
Enjoy

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

Pastor Stevan Vaughan

Introduction Many people today go through life with little joy. They are anxious about the economy: concerned about being laid off; worried they may lose their home; angry about high gas prices; some wondering where their next meal will come from. Others are anxious about their health: Will the cancer return? Will a stroke leave me paralyzed? Will a matching organ donor be found in time? Still others are anxious about death: Will it involve much suffering? Am I ready to face my Maker? Who will look after the kids? Anxiety eats away at the joy life can give. Anxiety kills joyful living!

That is as true today as it was in the time the Teacher wrote Ecclesiastes. The Teacher has been struggling in chapters 7 and 8 with the question why bad things happen to some good people and good things happen to some bad people. How can a just God allow this to come about? He ended chapter 8 with the conclusion that no one can find out all the work of God; "even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out." Then he begins chapter 9, "All this" - that is, that the righteous sometimes suffer while the wicked prosper, and that we cannot understand God's ways"

Sidney Greidanus. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons (Kindle Locations 2940-2947). Kindle Edition.

At the end of chapter 8, Solomon acknowledges that man cannot know God's ways, no matter how hard man tries or how wise a person is.

When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 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 8:16-17)

The One Thing in Life That Is Certain (Ecclesiastes 9:1-6)

There are very few things in life that are certain for all of us. The one thing that is certain for all of us is death, although none of us can know for certain when our life as God has ordained it will end.

Another uncertainty is that we do not know what kind of life God has ordained for us while we are living. Ecclesiastes looks at both realities, the certain and the uncertain, and tells us how to live within these two realities. How we choose to deal with both life and death will greatly impact how we live, and how we relate to God and others.

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. ²It 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. ³This 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.

Love or Hate? (v. 1)

Man cannot know what his life will be like, whether it will be filled with love or hate, good or evil. The harsh reality for man is that he is not in control of his life or his death. Ever since the Garden man has determined to be the master of his destiny, the captain of his ship, and the king of his castle. But from beginning to end we are completely dependent on God and his sovereignty for our very existence, as well as the type of life we will live and the time and manner of our death.

Solomon initially considers the life of the righteous.

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. (9:1)

Even the righteous and the wise do not know what their life will be like and whether it will be filled with love or hate, and even the deeds of the righteous and wise are fully and completely in the hands of God and under his sovereign control. But when it comes to life and death, living a righteous and wise life has no advantage over the unrighteous. Neither do the righteous know what kind of life they will have, whether it will be filled with love or hate. Clearly, God cannot be manipulated by those who are righteous and wise, to give us a different or better life because of our righteousness.

Alike (v. 2)

Whether a man is good or evil, no man knows what his life will be like and all men die. In this way life is alike for all men and Solomon says, this is an “evil under the sun”. Is it fair that the righteous cannot determine the life they will have, or have control over their death? Should the righteous be treated the same as the unrighteous? Shouldn’t the righteous be rewarded in life? The righteous and the wicked are alike.

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.

Death happens to all according to God’s sovereignty, but so does life. Death does not discriminate between the righteous and the wicked. The same fate happens to all men, no matter what their standing in this life. Both the righteous and the wicked die, as does the good person and the evil person, the clean and the unclean, and those who sacrifice and those who do not offer sacrifices, those who are good people as well as sinners, and those who swear and those who do not swear. Solomon contrasts and compares a wide variety of people and the result is the same, death to all.

Can This Be Fair? (v. 3)

How can this be fair? Solomon says this reality is an evil under the sun!

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. (v. 3)

From a purely human perspective this reality seems unfair, or as Solomon says, an evil or injustice in the reality of life. Death happens to all men whether they are good or bad, whether they are attempting to follow God and live a righteous life, or whether they are living a completely godless life. There is no advantage of one man over the other when it comes to death.

After considering the fate of the righteous in the beginning of the chapter Solomon turns to the hearts of all men. In somewhat of a contrast to the righteous, the children of man are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live. The Hebrew word used here, "madness," means delusional, foolish and blind. It also can be translated mocker or tormentor (plunderer) elsewhere in the Old Testament. Men who live their lives as they wish (compared to the righteous) still end up dead. From the standpoint of death and dying, there is no advantage in being righteous or evil, God is in control of the life and death of both the righteous and the wicked.

This could also be an allusion to wickedness of the heart of man written in Genesis before the Flood. Genesis 6:11-13;

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

When a Man Dies (v. 4-6)

While a man is living, no matter how miserable or hate-filled his life is, he still has hope. As soon as he dies there is nothing in this life remaining. All a man's pursuits and relationships end with him.

Hope is something we all take for granted, but there are many things about living that we fail to appreciate while we are alive.

But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 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. (v. 4-6)

Solomon uses a stark image contrasting the living with the dead. It's better to be a living stray dog, than a dead lion. When you consider the obvious comparison of a stray dog, and the mighty lion, even a stray dog who is still living (as miserable as his life is) is better off than a dead lion, which no longer has any impact on life. He is no longer King of the Beasts.

The living know they will die, and that will always be a part of the reality of life. But if you are alive you have hope, you have options. Death reminds us that God is in control of both our life and death and man has no input into changing the reality of God's sovereignty. Death is certain for all men, but no matter what kind of vain pathetic life you have, life in Solomon's thinking is better than death. If you are living you have hope that your life can be better.

A man who is alive can still contribute to his own life and the lives of those around him. He can still receive whatever reward and satisfaction his life might bring, but once he is dead, he will never again share or have input into his life or any other life. There will be no more potential reward from life and even the memories of most men are slowly forgotten in the minds of the remaining.

It is a difficult reality how quickly life gets back to normal after someone dies, and except for a few people mourning the dead, life everywhere else goes on without even skipping a beat. And even the life of a mourner is forced to move on very soon after the grieving process begins.

Whatever made up a dead person's life, whether his life was good or bad, filled with love or hate or even envy, it perishes with the deceased. The dead will never again share in life or have any type of influence or impact on any life again.

The Many Things in Life That Are Uncertain (v. 11-12)

Now we are going to skip ahead to verses 11 and 12. In this sermon we have a chiasmic structure. The things that are certain in life (mainly death) in verses 1-6, the center and focal point of the sermon in verses 7-10, and the end of the sermon, verses 11-12, on the things in life that are uncertain. I have chosen to look at both ends first and finish with the middle focal point of Solomon's solution. We know life is under God's sovereign control, as is our death. Now we observe that life is hard for all, and no one knows for sure what his life will be like. Look at verses 11 and 12:

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.

Life Doesn't Turn Out the Way We Expect (v. 11)

Although there are certain observations in life that greatly influence our view of life, such as...the fastest runner always wins the race, or the strongest man always wins the battle, or the intelligent will always have the most wealth and success. I could name numerous illustrations of people who fit perfectly into these categories. But in the reality of life, these observations don't always play out the way we think they should. Because in fact, the fastest runner in a race doesn't always win. The strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. Just because you are smarter than the next guy doesn't guarantee you will be the best prepared for life or accumulate the most wealth. Part of Solomon's frustration is that the good guys don't always win!

Time and chance happen to all men equally.

Man Does Not Know His Time (v. 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. (v. 12)

Man does not know what kind of life he will ultimately have, and man cannot determine the time and manner of his death. Like fish caught in a net, or a bird suddenly caught in a snare, life has a way of surprising us, no matter how well we think we are prepared for whatever life has for us.

Fish nets are hard to see underwater (on purpose). Fish who are caught in a net have no warning, and they rarely escape the net once it has been cast. Like the fish, or a bird suddenly and unexpectedly caught in a snare, death and tragedy comes suddenly to man, without warning. Difficulty and suffering happen to all men in the manner God has ordained for each one of us, and Solomon refers to the time of our death as "evil", since man's death is unexpected and irresistible.

So, what is the answer to the harsh realities of life and death that Solomon has observed?

Enjoy the Life That God Gives You (v. 7-10)

Verses 7-10 are the focal point of this passage in a simple chiasmic structure. And in fact, most commentators observe that this is a summary of the whole book of Ecclesiastes, and most certainly a turning point in the book.

So, how are we supposed to live since we cannot control our destiny and we have no control over our death? No matter how we live our lives, the same end of life happens to us all equally, so what is the answer? How can our life be meaningful with the shadow of death always hanging over us? Solomon says, starting in verse 7,

Enjoy the Simple Pleasures God Provides (v. 7-9)

Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. 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. 7-9)

Enjoy what you have while you are living. Enjoy the life that God has ordained for you. Have. Eat the food that God provides you and enjoy the simple pleasures that God gives, like a glass of wine, your spouse, and the work God has given you. And do so with a joyful, merry heart!

Also, take care of yourself and what you have, and do not go through life sad and depressed and having a bad attitude concerning the life God has given you. Make sure your clothes are clean, presentable, and well-kept so others see your contentment and joy. The imagery here is perhaps the opposite of fasting, or the imagery of white wedding garments.

Enjoy life with your spouse, and the other important relationships you have while you are still alive and be grateful and thankful for the friends and family God has given you.

In all these things God has approved what you choose to do because your life comes directly from him. He designed it, he put you in the life you have. Your life is your unique story to live. Recognizing God's sovereignty and worshipping him is a vital key to enjoying the life you have been given.

We should also do everything in life that we choose to do with all our might since when our life ends, we will not be doing anything in this life again and our relationships in this life will cease.

Pursue Life with All Your Might (v. 10)

Whatever your hand finds to do, ("...because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun") 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)

Whatever you find to do in this life, approach it with all your might, because that is the life that God has given you. And when you die you go the "underworld" and there will be no more work or knowledge or wisdom. I want you to consider this for a minute. This really caught my attention. No more work, knowledge or wisdom. We are created to work and find fulfillment in our work. Work was what man did as soon as he was created. Work is not a product of the Fall. But this is what really made me think. After we die, we will no longer plan, consider mysteries, figure out problems, nor learn. These are an important part of the life we have now! And yet, these are aspects of life we take for granted each day after we wake up to tackle the day we have been given.

I am convinced more and more we need to live our daily lives in the context of God's will and be thankful for the circumstances that God has ordained for us each day.

Realism and New Covenant Living

Does the New Covenant change any of what Solomon is teaching us?

The reality of life and death as Solomon has observed and laid out for us does not change with a New Covenant perspective. The way we live out the realities of life and death should be informed by the cross.

The uncertainties of life and death remain, but as believers our perspective and attitude should be informed by our life in Christ every time God allows us to wake up and face a new day.

1. We should rejoice in God's sovereignty, not fear it. We know our salvation is in God's perfect plan for us - how much more our life and death?
2. We know we will live forever, and although someday this life will end, and we will no longer have input into this life or the relationships we enjoy in this life, we will be in the presence of the Lord when we die
3. None of us know the length of our days, whether we will live to be 100 or die today, so live each day to the fullest (whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might) *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:23-24)*

4. Be thankful every morning for each new day God has given you, and enjoy it with a merry, joyful heart. *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* (Psalm 118:24)
5. Enjoy the simple pleasures in life, recognize God's gifts that he provides for you each day and rejoice in his provision.
6. Make the most of the relationships God has given you. Develop and cultivate meaningful relationships with those around you because you never know when your life or the life of someone you love will end.
7. Use the gifts God has given you to do the work of the gospel. We know from this side of redemptive history that God wants us to bear fruit for kingdom expansion, using our gifts and energy for proclaiming and living out the gospel. We should do so with all our might!

Conclusion

Live every day with God's will in view. Not "how can I know God's hidden will," but by accepting the circumstances, people, and life changes that God places in your day, week, year and life as the perfect will of God. Consider James 4:13-16; *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.* (James 4:13-16)