

# The Gospel for Control Freaks – *Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:9*

## *The Illusion of Control and Fierce Joy in the Mist*

**Introduction** – We are control freaks. And the world is out of control. This virus is out of control. The panic is out of control. Our governors are out of control. Our economy is out of control. My job security, my pension, the value of my money, it's all out of control. The food delivery chain is out of control. We think we should be able to control our health. We think we should be able to control global climate change. Our idol is control, or safety. We want to be in control of our safety. And God has given us over to our idols. Man-made control and safety, while only an illusion in the end, turns out to be a cold and hard master.

More importantly, it turns out that this world and the True God Who made and governs it, is not tame and cannot be controlled. And that, it turns out, is Good News.

**Smoke Rings and Sandcastles** – Ecclesiastes is a book about the inscrutability of life under the sun, a world completely out of our control and yet fully under the control of Almighty God. “*Vanity of vanities,*” this book begins, “*vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity.*” Later, in 2:26 we learn that this word, “*vanity*” is being used to mean something like, “*a grasping for the wind.*” Solomon testifies to this as he sought every form of pleasure possible and yet could find no ultimate meaning in it (chapters 1-2). God is absolutely sovereign, and while He is good, we cannot find that good under the sun (chapter 3-5). What appears to be the most stable life turns out to be a smoke ring, and the sturdiest empires are nothing but sandcastles awaiting the next tide.

**Feasts Without Taste Buds** – God gives many blessings, but they cannot be enjoyed unless He gives the ability to enjoy them. This is a terrible affliction. In the end, there is no profit from our work (1:3, 2:11, 2:22), or someone else gets the profit (2:18) and it might be wasted on a fool (2:19-20). Under the sun men are oppressed (4:1), it's better to be unborn (4:3), and one's popularity is never settled (4:15-16). Under the sun wealth brings misery (5:13, 6:1-2), and there is no assurance of where it all goes in the end (6:12). Try as we might, youth, health, and the passions of life fade and fail us (12:1-8).

**The Illusion of Control** (Eccles 8:16-9:6) – In this passage, Solomon sums up his efforts. Under the sun, our busy lives make no sense no matter how hard we work (8:16-17). All the works of the righteous and the evil are in the hand of God and as He measures out the events of our lives we cannot tell if it is because He loves us or hates us by the externals (9:1-2). Both the good and the evil die (9:3) and the only benefit of being alive, under the sun is that your passions have not yet perished and the memory of you has not yet faded – but they will (9:3-6). There is no control; there is no safety. Not under the sun.

**The Sovereign, All-Pervasive, Control of God** – Before we go to the final verses of this passage, we have to first see the stark contrast of our lack of control with the total control that God has. Ecclesiastes is also full of this wisdom. “*To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven*” (3:1). “*He has made everything beautiful in its time*” (3:11a). But He has not shown us what those purposes are, nor why they are beautiful, “*...no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end*” (3:11c). He controls every season and every event in every season, and He controls it all in such a way as to, in the end, reveal His beautiful glory. This is the very essence of what it means to be God (Isaiah 46:9-10, Psalm 135:6). The apostle Paul says, “*He works all things according to the counsel of His will*” (Eph 1:11). All things, not just some things. And He doesn't just do sweet and sentimental things. He is not the god of Precious Moments, that safe, controlled idol. “*If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it*” (Amos 3:6b).

The church does not believe this or teach this today. God doesn't do hurricanes, they say. And so the church teaches and encourages the world all the more to believe that it is up to us to control the events of the earth and our lives. We are the masters of our destinies. Instead, the Word says that every breath we take is a gift of grace. All life and all death are in the hands of God. “*Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand*” (Deut 32:29).

John Piper wrote, “Why should I receive the news of God’s sovereignty over the coronavirus, and over my life, as a sweet teaching? The secret...is knowing that the same sovereignty that could stop the coronavirus, yet doesn’t, is the very sovereignty that sustains the soul in it. In other words, if we try to rescue God from his sovereignty over suffering, we sacrifice His sovereignty to turn all things for good.” – Coronavirus and Christ, 2020.

Again - The same sovereignty that could stop the coronavirus, yet doesn’t, is the very sovereignty that sustains the soul in it. Those who believe it can say with Stonewall Jackson, “My religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me.” – or as one missionary, Henry Martyn is paraphrased: “I am immortal till Christ’s work for me to do is done.”

**The Gift of a Fierce Joy** (Eccles 9:7-9) - And so we come to the conclusion of the matter. Where does the ability to have such fierce joy in the face of *vanity* (the inability to control, to guarantee safety, or to know in the moment why certain events are occurring) come from? Where can I find such joy, merriment, and celebration in life? Why is bread so tasty? Why is wine so wonderful? Why are festive dress and fragrant oils so joyous? Why is the marriage bed so delightful? On the other hand, why is it that so many times, these things are given and yet there is no delight, no joy, no satisfaction?

**The Gift of Joy** – We are commended to enjoy these things and of course, we cannot unless God gives the gift of enjoyment – which He freely does to those who are in Christ, for Jesus is Wisdom. If you give thanks to God *for these things*, knowing they come from His hand, you will learn to give thanks to Him *for all things*, knowing that they all come from His hand and that He has and will make all things beautiful in His time. It all begins with our justification – “*for God has already accepted your works*” (v7). If you know the satisfaction of Christ’s righteousness given to you, you are on the path to a fierce joy.

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