

Every Man Dies. Not Every Man Truly Lives.
Ecclesiastes 9

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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. ² 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 the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. 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. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. 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.

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

- Ecclesiastes 9 (ESV)

How an Average Person Spends His or Her Life

How are you spending your life?

The average person in America will live 79 years – 81 years for women, 76 years for men, to be precise. But let's go with 79 years. How do most people spend that time? Well, because we're not God and we need sleep, we spend about 26 years of our lives asleep. However, we spend 33 years in bed, so 7 years is spent trying to sleep but unable to do so. I don't know about your marriage, but in ours, almost all of the time spent in bed awake is happening on the other side of the bed from me. If I'm in bed, I'm probably asleep.

The average person will spend 13 years and 2 months at work. It sounds like we work a lot less than we sleep, but that's because we sleep for all 79 of our years, but we only work for about 50 years of our 79. During our working years, we spend about a quarter of our time – 24% - at work.

Those two items seem pretty necessary. So, how do we spend the rest of our time, the time when we have more choice?

We spend, on average, 11 years and 4 months in front of a screen, including 3 years on social media. Another study found that we watch TV for 9.1 years. (Watching commercials = 2 years) Watching TV accounts for half of all leisure time, about 2.8 hours per day.

We spend 4 ½ years eating. By the way, 2/3 of workers eat lunch at their desks.

We're on vacation for about 3 years and 2 months.

We exercise for about 1 year and 4 months. That means we spend almost 7 times as much time watching TV vs exercising and more than twice as much time on social media as exercising.

We spend 395 days (1 year and 30 days) of our lives being romantic, including about 48 days being romantic together in bed.

We spend 368 days (1 year and 3 days) socializing, spending time with friends.

Our K-12 education took about 525 days, or about 17.5 months. So, we spend more time watching commercials than in school K-12.

By the way, women spend 136 days getting ready, while men spend 46 days on average getting ready.

And we spend 115 days laughing.

All of this leaves us with a little over 8 years – 8 years and 2 months – for everything else, including our commute to and from work, our parenting time, worship in church, etc.

This is the average person. We're all different, of course. So, how do you live? In the immortal words of the fictionalized William Wallace from Braveheart: "Every man dies; not every man truly lives." When your time die comes, will you be able to say you truly lived?

A. Examining All, v. 1-6

Ecclesiastes 9 begins with a kind of summary transition statement. We can tell we're reaching the conclusion of this book, even though we have four more chapters to go:

"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."

All in the Hand of God – What a powerfully encouraging statement. Despite all of the cold realities we're confronted with in life under the sun, Solomon is able to conclude that *"the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God."*

Yet as powerfully encouraging and true as this statement is, people continually misunderstand it. Being in the hands of God doesn't at all guarantee us a smooth, happy life. In fact, Solomon says, *"Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him."* He is not saying that we can never know whether God loves us or hates us, but rather that we would never be able to judge this by our external circumstances. In other words, we can either trust God and His promises and His good character or we can try to judge the reality of things by our external circumstances.

Ecclesiastes is calling us to believe God more than our eyes.

The Same Event Happens to All

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 the good one is, so is the sinner, and he

who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

Circumstances of life vary widely from person to person, and yet, “*it is the same for all . . . the same event happens to all.*” This event is death. Everyone dies. When we come into this world, the countdown to the day of our death has begun. As David Gibson summarizes this in his excellent book on Ecclesiastes, *Living Life Backward*: “Righteous and wicked, good people, bad people, the nice and the nasty, believer and unbeliever, the honest truth-teller and the lying deceiver – all go into the ground at the end.”

Evil and Madness in the Hearts of All

Not only do all go into the ground at the end, but also evil and madness is in the hearts of all: “*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.*” These two things are connected, of course: We all die because we’re all sinners. If we understand this clearly, we’ll see that we never have any ground for complaining. In South Carolina, we had a man named Randy Sandifer in our church, and when you asked Randy how he was doing, he would always say, “Better than I deserve.” And as long as we’re upright on God’s earth and breathing God’s air while we continue to sin against God’s goodness, then that is always the right answer, no matter how we feel. We are always doing better than we deserve.

But at the same time, we can also see that the evil and madness in the hearts of the children of man are what so often make life in this world so hard and troubling. In fact, the word translated “evil” here in the ESV is a word that means both evil and trouble or distress, and, of course, we experience both in this world. Sin and sorrow are twin realities; they come to us together as a result of the Fall. We deal with our own sin and the trouble and distress it causes us and others; we also deal with the sins of others against us, which add to our trouble and distress.

No one is immune to these realities. Just as the one event of death comes to all, so also in this life under the sun before death, we all experience the constant turmoil of evil, trouble, distress, and madness.

All the Living Better Than the Dead

And yet, as troubling as this life can be, it is still so much better to be alive than dead, from the perspective of life under the sun:

But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

Three things give all the living advantage over all the dead:

1. The living have hope. We have the hope of a better future of growing, learning and enjoying good things.
2. The living know they will die. Knowing we will die should give us opportunity to repent and reconcile with God, but the dead no longer have that opportunity. These verses are among several in the Bible that make it very clear that there’s no opportunity for hope, repentance, or reconciliation to God after death. As Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” Ecclesiastes makes that clear, too: The only thing awaiting us after death is to be judged by God for what we did with the days He gave us under the sun. We will have no more opportunity for growth or repentance or hope of redemption.

3. The living still have a share in the things of life under the sun: While we live, not only can we repent and reconcile to God, but we can also share in the things of life under the sun – working, playing, serving our neighbors, enjoying life in this world – all of which come to an end at death.

So, if we're better off alive than dead (from an earthly perspective), then what should we do with the life we've been given?

B. Our Marching Orders, v. 7-10

⁷ *Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.*

⁸ *Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.*

⁹ *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. ¹⁰ 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.*

The command form used here is strong, carrying a sense of urgency. These aren't suggestions; these are our marching orders for life under the sun.

Enjoy Good Things

We can and should enjoy the good things of life - eat your bread with your joy and drink your wine with a merry heart – as gifts from God, knowing that, if we fear the Lord, He has already approved what we do. Life is not a test we have to pass in order to get God to accept us.

Christians can fall into one of two forms of legalism that destroy the joy of living life as a gift from God:

1. The first kind of legalism is thinking we need to earn acceptance from God by being good enough. During the Second Great Awakening in the 1820's – 40's, Charles Grandison Finney emerged as the leading revival preacher in America, inspiring a series of revival camp meetings that swept across America, in many ways launching the American evangelical movement. Finney denied the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, the teaching that Christ died in our place on the cross for our sins. He also denied that we were made righteous before God by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. He was a lawyer who never went to seminary and, though he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister, he had never even read the Westminster Confession of Faith. In his lawyer's way of thinking, it was unfair for God to punish Jesus for our sins or to credit us with Jesus' righteousness. Instead, he saw salvation as a call to moral self-improvement. Many Christians still struggle with this burden of thinking that the call of the Christian life is a call to follow Jesus in imitating His moral example. The best-selling book *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon, which popularized the expression "What Would Jesus Do?" is based on this same theology. According to this version of the Gospel, Jesus does not so much save us from our sins as help us overcome them and achieve righteousness by His example and the help He gives us.
2. The second kind of legalism is perfectionism, which teaches that we can become morally and spiritually perfect in this life. Some versions are active and some are passive – in other words, some perfectionists believe we do the work to achieve perfection with God's gracious help, while others believe God makes us perfect in a second work of grace, which they call entire sanctification. This form of legalism also became very popular after the Second Great Awakening, leading to the establishment of numerous utopian colonies and then the Keswick Movement and the teachings of Andrew Murray.

Both of these kinds of legalism unwittingly undermined and sought to undo the Reformation and are poisonous in three key ways:

1. They keep us from seeing the depth of our sin – that evil and madness are deeply rooted in the heart of everyone, so that we cannot make ourselves good enough for God nor are we ever morally and spiritually perfect in this life – not even close.
2. They keep us from seeing the full glory of the saving grace of God, who loves us and redeems us despite how sinful we are and remain throughout this life. Included in this is missing the powerful effect of the work of Christ to take our sin upon Himself and give us His righteousness.
3. Finally, they keep us from seeing this life under the sun as a gift and a blessing to be received and enjoyed, because they make life into a test we are continually trying to pass and, if we're honest, which we're continually failing to pass. Thus, God is constantly disappointed with our failures instead of constantly extending us His grace and blessing us in His love and delighting in us.

God gives us food and wine and we can eat and drink with joy and a merry heart, because He has already accepted us and our lives in Christ, through His redemption. But there's something else to see here: Bread and wine are simple, ordinary pleasures. Some people think they must always be chasing the "finer things" in life in order to have pleasure, but this becomes a chasing after the wind. Chasing and grasping after better and better quality things to enjoy is a trap of its own. If we cannot receive the simple things in life as undeserved and lovingly given gifts, then nothing will satisfy us – for it is ultimately not the gift but the Giver who makes our hearts joyful.

Enjoy Your Spouse

God also gives us our spouses to enjoy – *“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.”*

One of our favorite love songs for married couples is by Sara Groves: “Twice as Good” – with the refrain “Life with you is half as hard and twice as good.” God gives us the blessing of marriage so we have someone to share both our joys and our sorrows. We carry the burdens of our troubles together – making them half as hard - and we rejoice in our blessings together – making them twice as good.

Work Hard

The third blessing we're called to wholeheartedly embrace is 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.*

Solomon isn't denying the resurrection or the life to come in the resurrection. What he's saying is that the work and thinking we're given to do in this life is for this life. We won't have any more opportunity to do the work God's given us to do in this life after this life is over. And this work is good, and if God has given it to us to do, we should do it with our might. Martin Luther reclaimed the sacred nature of all work in the Reformation, and he emphasized that the Christian approach to work is to work with excellence. A great Christian brickmaker is not one who puts crosses on all of his bricks, but one who makes the best quality bricks.

C. Our Uncertain & Most Certain Future, v. 11-12

We need to make sure we have the proper motives and expectations as we work hard at the things God has given us to do and as we enjoy the gifts He has given. We are always tempted to take control of our lives and try to force the outcomes we desire. But Solomon says:

¹¹ 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, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. 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.

No matter how hard we work or how much excellence in skill and wisdom we bring to our work, we have no guarantee of the outcome and we cannot delay or even know the time of our death, which still comes to all of us, and often quite suddenly.

Solomon is not saying that the race is never to the swift – usually it is, but not always. He’s not saying the battle is not ever to the strong – just that we can’t be sure that it always will be. The beneficial outcome we hope for cannot be the reason why we do the good we’re given to do.

In his excellent sermon on Ecclesiastes 9, Dale Ralph Davis comes to verse 12 “*For man does not know his time*” and tells the story of John F Kennedy’s inauguration. Kennedy’s people did not like Lyndon Baines Johnson and his people. Kennedy was from Massachusetts and Johnson was from Texas. Johnson was added to the ticket for regional balance and to bring in Texas and its Electoral College votes. Kennedy tried to calm down his people by telling them: “I’m 43 years old. I’m not going to die in office. So, don’t worry, Johnson will never be president.” *Man does not know his time.*

D. Wisdom is Better, But How?, v. 13-15

Solomon ends this section of Ecclesiastes by extolling the benefits of wisdom. “Every man dies; not every man truly lives.” To truly live, we need to live knowing we are going to die, receiving life as a good gift, enjoying life and its pleasures, and working hard at what God gives us to do. We also need wisdom:

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

This is a strange story, but Solomon’s point is very simple: Wisdom is good not as a means to an end of getting acclaim, fame, and remembrance – because it guarantees none of those things. Just as we do not work hard just to become rich and successful, so we do not exercise wisdom in order to be praised and remembered as wise. Wisdom saved this little city from destruction. Thus, wisdom is good; it is better than weapons of war. We should prize it and seek it because it is one of God’s good blessings, not because of what it might get for us.

Knowing What is Truly Better

This, then, is the key: To truly live, we must know what is truly better. We are tempted to see God’s blessings in terms of what they can get for us that we want, and if His blessings don’t get us what we want – deep satisfaction and self-fulfillment, success, wealth, victory, fame, remembrance – then we tend to become resentful and despise them and think of them as worthless or insufficient. But we must begin, as chapter 9 begins, with the knowledge that we are in God’s hands. He is the Lord, and we are not. He gives and we receive. He controls and blesses and orders, and we give thanks and enjoy and seek to do His will with what He gives us. We know this life is not all we are given, but it is what we are given now, until the Lord’s appointed time for our life under the sun to end. If we fear the Lord, He has already accepted us and all we do because of what Jesus has done for us. So, let us truly live – knowing that all things are from Him and through Him and to Him, to Him be the glory forever!