

Facing Death?

The wise person gratefully lives all the days he or she is granted.

During the years I served as pastor of a church in Columbus, Georgia, I also regularly taught a Bible study group at a nearby nursing home. At the first session I taught there, an elderly woman parked her motorized wheelchair very close to my podium. She happened to be a member of the church I served and was at that time 104 years old. I had been at the church only a few weeks, so this was my first visit to the facility. She looked up at me and softly asked, “Are you my pastor?” A big smile appeared when I responded, “Yes, ma’am, I am your new pastor.” After the session, she grinned at me and said, “I didn’t hear a word you said, but I sure did enjoy it!” She had experienced profound joy in simply being present when her pastor taught a Bible study.

Joy is a choice that God’s people can make regardless of age, physical health, marital status, financial means, family proximity, geographical location, or any other external factor. Like this saintly lady who enjoyed a Bible study she could barely hear, we as believers can choose to enjoy our God-given lives even in difficult times. Psalm 90:10 says, “Our lives last seventy years or, if we are strong, eighty years. Even the best of them are struggle and sorrow; indeed, they pass quickly and we fly away.”

In this session, we will examine Solomon’s counsel regarding how God’s people can best approach the time they have left to live on this earth. God determines the length of our lifespans according to His purposes. Therefore, we should be grateful for the time He grants us and enjoy that time in a manner that pleases Him.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 9:1-10:20

In Ecclesiastes 9:1-10, Solomon counseled God’s people to enjoy life for the gift from God that it is. Life is relatively brief, and death for all is a certainty. Life frequently is filled with difficulties. Even so, life is preferable to death.

Therefore, Solomon encouraged people to use their remaining time wisely before it was too late (9:4-6). This included using what God has provided each person in order to enjoy life (9:7-10). Life is too short to waste the time that God has allotted an individual.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18 points out the limitations of wisdom. As a monarch, Solomon routinely studied the military campaigns of contemporary rulers. One example provided unexpected insight into wisdom. An unidentified king led a powerful army against an insignificant town. An obscure but wise citizen of the town rescued the community. Despite the rescue, however, the wise man's fame faded into oblivion because of his poverty. To Solomon, this example showed that people too often have a tendency to concentrate on misleading factors. Popular opinion often exalts fools and marginalizes the wise.

Ecclesiastes 10:1-20 warns about folly. Failure to cover a container of perfume can lead to the ruin of its contents. Similarly, little tasks may seem unimportant but turn out in the end to determine the course of one's life (10:1-4). All levels of society, from the poorest to the wealthiest, can be guilty of folly (10:5-7). Mundane labor may have a variety of dangers. Preparation is essential to achieve success in completing a task (10:8-11). Solomon concluded this segment with some examples of foolish and wise living (10:12-20).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SOBER TRUTH (Eccl. 9:1-3)

Solomon shared that all people will die (physically) regardless of their level of human righteousness or of wickedness. He also noted that all people have evil in their hearts.

VERSE 1

Indeed, I took all this to heart and explained it all: The righteous, the wise, and their works are in God's hands. People don't know whether to expect love or hate. Everything lies ahead of them.

The translation **I took all this to heart** ("all this I laid to heart," ESV; "I reflected on all this," NIV) literally reads "all this I gave unto my heart." The ancient Israelites considered the heart to be the place not only of emotions but also of decision making. This is understandable in that making crucial life decisions usually affects a person's cardiovascular system. The heart rate increases; one's blood pressure rises. What Solomon specifically took to heart

and explained (“to declare,” KJV; “examining,” ESV; “concluded,” NIV) were all of the principles and applications he had discussed in the previous chapter. At the same time, the statement may be a general conclusion regarding the first eight chapters that included the reports of his investigations. The bottom-line conclusion for Solomon was that the one true and sovereign God determines the beginning, end, and outcomes of all human beings’ lives. While this conclusion might seem pessimistic and bleak at first glance, Solomon was on the verge of articulating truths that later were central to the apostle Paul’s teachings on law, grace, election, and sovereignty.

In Scripture, the term **righteous** refers primarily to being in right standing with God and secondarily with living in a manner consistent with that relationship. The phrase **the wise** likely refers not to a second distinct group of people but to a secondary characteristic of those who are *righteous*. The term **their works** points to the actions and attitudes of the same *righteous* and *wise* people. The life of Job provides an example of the kind of person Solomon described here. The Bible describes Job as “a man of complete integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). Job was not sinless—only Jesus lived a sinless life (see Heb. 4:15)—but right conduct and wisdom were characteristic of Job’s lifestyle.

At first glance, the statement that **people don’t know whether to expect love or hate** from God seems wildly inconsistent with the rest of Scripture, especially the New Testament (see John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 8:35-39; 1 John 4:7-11). Yet, even in the Old Testament the Lord is revealed as a God who is “abounding in faithful love and truth” (Ex. 34:6).

What, then, did Solomon mean in Ecclesiastes 9:1? At times in Scripture, the terms *love* and *hate* refer not to emotions (as we typically use the terms) but to divine decisions—in other words, to the reality of sovereign election (see Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:10-13). In this sense, then, Solomon realized that God’s approval (*love*) was not (and is not) a payment for our good works but rather His gracious choice of those who are rightly related to Him.

Moreover, the fact that humanity was universally burdened under sin’s curse means that the righteous as well as the wicked could experience degrees of both tragedy and success in their lives. In this respect, people do not know what the next day might bring (**everything lies ahead of them**). Job, a righteous man, had no prior warning about what lay ahead for him on the fateful day that he lost everything (see Job 1–2).

Human behavior does not deliver sinful people from divine wrath. We do not deserve and cannot earn salvation. A person can be saved only because God grants His grace to sinners. As Paul wrote, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

VERSE 2

Everything is the same for everyone: There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As it is for the good, so also it is for the sinner; as it is for the one who takes an oath, so also for the one who fears an oath.

Proper comprehension of the opening statement is crucial for accurate interpretation of this verse. The words **everything is the same for everyone** (“all things come alike to all,” KJV; “all share a common destiny,” NIV) describe life “under the sun”—that is, to the human experience while alive on earth. Solomon was not referring to the afterlife or to rewards (or punishment) in the life to come. The **one fate** (“one event,” KJV) that will be experienced by all human beings—again not considering the return of Christ, which was not a part Solomon’s thinking in his day—is physical death.

Solomon recognized, of course, the contrasting characteristics in the way human beings lived. Those contrasts included, **the righteous and the wicked ... the good and the bad ... the clean and the unclean**, as well as **the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice**. *Righteous* designates people whose conduct reveals they are right with God; conversely, the *wicked* are not right with God. The character traits of *good* and *clean* are further descriptions of *the righteous*, whereas the contrasting traits of *bad* (“evil,” ESV) and *unclean* further describe *the wicked*. Israel’s law specified clearly the distinctions between clean and unclean animals as well as clean and unclean activities and conditions (see Lev. 11–15). The phrase *one who sacrifices* may refer either to participating in temple worship or to taking religious vows or oaths. In either case, Solomon’s point was that none of these distinctions exempted any human being from experiencing the *one fate* that all human beings will face—physical death.

VERSE 3

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone. In addition, the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live; after that they go to the dead.

Once more, the phrase **under the sun** refers to life in this world. Sometimes the expression emphasizes events that occur during one’s lifetime, but here it encompasses the entirety of human history. The term rendered **evil** often applies to anything that harms a person, such as a physical injury.

Hence, the word typically refers to the opposite of that which is good. In this verse, however, the term likely has a more sinister sense, referring to anything that is contrary to God’s revealed wisdom. As such, it harks back to God’s warning that death was certain if Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Gen. 2:16-17; 3:22-24).

Since Solomon’s generation, with only one exception (see 2 Kings 2:1-12), everyone from that generation down to the present has died. So again, the **one fate** is physical death. Veiled within the reality of physical death is the bleaker forewarning of spiritual death and eternal separation from God. Tragically, humanity ignores God’s warnings and occupies their limited time on earth with more evil! Few turn to God. This is true **madness**.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, physical death has been the fate of every human being. However, one Person died yet rose from the dead on the third day after His death. His name is Jesus, and He is alive forevermore! His resurrection empowers those who trust in Him to receive eternal life (see John 11:25-26). Although people still die physically, those who have been saved by grace through faith enjoy the promise of resurrection to everlasting life. Every human being must prepare for death. The wise way to prepare is to put one’s faith in Christ for new life now and everlasting life in heaven in the life to come.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Revelation of God” on pages 1351–1353 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What features of God’s nature are most challenging for you to understand? What features are most comforting or encouraging to you in your current situation?

SEEK LIFE (Eccl. 9:4-6)

Solomon asserted that in light of the certainty of physical death, God’s people should realize the preciousness of life. While people are alive, there is hope of finding purpose and reward.

VERSE 4

But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion.

Solomon concluded that although all human beings face the same fate (physical death), it was better to be alive than dead. He stated his premise

using a vivid, if crude, proverb: **a live dog is better than a dead lion**. In Israel during the tenth century BC, dogs were not generally viewed as “man’s best friend.” Just the opposite was true. Most people in fact viewed dogs with contempt, considering them to be wild, filthy scavengers that roamed in dangerous packs. For this reason, the people of Israel in biblical times applied the term *dog* to anyone they wanted to insult or discredit (see 2 Sam. 3:8; Prov. 26:11; Phil. 3:2; Rev. 22:15). Nevertheless, *a live dog* could still function and some of them might be trained to serve a helpful purpose, such as guarding. By contrast, the regal, mighty *lion* could do nothing, helpful or otherwise, if it was dead!

Slightly smaller than African lions, the lions that roamed the ancient Near East were nonetheless powerful and terrifying predators, easily capable of killing livestock and humans. However, the carcass of a dead lion was completely helpless. Instead of killing and eating prey, it was consumed by scavengers, worms, and other vermin. Therefore, Solomon’s proverb meant that it was better to be despised and lowly yet still alive than to have lost both status and capacity to do anything as a result of death.

The phrase **whoever is joined with all the living** refers to people who are still alive. The Hebrew word rendered **hope** means “to feel secure, to be unconcerned.” As a rule, people prefer that which is known to that which is unknown. People who are alive at least know what is happening to them and around them. What the living do not know by experience is what happens when one is dead. Conventional human wisdom could only observe that the dead no longer were animated in any way. They didn’t breathe, move, see, or speak. In time, the corpses of the dead decayed, leaving only dirt and disconnected bones. Having no clear understanding of the afterlife, Solomon thus pronounced that as long as someone was alive, there was hope.

Today, divine revelation recorded in the New Testament discloses that the believer’s state after death is in actuality superior to the present sinful state of life (see John 14:1-3; Phil. 1:21). In the end, the believer’s mortal body will be replaced by an eternal, spiritual body (see 2 Cor. 5:1-5). Believers will live forevermore in the presence of the Lord. Without dispute, then, heaven is superior to earth in every way. Nonetheless, God created human beings with the will to live. Moreover, the believer realizes that physical life in the present provides additional opportunities to serve Christ (see Phil. 1:22). We should take care of our physical bodies so that we can better render that service.

VERSE 5

For the living know that they will die, but the dead don’t know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten.

Solomon's affirmation that **the living know that they will die** poses a paradox. Having the knowledge that he eventually would die underscores his initial pessimistic presupposition of futility. On the other hand, knowledge that death is certain also provides a rationale for hope. Since death has not yet terminated their lives, the living retain the opportunity to grasp the joy of life and to make needed corrections in their devotion to God and behavior.

Conversely, the words **but the dead don't know anything** are not conjecture about the nature of human existence in the afterlife. Rather, the words represent the viewpoint of those still living in regard to the dead. In other words, to the living, the dead no longer have any awareness of, much less any participation in, the activities of the living.

The word translated **reward** describes wages earned from performing a service. The dead no longer enjoy any such benefits because they do not perform any service for the living. Indeed, in time all **memory of them is forgotten**. Therefore, *the dead don't know anything* expresses the advantage the living believe they have over the dead. Life is better than death because death strips away all of the joy derived in life and all potential for making improvements in behavior. Solomon's conclusions remind us that life is brief. Therefore, we should enjoy the time we have and serve Christ in all we do.

VERSE 6

Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun.

The Hebrew word for **love** has a wide range of meaning. It can describe a person's fondness for an object, the relationship between friends, the romantic feelings that spouses have for each other, the passion of sexual desire, or God's self-sacrificial love for His covenant people. Similarly, the term rendered **hate** also can depict a spectrum of ideas. It can describe an emotion ranging from simple dislike to absolute loathing. The effect of such an emotion is the desire to avoid all contact and to exclude any relationship. Thus, the two words *love* and *hate* are antonyms; they reflect antithetical attitudes (or actions). Therefore, in Ecclesiastes 9:6 both terms describe human responses to people and things. People have the power to choose or reject relationships and to respond to things favorably or negatively.

The term **envy** ("jealousy," NIV) also represents a strong emotion in which some quality, object, or person is desired, albeit inappropriately. Together, these three terms represent the spectrum of emotion that animates human behavior. Solomon's point, however, is that the dead no longer possess these emotions—they **have already disappeared** ("perished," KJV; ESV;

“vanished” NIV). These are descriptors not of the dead but of living people. Since they are now deceased, the dead do not have **a portion**. The word rendered *portion* denotes a share of a territory. In this case, the territory in question is denoted by the phrase **under the sun**. Again, this distinctive phrase encompasses life in this world. Here, the territory of the living includes the habitable land masses on the earth. All of them are the domain of the living. In contrast, the dead no longer occupy physical space on the earth’s surface.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Burial” on pages 242–244 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What hope does the New Testament offer to those who honestly face the reality of physical death in this life? How does the Bible’s message of the reality of physical death and life beyond the grave instruct believers for their living now?

ENJOY (Eccl. 9:7-10)

Solomon directed God’s people to enjoy life, making the most of God’s provisions. He encouraged people to work hard while living, since the things of earth can only be enjoyed while living.

VERSE 7

Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works.

While Solomon had previously referred to enjoying life in general, here he added particular items that are to be enjoyed. Bread was a staple part of the ancient Israelite diet. Wheat or barley grain would be ground into course flour and baked into bread. Solomon’s admonition to **eat one’s bread with pleasure** (“joy,” KJV; ESV; “gladness,” NIV) implies a conscious choice to appreciate the food that God has provided. The parallel statement **drink your wine with a cheerful heart** conveys the same idea. The climate and geography of the ancient land of Israel made *wine* an important beverage. Grapes, pomegranates, dates, and figs all grew well in the region. Even with limited rainfall, the dew at night was often sufficient to sustain flourishing vineyards. All four of these types of fruit were fermented to produce wine. Some Bible scholars have estimated that the alcohol content of wine in Solomon’s day was less than ten per cent. The Bible thus uniformly condemns

drunkenness and warns against the abuse of wine and other alcoholic beverages (see Prov. 20:1; 23:29-35).

Solomon urged God's people to gratefully enjoy God's provisions for their physical needs. The statement that **God has already accepted your works** ("God has already approved what you do," ESV; NIV) foreshadows the New Testament pronouncements "What God has made clean, do not call impure" (Acts 10:15), "Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God" (Rom. 14:6b), and "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Joy is impossible apart from a right relationship with God. Therefore, the potential for rejoicing over one's daily food and drink implies being right with God.

VERSE 8

Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head.

In this verse Solomon used additional figures of speech to refer to the enjoyment of life "under the sun." Wearing **clothes of white** could imply either purity or festivity. The fragrant aroma of spiced **oil** on one's head also symbolized joy. These activities were the antitheses of wearing sackcloth and putting ashes on one's head to indicate grief and distress. When a person is right with God and appreciates the blessings He gives to His people, it is a time for celebration and rejoicing!

VERSE 9

Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun.

In ancient societies (just as in most cultures today), marriage was the rule, not the exception. Family life was (and is) a vital element in God's purposes for life in this world. God created human beings as social creatures. After creating the first man, Adam, God declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him" (Gen. 2:18). In a marriage relationship, a godly husband and wife can become a resilient and effective team (Gen. 2:24). Their partnership can grow stronger and more delightful as time progresses. Thus, Solomon saw that one of the ways a husband could find joy was to **enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life**.

The phrases rendered *your fleeting life* ("the life of thy vanity," KJV; "this meaningless life," NIV) and **your fleeting days** remind us of life's brevity. The phrase **your struggle under the sun** indicates the harsh challenges the

living often face to survive on earth. A devoted, godly wife or husband can make even the times of struggle in this life a thing of joy.

VERSE 10

Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength, because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Solomon urged God's people not to miss any opportunity to enjoy being alive. He began with the recommendation to be grateful that God provided the necessities for human life (see Eccl. 9:7). Then he suggested they enjoy feasting (see 9:7-8). Next, they were to find joy in their family relationships, especially their marriages (see 9:9). In 9:10, Solomon urged people to recognize and enjoy the value of work. The words **whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength** call for human beings to give wholehearted effort in everything they undertake, whether specifically in an occupation or more broadly in daily life itself.

The rationale for Solomon's command was simple: **there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.** The concept of *Sheol* in the Old Testament referred primarily to the grave, the place of the dead. In Solomon's time, God had not yet fully revealed the realities of heaven and hell. Therefore, little was understood about what happened to people after they died. The dead no longer breathed, moved, saw, or spoke. Further, their bodies quickly began to decay and turn to dirt. For sure, the dead were no longer able to do the things associated with *work*.

Thankfully, the New Testament reveals a clearer and more meaningful future. Revelation 14:13 says, "Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'so they will rest from their labors, since their works follow them.'" We as believers should treat life as precious, making the most of our lives for Christ's glory and enjoying all of the time God allocates to us.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Ecclesiastes 9:10. Compare this verse to Paul's message to servant-workers in Colossians 3:23. What are the different motivations given for one's work in these two passages? Which motivation encourages you most in the work that you do?