Not in any way. But somehow all hardship still comes from His hand.

If you know us very well you know that my family has received a double portion of the curse of Genesis 3 when it comes to vehicles. It is no surprise at all for us when we lose both an engine and a transmission in the same vehicle on the same vacation. That's just how it is for us. Last Sunday Tracy's heater had stopped working in her car, and so I bundled up and drove it in and dropped it off with the mechanic on the way to church. Meanwhile Chris and Faith had to tow theirs in to that same mechanic the same day. He had to drive his work truck to church because he had no working vehicle. And while I was talking to the mechanic my phone rang. It was Josiah. He said, "Dad, I was driving down I-25 and I heard this horrible grinding sound in my car and then this huge "bang!" and I looked in my rear view and there were bolts and metal parts bouncing all over the highway." He coasted to a stop and there was smoke coming from under the hood and the whole car was completely dead. Between our two households we had six cars down last Sunday. So just before prayer group Josiah put an ad on Craigslist that said, "Broken down '89 Toyota Tercel for sale. The engine blew up and it's sitting on I-25 at highway 7. \$300. And bring a tow truck." By the end of second service he had it sold, and on Tuesday he bought a new vehicle. He has wanted a pickup for a long time, and he had some money saved up, so he was able to get a really cool, lifted, 4X4 extended cab pickup with a locking toolbox – exactly what he wanted. Fun day for Josiah on Tuesday. Not so fun last Sunday. And that is how life is around the Ferguson home. Most days we are either buying a vehicle or calling a tow truck. You get a great deal on a new vehicle – that's fun. That vehicle explodes while you're driving to church – not as fun. Get a new minivan with all kinds of really cool features – fun day. Stranded in the desert in 100 degree heat on vacation when it breaks down

over 100 miles from the nearest garage – hard day. And the Preacher wants us to understand – both come from God. Both happy days and hard days come from His hand.

And if you don't understand that, you can forget about enjoying life because there are so many hard days in life, if those are not from God – if those are just random, meaningless, purposeless bad luck that have no value for you – then life is a bummer. And what you will do then is either just try to distract yourself from the hard days with shallow pleasures, or you try to gain control of life so that you can see to it that you do not have any more hard days. And both of those lead to a futile life.

When your life is spinning out of control, remember – it is only spinning out of your control. Use wisdom, take care of what God has called you to take care of, and enjoy not being God.

Benediction: Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Name one or two circumstances in your life that makes you glad that you are not God (glad that it's not your responsibility)
- 2) In what areas of life are you most prone toward prideful impatience?