

December 1, 2019

Sunday Evening Service

Series: Ecclesiastes

Community Baptist Church

643 S. Suber Road

Greer, SC 29650

© 2019 David J. Whitcomb

## RANDOM THOUGHTS ABOUT LIFE, DEATH AND THINGS BETWEEN Ecclesiastes 9

Do you ever sit down, be still, and contemplate where you are in life, who you are, and why you are what you are? For the follower of Christ, that should be a very humbling, but encouraging experience. Such contemplation forces us to ask many questions, among which are important ones like, “Why was I born in a nation of opportunity?” “Why was I born to the parents I have?” “Why did I hear the gospel?” Or more important, “Why when I heard the gospel did I respond in faith, trusting Christ to forgive my sin?” “Why did God give me the spiritual gifts He gave me?” “Why does God give me opportunities to serve Him?” And maybe one of the biggest questions, “Why did God give me eternal life...but not my sibling?”

These might be the easy questions compared to the questions about circumstances of life. At least the previous questions were centered on God, His work, and His will. Solomon pondered life and its apparently unanswerable questions, drawing mostly on human wisdom. That was a problem. Here and there throughout this record of investigation, Solomon mentions the wonderful contrast of how life looks when God is our focus. Those are the highlights of the search. The interruption of God in life gives hope, makes life worth living, and even more, makes life enjoyable.

Chapter nine reveals this wonderful contrast. Life without God, life lived according to human wisdom, life as most people know it is downright depressing. But to live life with a focus on God, a love for God, a deep faith in God gives us many reasons to be happy.

## Some Days You Can't Win for Losing. (vv.1-3)

Why would we draw that conclusion when deeds are in the hand of God? It seems like we should be happy, or at least satisfied, that God oversees the wise person’s deeds. *But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him (v.1).*

This statement is connected with the last statement Solomon recorded in chapter eight. *Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out (Ecclesiastes 8:17).* The Preacher’s conclusions remind us that life is hard to explain until we are willing to accept that God is doing His work on earth among real people (*under the sun*). We must remember that the phrase in verse seventeen, “all the work of God,” includes His watchful care for His people, who do not always understand what God is doing or why.

Especially important in God’s work is how all the deeds of the wise and righteous are in God’s hand (v.1a). But again, we wonder with Solomon, how much do we know about God’s work? As God governs me is He showing love or hate? What kind of a question is that? It is the question with which Solomon ended the first verse. And it presents a statement that flies in the face of what we think we know about God. Most people would retort with us, “Of course God governs in love, and He especially loves His chosen people!”

Yes, but in the midst of difficult circumstances and realizing that the same kinds of things happen to the righteous and unrighteous, even the people of God can get confused (see v.2). Swear or not, it makes no difference. *It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath (v.2).* The Preacher decided that it seems like the same circumstances, troubles, difficulties happen to everyone. Circumstances seem to be indiscriminate.

The religiously faithful seem to have the same kinds of problems the pagans have. We all get sick, nearly everyone goes to the hospital, everyone's car breaks down, and our dogs all die alike. This is true whether you are a child of God or a child of the devil. The difference is that God's people accept the problems with a different attitude knowing that these things really are not indiscriminate. They are governed, allowed, or ordained by God.

Yes, but Solomon was concerned about the evil that abounds in the world. Indeed, God even allows the evil to have its effect on His people. And evil is not selective. So the Preacher's conclusion, *This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all* (v.3a). Again, that is to say that bad stuff happens to everyone. Of course it does. Bad stuff is the result of evil. Had Adam not brought sin into the world, we would never experience adverse circumstances. But he did and so we do. The Hebrew word for *evil* is translated with about thirteen different English words in the New Testament. None of them are positive or even neutral. Evil is a fit description for everything that does not characterize God's original creation. Evil is all the stuff that makes us sad.

There is no getting away from it. Evil abounds, it follows us from birth to the grave. *Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead* (v.3b). Sadly, the human heart is full of evil. It is our natural condition that was demonstrated without boundaries in the time of Noah, when God chose to destroy the world because of it. *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (*Genesis 6:5*). It is manifested in human foolishness. David wrote, *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good* (*Psalm 14:1*). A couple verses later he wrote, *They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one* (*Psalm 14:3*).

Evil abounds despite God's immeasurable kindness. In light of God's kindness and grace, it is almost like everyone who does evil is crazy. And then they all die! It's not a very pretty picture. I would think that if that was all I know about life, I would be very depressed all the time. But that is not all I know. I know, along with Solomon,

that God is in control in spite of the fact that the world is awash in evil. And because God is in control, even in the midst of evil, He gives us blessings. So . . . .

### Have a Great Day. (vv.4-10)

Verse four contains one of those classic Ecclesiastes statements that leaves us a bit bewildered. A living dog is better than a dead lion. What does that mean? It means that in life there is hope. *But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion* (v.4). This statement stands in contrast to Solomon's frequent statements about death and the hopelessness of it all. As long as there is life, there is hope.

The dog and lion picture illustrates the truth that as long as there is life, there is hope. In ancient times the lion was the prime example of strength, prowess, fearsomeness. We, too, say that the lion is the "king of the beasts." But what good is a dead lion? I guess we could make a rug from its skin to put in front of the fireplace. Dogs on the other hand were generally considered useless in ancient times. They were pests and considered to be vermin. But a living dog, bad as it might be, is better than a dead lion. At least there is hope that you can train the dog to be your best friend.

The point of the illustration is that death ends all hope for change. When it is over, is it really over? *For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun* (vv.5-6).

We all know that we are heading to the same inevitable end. Of course that is not a positive thought! But it is a realistic thought. Denying it, trying to avoid it, trying to cheat it is useless – it is going to happen. And when it comes, we will be forgotten. The attitudes we displayed in life will cease, and maybe forgotten as well. More important still is the New Testament writer's admonition: *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment* (*Hebrews 9:27*).

So while we are alive, be busy with all that God gives you the opportunity to do. Or as Solomon challenges us, enjoy life before you

reach the end. It is not only okay but good to enjoy the stuff God gives. *Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do* (v.7). God tells us it is fitting for us to enjoy the fruits of our labor. But this is not a license for gluttony or to get drunk. Again, we must consider the very well-attested norm in the ancient Middle Eastern culture was to dilute wine 2/1 or 3/1 with water. God condemns drunkenness even in the Old Testament where the productive vineyard and abundance of wine were signs of God's blessing.

Whatever the Preacher commends here is approved by God – He commends it. What God commends is the opposite of sorrow. He continued, *Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head* (v.8). The sign of sorrow was sackcloth (a thick, dark cloth) and ashes. The sign of wealth and pleasure was white robes and oil. The white robe reflected the heat of the day. Oil was used to pamper the skin and keep it from drying out. God commends our enjoyment of the things He grants us.

Another wonderful gift God gives is our spouse. According to Solomon's conclusion this applies especially to the wife. He tells us husbands: *Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun* (v.9). The challenge is important because it is so easy for us men to forget that our wife is a gift from God. The text instructs us that God gives her as a portion, a blessing, a reward. God gives the wife for the husband to enjoy as she tempers the vanity of your days under the sun. This blessing is given with the understanding that the context of life as vain, toil, toil, toil, under the sun! Your wife is not your competition, she is your balancer who brings pleasure in an otherwise unpleasant world.

The third area of God's blessing that He desires for us to enjoy is a bit surprising to some. God wants us to enjoy our work. *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going* (v.10). On one hand, we toil and toil under the sun. If you see that unending toil as judgment against original sin or a necessary evil and you will be discouraged every day, every time you go to work. On the other hand, view your work as an opportunity to serve God,

enhance life, undo the evil of sin, and you will have joy. Our attitude about our work will make it pleasant or miserable.

Because of evil, life can be very discouraging. Remember that God has given us many rewards in that setting. Focus on God and the blessings He gives to offset the real effects of sin.

### You Never Know. (vv.11-12)

The events of life are not always predictable, partly because common sense is not always correct. We often say we wish some people had common sense, but that is not a cure-all. The Preacher said, *Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge* (v.11a).

Then he gave us five examples in which a positive result is not guaranteed. The most gifted runner doesn't always win the race. The strongest army doesn't always win the battle. The wise person doesn't always have bread. The intelligent person is not always wealthy. The knowledgeable person doesn't get all the breaks.

How do those truths work out in life? It means that we might lay the best plans possible in human wisdom, only to have something unexpected change our plans. We might prepare for the future with all commonsense, only to realize later that we overlooked a very important matter. Unplanned circumstances, events, personal issues can put a crook in our path that we do not desire and wish we could avoid.

Why is this the case in life? Time and chance happens, or so it would appear. *But time and chance happen to them all* (v.11b). The changes, the unexpected events appear to be time and chance. A common conclusion is, "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time." It is a very frustrating conclusion that leads to fatalism. Or as the sports commentator might say, "The football gods were against that team tonight." That is what life outside recognition of the One True God looks like.

But, we who love God know that life is not a matter of time and chance. Think about how people in his day misunderstood all that God allowed to happen to Joseph. His brothers thought that their abusing him and selling him as a slave was their idea. His brothers

thought that time and chance were unkind to them. His brothers thought that Joseph would wreak vengeance on them. But, Joseph understood that God governed all the circumstances in his life for His own good pleasure. And God's good pleasure was very good for His people.

There is also the example of Paul. Saul the Pharisee thought he was strong, wise, and knowledgeable. He thought he had life figured out to lead to a great future. God rearranged Saul's future, changed him to Paul, and sent him down the road of faithful service. Many of the people who observed this radical change were convinced that Saul had some kind of a breakdown. They were wondering why bad things happen to good people? Paul understood God's sovereign control and concluded that a very good thing happened to a very bad person.

Furthermore, life is quite unpredictable because trouble is seldom announced. No one knows his time. *For man does not know his time* (v.12a). In general this statement refers to the time of death. Sometimes, because of disease (or capital punishment) the time of our departure can be predicted. Most of the time a person does not know very far in advance when that fateful day will come.

In this context, the reference probably points to the time of calamity. Unfavorable circumstances happen without notice. It is possible that we can look ahead at some trials with a certain foreboding. But many circumstances like economic downturn, troubles in our family, health issues, or accidents show up without warning.

Calamity comes without warning. *Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them* (v.12b). The fisherman does not think the net is evil. To him it is useful. To him, the net is used to provide God's blessings. But, the fish has a different view of the net. The same is true for the bird's opinion of the snare.

In this proverb, we are not the fisherman or the fowler, we are the fish and bird. Evil circumstances can trap us like an unwary bird in a snare. Sometimes these things are not avoidable. God allows the difficult test for our maturing process. But sometimes, we can avoid the net and the snare by exercising the wisdom God gives.

## Listen to Wisdom. (vv.13-18)

Solomon ended chapter nine with a great illustration about a situation that looks hopeless. On one hand, there is the good example. *I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me* (v.13). Wisdom is God's gift. The exercise of it is obvious in life under the sun. We should learn from such examples.

Sometimes that wisdom is demonstrated in the evil day, the tough situations, the unexpected problems that jump up on life's path. Such was the case in this illustration. *There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it* (v.14). By all measures, under normal circumstances, the little city was toast. Most of the time great military power trumps little cities without much effort.

But such was not the case in this illustration because there was this poor, wise man. It looked like the great king would overthrow the little city. *But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man* (v.15). A poor man would be looked down upon as not very helpful. But this man was also wise. Through his wisdom, which could have been either strategy or negotiation, he saved the city. What he accomplished was good, helpful, and noteworthy. But in evil life under the sun, no one remembers or is thankful.

Remembrance or not, wisdom is still better than strength. The poor man proved it. *But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard* (v.16). Even when wisdom is shunned or rejected outrightly, it is still better than foolishness. God commends wisdom even when it looks like wisdom is not appreciated in an evil society.

It is wise for us to pay attention to the quiet, wise person. *The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good* (vv.17-18). In that way we might say, "Listen to this person. She doesn't say much. But when she speaks you do well to listen." Sadly, shouting fools generally grab the headlines – especially in our culture at this time. But as the previous illustration showed, it is true from the illustration that wisdom is

better than weapons of war. But sinners are fools and fools reject wisdom. The result is the destruction of that which is good.

These simple principles of wisdom, the proverbs that appear in this text, are more applicable in our circumstances than they have ever been in the history of our nation. We know all too well that evil abounds. We know that we are going to die. But we should not be morbid about the matter. Enjoy the incredible blessings God has given us. We never know when the blessings will be gone through the work of evil sinners who think that shouting and might are more useful than wisdom.