

Ecclesiastes 9: 11 and 12; “The Race is Not to the Swift”, Message # 64 in the series – “Remember Your Creator”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 8th, 2020, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

The verses that I have just read to us should cause us to understand that living the Christian life is not simply a matter of determined diligence. It is living your life unto God. The work that you do is included in this, as we looked at last time. But Solomon saw something of great spiritual value here, which you and I need to recognize as well. It is this; that although God is not directly mentioned in this verse, He controls the outcome of everything that is of importance to any man; even the race that he or she is running for Him. For our verse 11 says, “But time and chance happen to them all.” This is what we want to look at, at this time. 1st of all – We want to see that there is no such thing as “chance” with God. 2nd – We want to see that fleshly strengths and skills do not guarantee the outcome of the race that we are running. And 3rd – We will think about the truth that man does not know his time. May these things that we speak of, cause our faith in God to increase and be strengthened to run the race which is set before us.

1st of all – We want to see that there is no such thing as “chance” with God.

Verse 11 says, “But time and chance happen to them all.” The word “chance” in the verse is the Hebrew word “Pega” in the Hebrew, and it means “incident” or “occurrence”; something that comes to all people from outside of themselves. Many people, even some Christians, see things of great importance to them as matters of “chance”; something that just happens to them apart from God’s having any influence or control over them. But let us understand; that the things which we see as chance, are very much under the control and providence of God as much as the things which we can clearly see being “acts of God”.

Turn with me to 1st Samuel 6, verse 1. Here the Philistines in this passage are in a quandary. They have defeated Israel in battle and they have taken the ark into their possession. But the hand of the Lord was so much against them, that they say in verse 7 of Chapter 5, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.” So they sent the ark to Gath. But God struck the men of Gath with tumors breaking out on them, and so they sent it to Ekron. And a deadly destruction broke out among them there. Then in verse 1 of Chapter 6, it says, “Now the ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.” “And the Philistines called for the priest and the diviners, saying, ‘What shall we do with the ark of the Lord?’ “Tell us how we should send it to its place.”

The priests and diviners give the men some particulars and then they say this, down in verse 8 – “Then take the ark of the Lord and set it on the cart; and put the articles of gold which you are returning to Him as a trespass offering in a chest by its side.” “Then send it away, and let it go.” “And watch: if it goes up the road to its own territory, to Beth Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil.” “But if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us – it happened to us by chance.” “Then the men did so; they took two milk cows and hitched them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home.” “And they set the ark of the Lord on the cart, and the chest with the gold rats and the images of their tumors.” “Then the cows headed straight for the road to Beth Shemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right hand, or the left.”

You can see here that these things did not happen to them by chance. They were pagan unbelievers, and yet they had this truth proved to them. It does not say that they were converted to the God of Israel by knowing this truth. But a true Christian should not be a person who believes in luck, and they should not believe in “chance” in the way that unbelievers do. A Christian can, and they should, believe that there many things mysterious in the providence of God; the way that God orders things to happen in relation to their life, and the lives of other people around them. But they should not be a person who is questioning that God’s sovereignty is in all the details of the outworking of all things which come to them in their life.

Turn with me over to Proverbs chapter 16, verse 33, and I will show this to you. It says here – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” You can see here that this practice of casting lots seems to be very random in its outcome. But here it says that “its every decision is from the Lord.” There are a number of examples in the Bible which record that when this was done in the fear of the Lord, it was very obvious to all who were concerned in the outcome, that this was God’s will. John Gill says, the casting of a lot used to be done “in choosing officers, civil or ecclesiastical; in dividing inheritances, and determining doubtful cases; and making up differences, and putting an end to strife and contentions, which otherwise could not be done: and this,” he says, “ought not to be used in trivial cases, or to gratify curiosity, or for the sake of gain, or rashly and superstitiously; but seriously and religiously, with prayer, and in faith, and with a view to the divine direction, and submission to it; for a lot has the nature of an oath, and is an appeal to the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent Being.”

But you will say to me, “What about people being saved from their sins and their coming to inherit eternal life?” “Is that a matter of chance?” No, it is not a matter of chance. It is completely in God’s Sovereign hands; and it is completely worked out in accordance with God’s eternal purpose, and His providential ordering of all things necessary to bring it about. Let’s turn to the book of Ephesians Chapter 1 and what is said there about your own conversion to Christ. Listen to verse 11 – “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

You see, your salvation was to the praise of His glory, and not yours. Your salvation, dear believer, was not a matter of chance. God worked all things after the counsel of His will so that you could find Christ. You were known unto God and by God, from before the salvation of the world, to be one of His chosen ones. There was nothing of chance in your being saved from your sins. And it was not even a matter of your willing or your running, but of God who showed you mercy. (Romans 9: 16) But you should understand that now that you have been saved, that God would have you to go on to glorify Him by the way that you live. It may have seemed a thing of chance to you, that you just happened to become a Christian, but certainly this cannot possibly be true. You may have “happened upon” a certain book; the Bible, or a tract, which told you of Christ. And when you came to Christ, it might have seemed that you “found” Christ; not that Christ found you. But none of these things was by chance. This leads me to observe –

2nd – That fleshly strengths and skills do not guarantee the outcome we are hoping to see, by all of our mental and physical exertions.

“I returned and saw under the sun that – The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.” The race, the battle, the bread, the riches, and the favor being talked about here, can all be taken in both a literal physical and literal spiritual sense. The race is not always to the swift. A man may be very quick on his feet and yet it still may be the case, for reasons which are outside of his control; he may find himself not able to win the race. Sometimes men presume upon their fleshly strength, and they determine that they will do something, and then they are surprised when they find that they cannot do what they thought that they could.

Think about Asahel in 2nd Samuel 2: 18-23. It says, “Now the three sons of Zeruiah were there: Joab and Abishai and Asahel.” “And Asahel was as fleet of foot as a wild gazelle.” So Asahel pursued Abner, and in going he did not turn to the right hand or to the left from following Abner.” “Then Abner looked behind him and said, “Are you Asahel?” “He answered, ‘I am.’ “And Abner said to him, “Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and lay hold on one of the young men and take his armor for yourself.” “But Asahel would not turn aside from following him.” “So Abner said again to Asahel, “Turn aside from following me.” “Why should I strike you to the ground?” “How then could I face your brother Joab?” “However, he refused to turn aside.” “Therefore Abner

struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of the spear, so that the spear came out of his back; and he fell down there and died on the spot.” “So it was that as many as came to the place where Asahel fell down and died, stood still.”

Now, if this contest was simply a matter of speed, the race would have been won by Asahel for sure. But the contest was not simply a matter of speed. This was a battle for the life of Abner, and Asahel was not up to the task of taking on Abner in personal combat. And thus he died. He was very determined in his running to catch up to Abner, and then to kill him in combat, but he overestimated his own abilities. He ran into this battle simply on the strength of his own speed and strength, without realizing how easily Abner could deal with him. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. There may be someone quicker than you are; someone stronger than you are. And so you ought to carefully consider it, and not assume that your wisdom will bring you success, or that your strength or your skill will be enough to succeed in obtaining your objective. And so, each of us needs to remember that ultimately God determines the outcome in these things. Therefore will you not trust in Him alone for the wisdom and the strength that you will need?

I think that perhaps Asahel had the ambition for personal glory in this situation, and that this could have been the reason that he failed. It is not good to drink too much honey, and even so, it is not good to seek one's own glory it says in Proverbs. The race is not to the swift. However, Asahel may have even been seeking the glory of David's kingdom in this attempt to capture or kill Abner. But having glory and praise from other men is not the highest motive for doing what you are doing. In applying this to ourselves, we must see to it, that as Christians, that our motives are righteous motives in all that we would do for Christ's kingdom. And we must not let our zeal, even in a good cause, overtake our prudence and wisdom, in any given situation that we face.

Why rashly throw your life away by not thinking of the consequences of what you might desire to do in the short term? You cannot conclude that you will win the battle just because you are strong, or win the race just because you are swift. However you can pray and seek the wisdom which is from above, which first pure and then peaceable and gentle. And this will give you the right understanding. And then you may wisely begin to take definite steps to become a person of discretion where you need. Our zeal needs to be tempered by wisdom and discretion. Discretion is the ability to rightly assess the situation that you are facing, as to whether you take action, and instantly become involved in speaking words or taking actions which may affect your whole life in many ways.

God is your judge, and so you must ask yourself – Should I become a judge between one person and another; to become involved in a situation, whether I really understand what I am looking at, or not? David took righteous action against Goliath. But it because he was concerning for the glory of God. Asahel took action, but he rashly plunged ahead, to his death, when he did not need to do so. He was chasing Abner to kill him, but he was no match for Abner in personal combat. It is always good to be zealous for the glory of God, but it is not always good to be zealous simply for the approval of men, or to live up to your own conception of your own strength, rather than that which God has given to you. He gives you your abilities to use them all to Him and to his glory.

Turn with me to 1st Corinthians Chapter 9, verse 24. “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?” “Run in such a way that you may obtain it.” “And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.” “Now they do it to obtain perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty.” “Thus I fight: Not as one who beats the air.” “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” Now we must ask ourselves what is the prize that is being spoken of here in these verses? What is Paul running to obtain? It says here, he is running to obtain an imperishable crown; a crown that will last forever. It says here, that Paul's means to obtain this goal of his life was to discipline his body and to bring

it under subjection. This was not simply discipline to run swiftly toward to goal, but to run to the glory of God.

As he goes on to explain in Chapter 10, He would be temperate and moderate in his use of eating and drinking. He would guard himself against idolatry and sexual temptations and sins. He would guard himself against complaining. He would attempt to do all things for the glory of God and not his own glory. He would not let the world or his flesh overcome him. But what does he do all this for? Why all this self-denial? Since we should apply this to ourselves, we must ask what our own “running the race” is all about. Is it to compete with other Christians, so that we can prove to ourselves, and to them, that we are in better physical shape than they are? Is it to establish our own ability to be more righteous than other men? Is it only one Christian, then, out of all of them, who will win the prize? What is this prize that he is talking about? And who are we competing with? The prize that Paul would win, I believe, was knowing Christ Himself better, and being able to be faithful to Him by engaging in righteous thinking and living; that is, by asking Christ for the wisdom and grace to be able to learn of Him, and do all to His glory.

3rd – Let us see finally, then, that man does not know his time. (verse 12)

“For man also does not know his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.” I do not think that this verse refers to those who are fearing God and are trusting in His promises, and who are trying to keep His Word. Oh, I know that the same kinds of sudden adverse circumstances can fall upon believers as those which happen to unbelievers. This can cause them and other people to think that there is no advantage to being righteous. Bad and evil things can happen to God’s good people. But we know that God providentially orders all things to work together for their good, whereas for the unrighteous it means their eternal and everlasting doom.

I believe that this verse is related to those who are swift to do what is evil. I believe that it refers to those who think that bread and riches will only come to those who are using worldly wisdom and understanding to achieve their ends; people who believe that favor only comes to those who are skillful in planning their own way apart from God’s way of doing things. The outcome of their life is that they do not know their time. In other words, they do not know the time of their calamity which will come upon them from the hand of God. Proverbs 29: 1 – “He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” Like fish, they will be taken in a cruel net. Like birds they will be snared in an evil time, when calamity suddenly falls upon them. But for the Christian, it shall not be so. Although evil men may persecute him and try and bring trouble to him, to catch him unawares; yet God will be there with him, to deliver him and protect him from all evil, and to keep his soul. He will be with him and for him, to help in such trials.

Listen to the Apostle Paul again in 2nd Timothy 4: 16. Speaking of his being left by himself, with no man to stand with him and help him in the preaching of the gospel, at one point late in his life, he says, “At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me.” “May it not be charged against them.” “But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear.” “Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.” “And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom.” This deliverance may be from death or through death, but it will most certainly come. Let us praise Him that it shall be so; that no evil work shall have any everlasting effect on any of God’s people. And let us praise Him that our God is a God of deliverances and to Him belongs escapes from death.