

“The Vanity of Outward Observation”
Ecclesiastes 9:1-6
(Preached at Trinity, November 12, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we come to **Chapter 9** Solomon is still trying to find out by observation what God is doing upon the earth. This has been his task from the beginning of this Book. And his conclusion has been consistent.
Ecclesiastes 1:13-14 NAU - "And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.* ¹⁴ I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."
2. The introductory statement in **Verse 1** provides us with comfort and confidence.
Ecclesiastes 9:1 NAU - "For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God."
 - a. We saw last week that as far as the details of life, the ways of God are unfathomable. They can't be known. But one thing we know of a certainty. God knows those who belong to Him. They are protected safely in His hand. Whatever God is doing in the lives of His righteous ones He is working for their good. But this is a statement of faith. It is the confidence experienced by God's people.
 - b. From outward observation, however, there is no difference between the righteous and the wicked. It would appear that both are treated alike.
Ecclesiastes 9:1-2 NAU - "Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him. ² It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear."
 - c. Matthew Henry – “The great difficulty which Solomon met with in studying the book of providence was the little difference that is made between good men and bad in the distribution of comforts and crosses, and the disposal of events.”¹
3. Man cannot tell from outward observation the favor or curse of God. God's love or hatred cannot be determined by outward observation. Is God for us or against us? The truth is, no one can know these mysteries based upon what he sees in the circumstances of life. One will have to wait until the day of judgment when every secret will be made plain. But before that Day it isn't as clear.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1048.

- a. Is prosperity a sign of God's favor? Is suffering a sign of God's judgment? Many believers have been distressed by the many trials they have experienced. Why is this happening to me? This has been a longstanding question. Why do bad things happen to good people? It is actually a foolish question.
Romans 3:10 NAU - "as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one;"
- b. Many have also struggled with the apparent favor received by the wicked.
Jeremiah 12:1 NAU - "Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead *my* case with You; Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? *Why* are all those who deal in treachery at ease?"
Habakkuk 1:13 NAU - "*Your* eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness *with favor*. Why do You look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?"
4. Regarding the state of human beings upon the earth, there are some things that are the same, and there are some things that are vastly different. Tonight, I want to set before you the two states of man as they live together in this life.
- I. The things human being share alike—both the righteous and the wicked.
- A. Both the righteous and wicked share in the trials of life.
Ecclesiastes 9:2 NAU - "It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean"
1. We live in a fallen world. There are floods and fires. There are diseases. There are accidents and tragedies of every form.
 2. When a hurricane hits the homes of both righteous and wicked people are destroyed. Churches are sometimes destroyed. Churches need the same wind and fire insurance coverage.
 3. Hospitals are full of both righteous and wicked. COVID was no respecter of persons.
- B. Both wicked men and righteous share in the various degrees and conditions of life.
Ecclesiastes 9:2 NAU - "As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear."
1. There are rich atheists and poor righteous men.
 2. The New Testament recognizes slaves and masters without regard to their spiritual condition.
 3. There are married couples where only one is a believer.
 4. People have always presumed that suffering is the result of personal sin. Can we presume to know the mind of God?
 - a. The disciples of Jesus were guilty of this way of thinking.
John 9:1-3 NAU - "And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "*It was* neither *that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* in order that the works of God might be displayed in him."

- b. Job's friends presumed that Job was suffering because of sin.
Job 4:7-8 NAU - "Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed? ⁸
 "According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity And those who sow trouble harvest it."
5. People also foolishly presume that earthly blessings are a sign of God's favor. This is why the disciples were so shocked at the outcome of the Rich Young Ruler -
Matthew 19:25 NAU - "Then who can be saved?"
6. In **Chapter 8** Solomon described the mystery of God's dealing with men.
- a. On one hand, we presume that God blesses the righteous.
Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 NAU - "Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. ¹³
 But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God."
- b. On the other hand, things often appear upside down.
Ecclesiastes 8:14 NAU - "There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility."
7. Here in **Chapter 9** Solomon has to admit that the circumstances for both the righteous and the wicked were the same.
Ecclesiastes 9:2 NAU - "It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked"
8. This is the truth of God's dealings with men on the earth.
Matthew 5:45 NAU - "He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous."
- C. Not only are circumstances the same, both the righteous and the wicked will die.
Ecclesiastes 9:5 NAU - "For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten."
1. In **Verse 3** it is called an "evil." It is the fate of all men, an evil that all men must endure. All are born in sin. The same evil happens to the righteous and the wicked.
- a. The Bible presents death as a stalking enemy that pursues us.
- b. Death is the just consequence of sin. The sure testimony to the universal sin and guilt of human beings is universal death.
 "The wages of sin is death."
- c. Derek Kidner wrote: "Death is the great leveler. No matter who we are or how well we live, our time on earth will end in death—the universal obliterator."²

² Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 206.

2. Solomon does not put an emphasis on the afterlife. His focus is on the living. Where there is life there is hope. With death comes the end of every earthly hope.
3. We read Ecclesiastes as it rests within the whole of Scripture. We know God's redemptive purpose in Christ. The man who dies without Christ is forever lost.
Ecclesiastes 9:4 NAU - "For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion."
4. The living know they will die and have time to prepare for death. The dead know nothing.
Ecclesiastes 9:5 NAU - "For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything"

II. The vast difference between the righteous and the wicked.

- A. As I pointed out before, there is a great difference in how God deals with His people.
 1. All of God's dealings with His people are motivated by His love. Everything is for their good. The life of each individual is ordered for him personally as God works precisely what he needs whether it is suffering or pleasure.
 2. The life of the unbeliever is always under God's wrath. Whether he is experiencing suffering or great riches it is all moving towards his condemnation.
- B. While all suffer, there is a great difference in how people endure their suffering.
 1. The Christian sees all things as being from the hand of God.
 - a. God is working His purpose on our behalf.
Romans 8:28 NAU - "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."
 - b. The Christian receives both the good and the bad and praises God.
Job 13:15 NAU - "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him."
 - c. We can receive all things with thanksgiving because they are all gifts from the hand of our God.
 2. Christians remain steadfast and confident in the face of whatever this life will bring.
As Polycarp faced the threats of martyrdom the proconsul pled with him: "Curse Christ and I will release you."
REPLY: "Eighty-six years I have served Him. He had never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"
 3. With adversity the righteous praise God.
With adversity the wicked curse God.
 - a. This was the heart of the wicked who perished in the wilderness.
Numbers 11:4-6 NAU - "The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? ⁵ "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, ⁶ but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna."

- b. This was the heart of Job's wife.
Job 2:9 NAU - "Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!"
 - C. While Christians sometimes fear death, in the end God grants us the grace to face it with confidence. Death need not terrorize us.
 - 1. Death has lost all power over us.
1 Corinthians 15:54-57 NAS - "But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."
 - 2. Death is merely the means for departing from this world of sin to receive our eternal reward.

Conclusion:

- 1. Again, we need to read Ecclesiastes in the context of the whole Bible.
- 2. Yes, it may be true that the circumstances of this life happen to all regardless of our spiritual condition.
 But as God's people, we know He smiles upon us as His elect. He loves us. He keeps us. No trial shall ever separate us from His love.
- 3. And while Ecclesiastes may not give us a clear exposition of life after death, we know that death is not the end. We have a Redeemer. We have the promise of eternal life with Him. This keeps everything in this life in its proper perspective.