



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 8:14 – 9:12

Lesson 11 of 16

2007-08

"*Hard Realities and Time And Chance To Us ALL*"

TRANSCRIPT

Our text tonight is in Ecclesiastes 8:14–9:12. This is a Bible Study and we're treating it that way, and so I will give you, occasionally, some text that I want to refer to that is outside of the context of our study that I think will be helpful. I want to give you three tonight. We will look at the idiom; "...whatever your hand finds to do, do it." There are two places that this idiom occurs: Judges 9:33 and 1 Samuel 10:7. Please mark them for I think they will be helpful to our study. Also mark Romans 1; a passage that you're very familiar with from the Apostle Paul.

The structure of our lesson falls out into three parts. The first, Chapter 8:14–17: I call '*limited knowledge*'. And our second, Chapter 9:1–10: '*The hard realities*', dealing with the subject of death. And then our third section, Chapter 9:11-12: The subject of '*time and chance*'.

Well, I am going to read the passage tonight, so if you will follow along with me, we will begin in the eighth chapter beginning in verse 14, and I'm reading from the NIV.

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: The righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his toil all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—..." (*Note: the*

word 'not' has been added as an interpretive feature. Later I will deal with this as an idiom. But just as a point of reference at this point, the word 'not' is an interpretive feature. Instead, "—his eyes seeing sleep day or night" is a much clearer understanding of the text than the interpretative feature.) "...then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

Ecclesiastes 8: 14-17

(Chapter 9) So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. All share a common destiny – the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good man,
so with the sinner;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.

This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.
Their love, their hate,
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.

Go, eat your food in gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to

do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you're going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle is not to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

May God add His blessing to His Word as we study it together tonight. Let's bow for a word of prayer.

Father, we're very grateful to be together at Believers Chapel. And we are very grateful for this season of the year that reminds us of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ who gave us life and gave it to us in such abundant fashion that we can scarcely imagine even for one moment being apart from Him in daily fellowship and in life.

Father, bless the Word as it goes forth tonight. Bless my stammering lips; my limited understanding. Bring this Word alive to the hearts and minds of Your people who love You, who desire to be knowledgeable of the things that involve You, so that they may live their lives straightforward and upright unto You. Grant us that. And we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Life ‘under the sun’, as we have said, is the subject of our study, and it comes through the observations of our ‘man with the powerful mind’. To date, his insights have been very pithy and deep; but very discouraging. Life ‘under the sun’ is just so limited. We just don't have the big picture; and never will.

So, considering our limits we will note our first verse as we begin tonight's study. "There is something else meaningless that occurs on the earth; righteous men who get what the wicked deserve and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too is meaningless." (8:14). Now, in our last lesson we discussed that it is a fact that God's plan, (His will), is for wickedness to triumph and to have its day for a season. This verse is more of an ‘in-your-face’ of the same. Notice it opens with the particle translated "*There is*" in the NIV. So, his observation that follows will be the content of what he tells us is ‘*meaningless*’. And here it is: ‘In a world governed by a sovereign and righteous God, the upright do not get rewarded. Even worse, they often get punished. And the wicked do not get punished, but actually rewarded’.

Also observe this reality: It "... takes place on the earth." That is another way of saying ‘under the sun’. So, let's remember that in this life the world is really a screwed-up place. The post fall garden is no longer friendly: Thorns, thistles, hostilities of every sort now have their rule and reign over us.

That is why people look at you in your Christian life and consider you really *weird*: A person with convictions! How could we follow you since no one really understands you; and no one ever really will? See, life for the believer following an invisible God and listening to His written Word, makes no sense to the common man living ‘under the sun’.

So again, in this very limited life, our ‘man with a powerful mind’ advocates the simple pleasures: notice the eating and drinking of vs15 and observe that he speaks in the first person here: “So I commend the enjoyment of life...”. The verb ‘*enjoy*’ is translated back in Chapter four and verse two as ‘*declared*’ – that's your NIV – where he declared or praised the dead because they were happier than the

living. He envied them because they didn't have to live under oppression, which certainly fits our theme here. The righteous are punished; the wicked go free. The world is a screwed-up place.

Observe the second sentence of the verse. It begins in the third person with an independent pronoun (*'him'*) which clearly refers to *enjoyment* (your NIV translates “*joy*”) and brings us back to productivity, work and “*toil*”: The satisfaction of knowing that what we are doing has a value; it's worthwhile, an accomplishment, a blessing in this life that has been given to all of us.

Now here in verses sixteen and seventeen he states the goal of an intellectual labor; namely (vs16) “... to know (*all of*) wisdom...”. But he has told us before that this pursuit is exhausting and one never gets there. It's never settled. Now, you can observe the difficulty with the phrase that I alluded to earlier in the NIV: ‘Seeing sleep’ or ‘not seeing sleep’. The verse could be literally translated: “...in day and in night, sleep his eyes not seen...”: And this phrase would, of course, be very wooden sounding. The phrase “seeing sleep” is here and here only in the Bible: It is not translated anywhere else in English or in Hebrew. Most people understand it to be an idiom and that is the way the NIV takes it. So, this observation from our friend ‘with the powerful mind’ is clear enough, I think, in the way it's translated in the NIV. The idea is that people are so occupied with their toil that they never get enough rest. And the implied irony is that they never stop to think where life is taking them; and then suddenly—it's over. From making our corporate goals one year, to the anticipation of making them for the next, and the next, and the next, and the next,...—And that's the way we live.

Next, the chapter ends (vs17) on a note of skepticism and disappointment. In spite of the hard labor and energy that man expends ‘under the sun’, no one can figure out ‘what God is up to’. In Oklahoma City we have a new pastor in the community; and he has a new radio program. He comes on with this wonderful melodious ‘Walter Cronkite type’ voice and his commercial goes like this: “What...in the world...is God....up to?” And then he tells us to tune in and he's going to tell us.

I always laughed thinking, "Do we really follow that stuff?" Then I came across our text and realized that he was more biblical than I gave him credit for. Right here (vs17), observe that the “No one...”, in the NIV, is referring to all people in general. And this ignorance even affects the wise—those that have insight and knowledge. ‘No one,’ he says, ‘can really understand the work of God.’

At times in our lives as Christians, we see the providence of God fitting the pieces together so clearly. It's like we're standing next to the Lord Himself and He's whispering in our ear. Then there are times that He takes us by the hand and leads us into the darkest of tunnels and cuts off the lights: And we don't know where we are! For those who want answers; the real answers to ‘What in the world is God up to?’—well, I can only offer you what the Bible says. And it states it with an unqualified clarity and that's why I wanted you to mark Romans 1. Romans 1:18-21, a very familiar text to people at Believers Chapel, so let us review it for a moment together.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Romans 1:18-21

Now, here's the point of the Apostle Paul: The knowledge of God is everywhere. It's coming at us 360 degrees, and it's coming at us moment by moment. It screams at us here, there, all over the creation. But due to the fall, the fall in the garden, man can't, won't, and doesn't want to hear it: Nor can he. See, the problem is not that the creation isn't speaking. The problem is with our hearing. We can't hear it. We can't see it. Our minds are messed up from the noetic effects

of sin upon our minds. We don't retrieve what God is up to, and therefore we must turn to the scriptures.

So that's what we do; 'Looking in a glass darkly' (I Cor 13:12, KJV). We look at it and we ponder it, and we think about it; for the scriptures give us what the creation now can't. There are radio waves going through this room: But without a receiver, there is no way for us to know of them. It looks just like air: But they are real, and they are there. Your mind can no longer receive that information. We now must go to the scriptures where it will teach us what natural creation was teaching and would have taught Adam about God.

What in the world is God up to? Here is a proposition for you to gnaw on and what I would tell my friend on the radio. Think about this one (Gen 2:17b): "...in the day you eat therein you shall surely die." But we didn't believe it and we bought the lie. So here we are asking: "What is God up to?"

Now we move to our second point in the outline: *The hard realities* in dealing with the subject of death (9:1-10). Death comes to all and 'under the sun' that is the definitive end for us. Remember: *This is not New Testament theology. This is life 'under the sun' being examined by a 'powerful mind'*. Acting righteously or being faithful does not save anyone from the grave and that is what he wants you to know. Thus, our only recourse is to take as much enjoyment as possible out of our lives 'under the sun' before we die.

Verse 1. He begins with an assertion that the righteous and wise are under God's sovereign control. And the image he uses for teaching us His sovereign power and control are '*His Hands*'. Yet 'under the sun' we are not disposed as to His daily initiative toward us whether it is love or hate. You see, our 'man with a powerful mind' does not have Romans 8:28 in his portfolio to know that: '*...all things work together for good for those who love Him*'. So this is the best reasoning that he can come up with—'God is all powerful and you and I don't know what will be our disposition by the end of the day.'

Verse two carries forward what he has already told us back in chapter two, verse fourteen: Everyone, no matter what character or lifestyle, will meet the same end – death. He structures his argument by listing five pairs of opposites. Let's mark them carefully. First, 'the righteous and the wicked'. Second, 'the good person and the bad'. Third, 'the clean and the unclean'. Fourth, 'those who offer sacrifices and those who do not'. Fifth, 'those who take oaths and those who do not'. Well, I think that pretty much encompasses us all and covers everything pretty thoroughly, doesn't?

Verse three. The "*This*" that opens the verse refers to what has just proceeded; namely, no matter what the merit or position of people—we die: All of us. Now, from this overriding conclusion, one would logically deduce that God is uninterested in the upright man. Things that should matter to Him; good things, righteous things, you would think He would care about. But looking at life, He doesn't seem to care about them. In life, good causes are lost or squandered while evil ones flourish. This is a messed-up world we live in. This world 'under the sun' is just a mass of contradictions from a righteous, sovereign, providential God. And here's why. Notice the word '*heart*': It is mentioned twice within the content of evil and madness. So what can we expect in general from that?—Except a funeral: For that's what those kinds of '*hearts*' lead to—funerals.

Verse four. The theme of death continues, but he surprises us here by saying that '...the living have hope.' Now we think he's going to give us something positive, but we find and discover that it's only death for us all in the end. Look at his argument: 'Life under the sun is better than death.' And his illustration for that, "...a live dog is better off than a dead lion!"

Now we in the west; we prize our canines. Many times, I look at my dog and say, 'I would love to have your life.' But back in the ancient Near East, dogs were dirty, horrible creatures making the insult by Goliath to David even more sustainable. He says in 1 Samuel 17:43, "Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?" Or the mind of handicapped Mephibosheth when David found him in

desolate Lo Debar. David brought him back to the palace, restored to him his family estate, and then he eats daily at the king's table. There Mephibosheth says to David in 2 Samuel 9:8, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" Dogs were the worst of creatures. But the lion—the lion is the noble beast much superior to the dog: But not after death.

And here's why: Verse five. 'The living are self-aware, while the dead are not.' 'Under the sun', you see, they have no reward. Even the memory of them is forgotten. Then in verse six, He specifically lists three emotions that highlight life's advantages over death. These three emotions are intense – Love, Hate, and Jealousy. Yet, "...never again will they have a part..." in your person after you die. They have long since vanished as a part of your life 'under the sun'.

Rick Atkinson in his book *The Day of Battle* has chronicled for us the early part of World War II by highlighting the battles in Italy and Sicily. Here we have all of the notables, the well-knowns: Eisenhower, Patton, Montgomery. But he also features the lesser knowns; a group of young but battled-hardened 20 year olds. One was Captain Henry T. Wasco. According to Atkinson, he was walking on a ridge near San Pietro. "The captain", he writes, "suddenly had a craving for toast. "When we get back to the states," said Wasco, "I'm going to get me one of those smart-alecky toasters, the bread pops up right in front of your face." And those," wrote Atkinson, "were the last mortal thoughts of Henry Wasco. Machine guns crackled, mortars crumpled, and Henry Wasco pitched over without a sound." 'Our man with the powerful mind' says at the end of verse six: '...never again to have any part of that which happens under the sun.'

Verse seven. In the light of death our teacher urges his readers to seek enjoyment particularly in eating and drinking. Now, this is the fifth time he has recommended eating and drinking for temporal enjoyment –the source of simple pleasures that life offers. Let's review them together. Chapter two, verse twenty-four; "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work." Chapter three in verse thirteen; "That everyone may eat and drink and find

satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.” Chapter five, and verse eighteen;
“Then I realized it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and find
satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun.” Chapter eight and verse fifteen;
“So I commended the enjoyment of life because nothing is better for a man under
the sun than to eat and drink and be glad.”

And so here now is our fifth—and yet here, this familiar phrase is rather
striking to us. In the past, he has given us advice. Now here, the force of the verb is
imperative. Notice he says “Go...”. The emphasis is on urgency in light of death.
That's what he's telling us. In the motive clause, just look: “...for it is (*now*) that God
favors what you do.” (vs7b).

This clause is not to be misunderstood that our Teacher would believe that
God approves of people's actions in an unlimited way. We know that because
notice the word "now." It's only while life ‘under the sun’ is going on. Specifically,
what are we to do? Well, we are to receive it as a gift. See, the words, "...joyful
heart..."? Receive life that way: Stay in the moment. Don't be anxious about
tomorrow for it has its own cares. Pick up your children and your grandchildren and
love them; and when you think of your friends who stick closer to you than a
brother—sing the *Doxology*! Thank God for your life; and do it now! Because in this
context we are given the reminder that we are not going to last. And it is the same
for those who love you; they're not going to last either. So what are we going to
do? Fret or faint just because life ‘under the sun’ will never be the same? No! Enjoy
it! Love God for it! Receive life as a gift and receive it right now!

In the same vein (vs8) he tells us to waste no opportunity or expense to seize
the good things life has to offer. Practically: ‘Put on your best clothes; refresh your
head with oil’. Scholars who have worked the social customs on the ancient Near
East tell us that white garments symbolize purity and festivity. In the hot, dry
climate of Palestine, white clothes reflect rather than absorb the heat. We all know
that: We live down here in Texas! The oil, which is alluded to several times in the
Psalms and Proverbs, would be aromatic and protect against dry skin.

Verse nine. And again he says: '*Enjoy your life*'; and specifically in the company of your wife who is a reward in this meaningless life with its meaningless existence. Then notice the word '*lot*': L-O-T. You see, it's all ordained. It's all divine providence. That's why you're alive. You're part of the plan: His grand plan.

Verse 10. There is disagreement over just exactly what 'our man with the powerful mind' is asking here. The liberals argue that it's a call for complete license to do whatever one wants (they have a very low opinion of our Teacher). Others say it's a call to hard work. But if we simply compare scripture with scripture (which was and has been since the Reformation, a sound way to determine the interpretation of a text) we will find some help. So I want you to look at this idiom, "*Whatever your hand finds to do...*" The first place we find it is in Judges 9:33. "In the morning at sunrise, advance against the city. When Gaal and his men come out against you," – notice – "*whatever your hand finds to do, do it.*" And here's the second use of this expression. 1 Samuel 10:7. "Once these signs are fulfilled, *do whatever your hand finds to do...*" (there it is again) "...for God is with you."

Now, in both of these occasions the idiom refers to an opportunity: If given the occasion, do it now. In Judges 9:33, it was the opportunity for Israel to make war. In 1 Samuel 10:7, it was an opportunity for a young Saul to lead because the blessing of God rested upon him, the future first king of Israel. 'Opportunity' and 'do it now', that's the idea.

So back to our text (vs10); the force of this idiom is: 'Live your life now because in the grave, there is no more opportunity.' That's his point. Notice the motive clause in the second half of the verse. "...where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." Observe the elements – working, planning, knowing, wisdom. All are activities that occur 'under the sun'. Talents. Gifts. Do you see the word '*grave*' (KJV)? When you and I are planted in the earth, those gifts, those talents, those abilities will never be used again.

Just this Monday morning (November 27, 2007) the sports world was awakened to the shocking story of young Sean Taylor, 24 year old defensive back

for the Washington Redskins: Shot—clinging to life. Someone had broken into his house and shot him. He died early Tuesday morning. My son is 24 and we discussed this. And he said, ‘Dad, outsiders have no way of appreciating the skill it takes to be a defensive back in the NFL. One in a thousand, maybe one in two thousand can play and be as successful as he was’. There he is: And now he's gone.

And of course, we as believers cannot help but taking a text from the New Testament and making a practical application from the Lord Jesus Himself for all of us. In John 9:4, He told His disciples this; (*listen very carefully*), He said, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no man can work." Death may very well be the hard reality. But if we are really wise, we will use our gifts and our talents, and our abilities—whatever God has given—and use them with all of our might. Opportunities will come and afford us a chance for eternal service; service to Him. This is what living is really all about: “...to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”. You do that...and you will do well. But let's do it!, because our time is running out.

Now the third section (vs 11&12), is about *Time and Chance*. Human ability; human talent, is always subject to the providence of God. Sudden changes ‘under the sun’ are the observable random events of life that remind us that you and I are in control of nothing. Nothing. The providence of God works in accordance with God's sovereign plan, His eternal purpose, so we do not know how we will end up at the end of any given day. We trust God for our daily bread and we trust God when we close our eyes at night that we may awaken in the morning. Our ‘man with the powerful mind’ is telling us life is subject to disappointment and frustration. And yet this is all part of His all-wise plan.

Here are five lines of evidence to demonstrate that things don't turn out as we might presume (vs 11). We would expect the fastest person to win a foot race. We would expect the most seasoned and most powerful warrior to win a battle. We would expect the most physically capable to come out in top. We would expect the most mentally competent to have the best of life's rewards. But the ‘man with

the powerful mind’ says: ‘No; it doesn't work that way at all’. Time (a word identifying God's sovereign purpose that we have studied several times in the past weeks) and Chance (a word declaring God's all-wise providence in the exigencies of the day) ultimately rule everything. Everything!

Now, there was a prominent pastor who thought he was being clever when he said: "How serious and detailed do you take the sovereignty and providence of God? Well", he said, "for example, *I* pick out my tie in the morning. *I* don't call on God to pick out my tie." He thought he was being clever. My question to him is: 'Who is holding that tie together by the Word of His power? Who is holding the breath that you draw into your lungs by the Word of His power? Where do you think you have the ability to think for one moment except that He gives you the energy to process that thought?' Oh my friends, God is sovereign and His providence rules over all.

So, little Israel walks right out the front door of mighty Egypt without firing a shot. They take over the population of the Land of Canaan, although the Canaanites had cities and armies and fortified walls: But they failed to hold the land. Judges win mighty battles although they're outnumbered, and Israel had no weapons. And David, little David, without a sword, without a spear, and without armor; and he beats the heavyweight champion of the world.

My friends, God demonstrates every day His grand power by taking you and me, that are fashioned and formed in weakness, and displaying to the world what He can do with the common, the ordinary, and the weak. 'What in the world is God up to?' Just look around and watch your fellow believers who trust Him.

Verse twelve. The unpredictability of life 'under the sun' here connects with death itself. No one knows the day, the hour, the month, or the year that they are going to die. There is a day on a calendar that's been set aside for you. There is an hour on the clock that has been set aside for you. And you will not exceed that date or hour. But you and I don't know when that is. And he illustrates his point by two images from wildlife. First, the fish that swim along; and second, the bird that flies

through the air. Then in a moment, they're caught which will lead to the end of their lives. The point of our Teacher is that no one knows when the end will come. So here is a word that we need to think about; the English word *suddenness*. *Suddenness*. Notice your NIV – “*unexpectedly*”. That is the world that we're in ‘under the sun’. Here we are playing defensive back for the Washington Redskins; and we're gone. Here we are walking a ridge near San Pietro, talking of toast and toasters; and we're gone. And we say to one another; "I'll see you tomorrow". But will you...Really? Or will we be looking for you and not finding you?

This discussion may cause someone to feel a bit uneasy: Perhaps for the first time you've come face to face with the cold cruel facts about death. And here's what the Bible teaches—Death is waiting for you someplace out here. Maybe waiting for you in a hospital. Maybe waiting for you on an airline. Maybe waiting for you out there on a freeway or out there in a darkened parking lot. It's out there. It's waiting for you. That's what the Bible teaches.

But the Bible also teaches this: You are more than fish and you are more than birds. You have been made in the image of God and He desires fellowship with you. He desires a relationship with you—*For Eternity*. But to do that you come on His terms and His way. His simple proposition is that you have to die to self. You have to take up your cross and you have to follow Him. You must set your *deadly doing down*; give up yourself; and turn to Him.

My friends, I implore you to do that right now. It is my sincere prayer that God, by His Spirit and the teaching ministry of His Word that has gone forth in this room tonight, would regenerate your heart such that you would then believe. May God give you the grace to do just that. For you see, the people that really know Him are the people that walk with Him and live with Him by faith. They find death to be no threat and no harbinger of evil to come. Those who would put their trust in Christ will never, ever be disappointed. May God give you the grace to do just that.

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