



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Facing Death and Enjoying Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

The first six verses of chapter 9 are a continuation of the thoughts in chapter 8, that wisdom comes in fearing God. “But all this I laid to heart, examining it all” refers to what Qoheleth had discussed in the previous verses: On this earth it can be hard to reconcile why the unrighteous sometimes prosper while the righteous suffer, but the wise man will trust God who will one day make things right. A wise man will enjoy the simple blessings that come from the hand of God while trusting God in those things he cannot understand.

In chapter 9, Qoheleth sees that all who are righteous and wise are in the hand of God regardless of whether they suffer or prosper in the present life. The conclusion is to make the best of every day because there is hope and industry while alive, but death will bring an end to all activity “under the sun.”

1. What does it mean to be in the “hand of God?” (9:1; 2:24)

The love or hate in verse one describes the entire breadth of experiences a person can have in life. There are both good and bad happenings in the life of every person. Being in the hand of God does not prevent terrible experiences nor do problems in life show that a person has been unwise or unrighteous. Similarly prosperity does not indicate whether or not a person is righteous or wise.

In verse 2, the same point is made in expanded form. No matter if a person is righteous or wicked, good or evil, clean or unclean, a man who sacrifices or one who does not sacrifice, a good man or a sinner, one who swears or does not swear an oath each one experiences a range of happenings in life. There is no way to tell by external observances of a person’s circumstances whether or not they are righteous.



2. What if anything do these verses say to those who claim that health and prosperity will come to the righteous? (Sometimes called the “Prosperity Gospel”)

In verse 3, death is described as “an evil” which comes to all. For the unrighteous person the realisation of a coming death causes them to be full of evil and madness while they live. “The term ‘madness’ ... embraces the idea of being blind to the real issues, spiritually deluded.¹ It appears to them that there is no advantage in righteous living because the righteous suffer and die just like the unrighteous. Solomon repeats what he wrote in 8:11 “that because evil is not in this world visibly punished, men become confident and bold in sinning.”²

3. Why does an awareness of a coming death sometimes lead the unrighteous to sin?



In verse 4, Qoheleth says there is hope only while one is alive. (This the hope for accomplishing anything “under the sun.”) It is better to be a live dog (which was viewed with contempt, as a wild scavenger, by the people of Solomon’s day) than to be a dead lion (which was considered the noblest of animals.) The living have an awareness of life and death, but the dead know nothing of what is happening on earth and even their memory is soon forgotten.

Solomon is not teaching that there is no life after death (see 12:7). He is saying that the dead no longer have any knowledge of or participation in what happens on earth. In a generation or two they will be forgotten and they are no longer loved, or hated, or envied by anyone. This is the view of death “under the sun” without a knowledge and appreciation of the workings of God. This is an accurate view of death for non-believers who “refuse to let the light from the empty tomb illuminate the darkness of death.”³

4. What emotions might the unrighteous person experience if he believes life “under the sun” is all there is or ever will be?

5. How should an awareness of a coming death motivate and affect people?

The previous verses in Ecclesiastes may seem quite depressing. Everyone faces problems, pain, and tragedy in life even if they are righteous. There is no equity “under the sun;” the wicked may prosper while the righteous suffer. Everyone faces a certain death and their contribution to life in this world will be soon forgotten. How can a person bear up under the expectation of such a future? Solomon basically says live your life to the fullest and enjoy every moment you can.

In verse 7, Solomon says, “eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.” Enjoy food and drink “for God has approved of what you do.” God has provided these blessings for our

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 785.

² C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), vol. 6, p. 756.

³ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 787.



enjoyment. God has made food and drink to have good flavour, to nourish, and to bring satisfaction.

White garments were used to denote purity and celebration. Oil was used as a perfume and to refresh the skin. These show an attitude to joy, celebration, and thanksgiving. Again, the teaching is to enjoy the blessings God provides. Do not wallow in self-pity or allow yourself to be depressed by what you cannot change. Take pleasure in what God gives you to enjoy.

Next Solomon teaches that a man should enjoy his life with the wife he loves. Solomon commends marriage and makes it clear that marriage is between a man and a woman and is considered to be a permanent union as long as they both shall live (see Matt. 19:4-6). The word translated as “vain” in verse 9 is the word *hebel* that we have seen repeatedly in Ecclesiastes. The idea is that life is transitory, so enjoy your marriage as long as you and your spouse live.



Your wife is “your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.” The idea is that a good marriage can bring joy in the midst of a life filled with work and difficulty. It is likely that Solomon originally wrote these words of advice late in his life to young men to impress upon them that taking a wife can make life more bearable.

6. In what ways can a good marriage make the toil in life more bearable?

The final advice for enjoying life comes in the pleasure of work. When you labour, do so with all your might because the days of your activity in this world will one day cease. Whether we are working in our occupations, or engaging in activity for the Lord, we should work diligently, intently, and industriously because the grave will one day bring an end to our labours. We are all headed to Sheol (the unseen abode of the dead). Solomon is not teaching there is no afterlife, but that all our activities in this world will be complete at our death.

Time is a precious commodity. For the righteous, there should be enjoyment from the work of our hands as the Bible commends industrious living. There is also much work to do for the advance of Kingdom of God. The brevity of life should lead the believer to make the most of every opportunity for service to Christ.

The Uncertainty of the Future **Ecclesiastes 9:11-18**

The outcome of our activities is far from certain. In verse 11, Solomon lays out what seems to be a number of contradictions. We cannot be certain that the swift will win the race, that the battle will be won by the strong, that the wise will have bread, that the intelligent will be wealthy, that the knowledgeable will have respect and influence. The reason why these expected outcomes do not always occur comes from circumstances outside of man’s control.

Regularly our well laid plans are interrupted or short-circuited by events that we could not have anticipated nor prevented. Life under the sun is filled with uncertainty. Even the time of a man's death is outside of his control and can come unexpectedly like fish caught in a net or birds entrapped in a snare. Man can prepare for many things, but unexpected happenings occur quickly and without warning. No man can be certain of what will happen tomorrow.

7. The word translated as “chance” in verse 11 means an unexpected circumstance. How should people prepare for the unknown?

The chapter closes with a story of a mighty king with a great army who came against a small and poor city. The fearsome army built siege-works and was nearly to breach the walls of the city. Inside the walls of the city was a poor, but wise man. He delivered the city through his wisdom; probably by shrewd negotiation.

Though the poor wise man saved the city from certain destruction he was soon forgotten. His wisdom was greater than the army's might, but under normal circumstances he has no voice and is despised by all around him.

Solomon writes a wise proverb in verses 17-18. The wise word heard in quiet is better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. A wise man offers his advice quietly and when accepted is greater than the loud leader who carries much influence. His wise counsel is greater than the mighty weapons of war. Conversely one sinner destroys much good.

8. How does a sinner destroy much good?

There are many lessons in chapter 9 of Ecclesiastes. Let us summarise some of the main lessons:

1. Every person will face good times and bad and these events are unpredictable. They do not necessarily reflect upon how righteous or unrighteous a person is living.
2. All believers are in the hand of God.
3. Death comes to all, but the believer will not concern himself with what he cannot change. He will enjoy the life that God provides and live it with enthusiasm.
4. Time is precious and we should use it wisely.
5. It is better to be wise and to accept the counsel of the wise even if it is not popularly accepted.