

Ecclesiastes 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes chapter 9. But all this I laid to heart, examining at 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. 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. 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, a madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. 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 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. 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. 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. 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 favour to those with knowledge.

But time and chance happen to them all, 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. I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it. 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. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Ecclesiastes chapter 9 especially focuses upon the unpredictability of life and the interruption of death. The lives and deeds of the righteous and the wise are in the hands of God. Divine sovereignty and providence, not human wisdom, prudence and righteousness, oversee all things. Although we might believe that by our righteousness and our wisdom we could direct the course of our lives, it is God who is in control, and he will direct our lives as it pleases him. There are various views concerning what is referred to by the love and hate in the second half of verse 1. Daniel Fredericks observed the presence of love and hate connected with envy in verse 6. On this basis, he argues that these belong to human beings, not God. No one knows whether they will experience love or hate from others. However, in light of the more immediate context, Michael Fox claims that it refers to God's favour or disfavour. We don't know what our fortunes will be in advance.

The same fate of death ultimately befalls all human beings, irrespective of their moral character and piety. No matter how different two persons may be in their behaviour and the relationship to God, death is the universal and ultimate equaliser. Life swiftly passes and we will die. Life, however, is much to be preferred to death. Death is inert. It's the extinction of all possibility and potential.

The preacher describes this in terms of the arresting contrast between a dead lion and a living dog. William Brown writes, Associated with royal might and prowess and conflict, the lion was considered the archetypal predator, the model of a king from the kingdom of the wild, this king of beasts. But the lion's regal stature is worthless in death, Koheleth observes. A dead lion is nothing more than a carcass, fit for the vultures.

[4 : 33] The dog, by contrast, was typically associated with filth and even death in ancient Near Eastern culture. Moreover, dog was frequently a term of contempt in biblical tradition and remains so in English.

Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly. The lion and the dog were emblematic of opposing reputations, intelligence and folly, might and weakness, majesty and lowliness.

According to the sages of convention, reputation is the individual's lasting legacy for future generations. It is the immortalized self. But for Koheleth, the groveling dog holds an absolute advantage over the lion's carcass. Life cannot be lived for the sake of the future. A dog at least receives the crumbs that fall from heaven. Strangely, for the preacher, the advantage of the living over the dead, in verse 5, is that the former know that they will die. Perhaps their awareness of their coming demise excites their sense of the fleeting possibilities of the present. Man's period upon the stage of life is brief, and who knows what awaits him when he departs it to the darkness of the wings.

The dead fade into the shadows forgotten, their part in the drama of life over. Dwayne Garrett maintains that the claim that they know nothing is not a claim about the metaphysical nature of the afterlife, or perhaps the lack of one, but is rather another way of making the preachers claim that they know nothing more of the business of life. Their time has passed, and they have moved on. Whatever awaits us after death, the current brief season of life, is the only such opportunity that we will have. Jeffrey Myers uses Jesus' statement in John 9, verse 4, to illustrate this point.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming, when no one can work. Verses like these might trouble Christians, who have a far more positive view of the afterlife. However, the afterlife, in the Old Testament particularly, is veiled in darkness and shadow. To the extent that a continuing form of existence is envisaged, it is in the grave, or Sheol, a place to which all go, a place where men are much reduced from what they were in life.

[6 : 42] While there may be continuing distinctions between the righteous and the wicked, the dead are all in a less fortunate position than the living. Positive hope for life after death only starts to appear as the promise of resurrection, of God's gracious, purposeful overcoming of the power of the grave, starts to come into view in the scriptures. And with the death and resurrection of Christ, there is a decisive change in the position of the dead. The dead are raised up to God's presence to be with Christ. Consequently, following the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, death can be viewed very differently, indeed very positively. However, we should never forget that death used to have a quite different character, and the only reason that it doesn't still have that character for the righteous is because God has acted decisively in history in Christ to change things. Given the certainty and finality of death, the preacher exhorts his hearers to make the most of their span of life, while they still can enjoy it. In verses 7-10, he gives a fuller expression of his frequent counsel to pursue joy in God's gifts in the midst of our toil. He lists some of the things that we should enjoy, sustaining and tasty food, wine to make our hearts glad, God's gracious approval of our works, comfortable, clean and attractive clothing, the refreshment of sweet-smelling oil and other things upon our bodies, and the pleasures of life with a woman that you love. God has given us these good gifts, and as we know his gracious smile upon us and a right standing before him, all of these gifts should be delighted in. Holiness is not dullness, drabness and miserableness, it's joy in the kindness and grace of God and the goodness of his world and his gifts within it.

Justification and forgiveness, God's having approved of what we do, are gifts to be enjoyed. They give us relief from anxiety and the accusations of conscience, an assurance of acceptance and standing with God. Part of what it means to receive these things is to know true joy. We all have a limited window of opportunity in which to enjoy the possibilities of life, and we should throw ourselves into it. Over time the rich array of possibilities that lie open to the young child dwindle and narrow, and we find ourselves set in a particular course, perhaps yearning for a time when the possibility of us being something different still seemed open to us. Rather, however, than yearning for now-closed possibilities of the past, we should devote ourselves fully to the realisation of those possibilities to which we have committed ourselves. Half-hearted activity should have no place in such brief lives. Toil is our lot in life, and we should devote ourselves to doing it well, and to pursuing joy within it, and not futilely longing for things that lie outside of our grasp.

Life is unpredictable. Fortune does not invariably favour the brave. We are all at the mercy of time and chance. No man rises above fickle fortune, or escapes the cruel interruption of death. However we prepare ourselves for the challenges and struggles of life, the vaporous movements of life and death will outwit and wrong-foot us. The preacher tells the story of a poor man who illustrates both the fact that wisdom can exceed military might in its effectiveness, but also exhibits our limitations in the face of the swirling vapour of life. This poor man delivered a besieged, weakly defended city with his shrewd wisdom. Yet despite the greatness of his wisdom, he was soon forgotten and unheard.

We read a very similar story to this in 2 Samuel chapter 20 verses 15 to 22, where a wise woman saves her besieged city from destruction by delivering the head of Sheba to Joab. We know of the existence and the action of this wise woman, but her name is forgotten to history. Proverbs often teaches about the great power of wisdom. For instance, in Proverbs chapter 24 verses 5 to 6, a wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might. For by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory. The poor man of the besieged city may not have gained personal fame, received regard, or enjoyed status, but his wisdom is nonetheless to be preferred over the might of those who enjoy fame, wealth, and honour being foolish. Unfortunately, although the poor wise man achieved great good through his wisdom, it is generally easier to damage and destroy than to create and establish. A one sinner or fool can do much harm. A foolish son can squander in a few years the great legacy that a family took many generations to create. A wicked king can bring a mighty kingdom to ruin. An abusive minister can devastate a once faithful and flourishing church.

These things too are tragic aspects of the vapour of life under the sun. A question to consider. Where in the New Testament can we see a positive vision of death that contrasts with the preacher's vision of it in this chapter? What are some of the ways that we can apply the teaching of the preacher here, while nonetheless recognising the difference between death after the advent of Christ and death prior to it?