

The Race Is Not to the Swift

Ecclesiastes 9:11

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We must carefully guard against thinking that our hard work or our great talent automatically guarantees us success in this life.

Certainly, we should be diligent in working hard and developing the abilities God has given us to serve Him and others. Ordinarily, hard work in the use of the blessings and gifts God has given to us do yield profit in many ways in this life (Proverbs 13:4).

Nevertheless, the Lord reminds us from His Word today that the right use of God's gifts does not necessarily ensure that all our earthly plans will be realized. The Lord teaches us that it is not our swiftness, strength, riches, or knowledge that ultimately brings our plans to realization in this life. Yes, He uses our gifts, abilities, faith, and obedience, but it is God by His most wise and good providence that brings every blessing in this life. The disciples learned this lesson the hard way when they were unable to heal the possessed boy though they had received the gift of healing (Mark 9).

We are simply tools in God's hand that He uses to accomplish His good pleasure. And to our shame we often look to the tool (our gifts and abilities) for the help we need (giving the tool our praise), rather than looking to God who wields the tool in His almighty hand to fulfill His purposes in this world (giving God our praise).

God disappoints and frustrates our resources, abilities, and plans at times in order to humble us and to remind us that we are not God—we are simply tools that God uses for His own glory (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). God gives the increase, but He also withholds the increase at times for His own holy and wise reasons. If we do not learn this lesson in the School of Christ, we will be constantly discouraged because our plans have not been realized though we have been diligent in the use of our gifts/graces.

The main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 9:11 are the following: (1) Our Gifts Do Not Guarantee Earthly Success (Ecclesiastes 9:11); (2) The Reason Why We Cannot Trust Our Gifts (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

I. Our Gifts Do Not Guarantee Earthly Success (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

A. Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, the wisest mere man that ever lived, in order to reveal the vanity of all life under the sun without God (Ecclesiastes 1:2). He states his conclusion first—then he proves it.

1. If anyone should have found true joy, it was Solomon—he had the wealth, power, and knowledge. But he writes this inspired Book to inform us that if we only live for this life, we will be filled with emptiness. Only Jesus can give a true and lasting joy and contentment regardless of what happens in life.

2. In Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, King Solomon has given us a remedy to ward off discouragement when we find ourselves in times of adversity. He (in effect) says, “Look at the blessings of God all around you and seek to enjoy them in humble thanksgiving to God, and do not fulfill this duty to enjoy God's blessings half-heartedly, but do so with your might. God wants you to enjoy the blessings He has given to you.”

3. It is easy for our sinful nature to count all that we want and do not have, but it is the new nature that counts all the blessings God has graciously bestowed upon us. That is seeing life from above the sun, not from under the sun. Our joy, peace, and contentment depend on what we count as God's blessings to us. Enjoy them with you might!

B. But Solomon gives a word of caution (Ecclesiastes 9:11). This word of caution is given in order

that we might avoid an erroneous conclusion that might be drawn from Ecclesiastes 9:10.

1. There may be some who think that applying our hand with our might to use our gifts and perform our duties will AUTOMATICALLY yield the blessings we seek in this life. Perhaps we have cried out to the Lord, “God I have sought to be faithful in my Christian life, why did I lose my job, or why did my child go astray, or why did my marriage collapse, or why did my loved one die, or why have I suffered this physical affliction?” The prophet, Elijah, even fell into this error (1 Kings 19:9-10).

2. Does God always bring earthly success to our diligence in obeying and serving Him? He will bless our loving obedience, but will it necessarily be earthly blessings that we can see or grasp?

3. Ordinarily, those who obey their parents (and all lawful authority) according to the Fifth Commandment will have a long life on earth as God has promised (Ephesians 6:1-3), but that is not always true as we see in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ who was only 33 years of age when He was crucified (the young Margaret Wilson was just 18 years old). Does the prayer of faith always heal the sick (as some believe is taught in James 5:15)? Why then was Paul not healed of the thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:8-9), or why was Timothy not healed of his many stomach ailments (1 Timothy 5:23), or why was Trophimus left sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20)? Does obedience to God always lead to earthly blessings? Then why was Lazarus begging at the gate of the rich man (Luke 16:19ff), or why did Job lose all that he had in this world during his time of testing (Job 1-2)?

4. There is no mathematical formula that will bring about the realization of all our plans in this life that is “under the sun”, for God cannot be placed in a box to do what we want Him to do and when we want Him to do it no matter how gifted or diligent we are.

a. It is certainly true that our Triune God will keep all His promises. However, He will keep His promises in the way and at the time that He sets and not according to the timetables we set for Him. Sometimes God works ever so slowly in our lives or in the lives of others, (even to the point that we wonder in unbelief whether He is working at all). At other times, God surprises us with unimaginable blessings (when we ask or even before we ask).

b. It is not our gifts/diligence that are the cause of the blessings we enjoy. It is the mercy and love of Christ that is the cause of the blessings we enjoy in this life. It would lead us to put our trust in our gifts/diligence to bring the blessing, rather than to put our trust in God who works by means or apart from means to bring to us His blessings.

c. We use our gifts to serve the Lord and others because He is worthy of that service and obedience—not in order to get what we want in this life (Revelation 4:11). We cannot make God our debtor.

C. The words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:11 are both an encouragement and a warning to us.

1. **This truth is a great encouragement** to us who are in desperate circumstances and are utterly powerless to change our circumstances or to change the people around us. It may appear the enemies of Christ in the world are swift, mighty, rich, and knowledgeable. It may appear that our situation is totally hopeless in light of the enemies’ resources. But let us be encouraged: “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, etc.”

a. The Lord gave victory to Jonathan and his armor bearer over the Philistine garrison (1 Samuel 14:6). The Lord defeated 135,000 Midianites through Gideon’s 300 Israelites, who had only trumpets, pitchers, and torches (Judges 7—the enemies destroyed themselves). The Lord delivered Peter by an angel from prison, though shackled and guarded under lock and key (Acts 12). Jesus took Paul’s painful thorn in the flesh and used it to show forth His strength in Paul’s weakness (2 Corinthians 12:10).

b. This is always our hope, that God is able to use us who are weak and frail to accomplish mighty things for His glory. He is able to turn the overwhelming resources of the wicked against them so that they destroy themselves (Isaiah 54:17).

2. **This truth is also a great warning** to us that our trust cannot be ultimately placed in man or in the gifts/resources of man. This is to make an idol out of man or man's resources. Our trust must finally be in the Lord alone (Psalm 33:16-20).

a. So much of the discontentment and discouragement we experience in this life is due to our falling into this error. We faithfully do what we know to do, and when adversity rather than prosperity comes our way, we say, "Why Lord? I have done what Thou has commanded me to do. Where is Thy blessing for which I have prayed?" From there we may spiral downward into unbelief, self-pity, and anger against the Lord and against His most holy and most wise providence.

b. When that happens, does that not indicate that our faith has been misplaced? Are we not trusting more in what we have done to bring His blessings than in His tender mercies? Our response to God's nays or God's delays says much about where our faith is placed—in ourselves or in the Lord? Does our response reveal that our faith is placed in Christ who works His power in those who glory not in their swiftness, their riches, their might, nor their earthly wisdom, but who glory in the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23-24)? The Lord disappoints our earthly expectations and shows that the race is not to the swift so often in order that our faith might rest in Him and not in our swiftness, riches, might, or wisdom, but in our Almighty God.

II. The Reason Why We Cannot Trust Our Gifts (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

A. "But time and chance happeneth to them all."

1. In other words, it is not the resources of man that guarantee success or bring to pass the events in your life or mine, it is the divinely ordained plan and good pleasure of God that orders the time and events in our lives (even those events that appear from our human perspective to be "chance" because they are outside the control of man).

2. "Chance" is better translated as an "occurrence" that is not planned by man. This is God's providence, not our plans.

3. This is why we must never consider some earthly blessing as a sure and certain result of our strength, our knowledge, our wisdom, or our obedience (even if it is done with our might according to God's revealed will). God administers those blessings that He chooses at precisely the right time (no sooner and no later than is best for us). He doesn't do this so that we can be lazy in our faith, love, and obedience (acting as though our diligence doesn't matter at all), for He will discipline us when we are lazy. He calls us to diligence, faithfulness, and perseverance in what is true and righteous. He calls us to use our gifts for His glory and to walking in faithfulness to His commands. And He even graciously rewards us in doing so, but it is He who blesses—not we who bless ourselves by our gifts/diligence/obedience. The duty to obey God is ours, the result and consequences of our obedience are God's.

B. The race is not to the swift or most gifted, but is to those who see their weakness and because they do, they persevere in trusting the Lord Jesus as their strength. It is not how quickly you start the race or how swift you are at certain parts of the race. What ultimately counts is that you finish the race (2 Timothy 4:7-8). What ultimately counts is that you persevere in running the race in looking to Christ who has already finished the race for us (Hebrews 12:1-3).

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