

Facing Death?

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

ECCLESIASTES 9:1-10

MEMORY VERSE: ECCLESIASTES 9:10

STUDY Ecclesiastes 9:1-10, noting how people are to enjoy life despite the certainty of death. Consider the similarities and differences Solomon shared regarding the righteous and the unrighteous or wicked. List the areas of life highlighted for enjoyment in Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 130–132. Be prepared to highlight that we have lived in a broken world since the fall of humanity recorded in Genesis, and thus all people are in need of forgiveness.

GATHER the following items:

- Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)

Prepare to Display:

- Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*)
- Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*)

Make Copies of:

- Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Ecclesiastes Time Line*)

CONSULT *QuickSource* for additional questions to use during the group time and review the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* for more biblical insights (available for purchase from LifeWay.com).

REINFORCE the study by evaluating the level of joy found in your group. Consider actions to take that might increase the group's joy level.

KEY DOCTRINE

Marriage

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime (Heb. 13:4).

FIRST THOUGHTS

We do not know the number of days we have on this earth. But we are responsible for how we live those days and steward the resources we have been given. There are times when we may suffer. There are times when we will experience great blessings. These times are part of the ebb and flow of life. No matter how long a person lives, he or she is going to die unless the Lord returns first. Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 addresses this reality and how people live in light of their mortality.

(In PSG, p. 109) **What is on your bucket list? How does the potential of death add urgency to doing the things on your list?**

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary.

Read articles in a Bible dictionary about Sheol. Note verses included in the articles, reviewing selected passages. How does Sheol differ from how most people understand "hell." How does the use of the word in the passages you examined give you a deeper understanding of the meaning of the word?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 9:1-10:20

In Ecclesiastes 9:1-10:20, Solomon continued his exploration of life "under the sun." Part of this reality includes the unpredictability of life and the certainty of death. These truths are difficult to come to terms with. All humans long for some sense of control; Solomon reminds us that no human can know with certainty what each day will bring or when death will occur. This is part of being human. Only God holds these truths in His hands. These truths are hidden in the mystery of His will. Once again the Teacher confronted his audience with the limits of human power and knowledge (Eccl. 9:1-2).

Solomon made it clear that difficulties will come in each person's life, regardless of whether that person is righteous or wicked. Trials are no respecters of persons. Sometimes the wicked live a relatively blessed life from an earthly perspective. Sometimes the righteous suffer in a way that boggles the human understanding (consider Job). Regardless of this uncertainty, the righteous person can live in assurance that his or her life is held in the hands of God. Moreover, life is itself an opportunity to enjoy the good gifts of God and live in a way that makes the best use of time. Living with an awareness of these truths is the personification of wisdom. Living without acknowledging these truths is foolishness. Therefore, pursuing a wise life has benefits in and of itself.

The contrast between wisdom and foolishness is the theme of this section of the book. Wisdom is explored in 9:13,15-18; and 10:1-2,10,12. Folly is explored in 9:17; and 10:1-3,6,12-15. This section provides practical advice for living day-to-day life. Moreover, Solomon explained that the poor can possess wisdom while the privileged can exhibit folly. Therefore, one's opportunities or resources do not guarantee wisdom or

foolishness. No one is doomed to foolishness or guaranteed wisdom. The way one lives life, regardless of the circumstances, demonstrates what category they fall into. For this reason, wisdom can achieve greatness and surpass many earthly gifts. One could summarize this entire section with the idea that regardless of the life you are given, all people are destined to die and be judged. This truth alone can be a great motivation for wise choices in life.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SOBER TRUTH (ECCL. 9:1-3)

Verses 1-3

We have already seen, and we are reminded again, that both the righteous and the unrighteous have the same fate, death. According to Solomon, there is one fate for everyone. Each of us is closer to the point of death than we were the day before.

In verse 1, the Teacher referred to all that we have learned thus far with the phrase, **all this**. For Solomon, this was not just intellectual reflection; he was deeply involved in what he was about to share. First, he noted that **the righteous** and **the wise** are **in God's hands**. To refer to all things being *in God's hands* reminds the reader of God's absolute sovereignty over all things. Just like we read in Proverbs 21:1, even the hearts of kings are in His hands. Therefore, the outcome of everyone's life, including the righteous and wise, rests in God's control.

God knows the big picture of what we do not know.

The implications of this truth are vast. Essentially, God knows the big picture of what we do not know. From a purely human perspective, no one knows whether being in God's hands means that blessing or judgment lies ahead. This is how we might read Solomon's use of the words **love** and **hate**. This is one of the most intense and transparent passages we find in the entire book. There seems to be a deep struggle on the part of Solomon here. From his limited perspective, he could not see whether the future holds love or hate from God. Moreover, we do not know why God allows and ordains certain things to happen in our lives. But one thing we do know is that death is certain for all people.

While Solomon did not know whether love or hate was ahead, he did know that death was ahead for all. Regardless whether one is **righteous** or **wicked**, whether they will face love or hate, whether they are **clean** or **unclean**, whether they make **sacrifices** to God or not, whether they make vows or not, they cannot escape the certainty of death. Death is the fate of all regardless of one's ethics or worship.

VERSES 1-3

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. 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. 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.

In this sense, the Teacher despaired of death as an evil necessity, an enemy in the world. Death is necessary because, as Solomon said in 9:3, the hearts of men are evil. It was out of his own self-reflection that he agreed with Jeremiah that the human heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all else (Jer. 17:9).

The first step in living wisely is knowing how to live in light of your coming death.

In the end, the point of this section is clear: all people will die regardless of their level of human righteousness or wickedness. Therefore, all people must prepare for death. However, understanding this reality can help one live life with wisdom. The first step in living wisely is knowing how to live in light of your coming death. Knowing that we will eventually die reminds us that we are not God. He has dominion over us, and ultimately we will answer to Him.

If you were to write your own obituary, what would you want to include? If you could hear the conversation at your own funeral, what would you hope to be said about you?

SEEK LIFE (ECCL. 9:4-6)

Verse 4

In the ancient Near East, a **dog** was not a pet but an unclean scavenger. Dogs were associated with contempt. Goliath expressed this connotation when he asked David: “Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks?” (1 Sam. 17:43). The **lion** on the other hand was admired as the king of the animal world. Lions were icons of royalty. For example, Jacob used the metaphor of a lion to describe the coming Messiah (Gen. 49:9). Solomon concluded that a despised, contemptible dog that is alive is better off than a dead lion, even if the lion was the mightiest and most majestic of the entire animal kingdom.

This is a stark way for Solomon to remind us that to be alive is to have opportunity that is not available to the dead. This is a point that he explored previously in Ecclesiastes 6:1-6, where he asserted that there is advantage in being alive rather than dead. One of the advantages is that you know you will die. Thus, you can live your life with this knowledge before you. Once you are dead, it is too late to direct the path of your life. Our days are fleeting; therefore, we must assess how to live well in order to die well.

VERSE 4

⁴ But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion.

Verses 5-6

Solomon stated that when it comes to the dead, ***their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared***. There is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun. He asserted that in light of the certainty of physical death, God's people should realize the preciousness of life. While alive, there is hope of finding purpose and reward. There is wisdom in letting go of the things that embitter us in our days.

Keep in mind that Solomon did not have a fully developed understanding of the eternal fate that is explained in the New Testament. When Solomon spoke of "one fate for the righteous and wicked" (v. 3), he was primarily concerned with physical death, not heaven or hell.

As Christians, we have a more fully developed understanding of the rewards that await those who have their righteousness in Christ. Because of this, we can live with hope and purpose, knowing that Christ defeated death through His resurrection. This means that death does not have the last word. Even still, it reminds us that how we live before we die matters to God.

Do you struggle with any emotions or memories that you would like to move past or settle in your heart? How do these things affect your everyday life?

ENJOY (ECCL. 9:7-10)

Verses 7-8

Several times already the Teacher has exhorted his readers to enjoy life. (See 2:24-26; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15.) In verses 7-10, he elaborated again on why and how one should enjoy life. (And he will do it one more time in 11:7-10.) Repetition was the common way ancient Near Eastern writers emphasized a point, and Solomon's repeated message to enjoy life demands our attention.

In many ways, verse 7 is the heart of the message of Ecclesiastes. ***Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works***. Have you ever wondered why the Gospel writers included the saying, Jesus "came eating and drinking?" Breaking bread together is a sign of enjoying others in intimate fellowship. In ancient Israel, wine was a common item of fellowship. In some cultures it may be tea time or grabbing coffee with a friend. God has not only created us to need food and drink, but He has created a vast variety of food and drink for our enjoyment.

In verse 8, Solomon continued to build on the idea of enjoying life with the words: ***Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head***. In ancient times, when people were distraught, they wore

VERSES 5-6

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. 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.

VERSES 7-8

⁷ Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works. ⁸ Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head.

sackcloth and ashes to demonstrate their grief. On the other hand, white clothes reflected the heat of the sun, and oil protected and nourished the skin. Likewise, oil symbolized joy. In our time, it would be like wearing bright and fun clothes and living life with a smile on your face. The Teacher was saying be clothed or covered in joy at all times and let your joy be apparent to others.

VERSES 9-10

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. 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.

Verses 9-10

In verse 9, Solomon instructed men to **enjoy life** with their wives, but the principle here applies to both married men and women to enjoy their spouses until they die. Marriage is a blessing from God for the mutual enjoyment of both partners, and couples can only enjoy it in this **fleeting life** because there will be no institution of marriage in heaven as we know it on earth. (See Matt. 22:30.) When a married couple loves and enjoys each other as God intended, they will experience a wonderful blessing.

Enjoying life also includes **whatever your hands find to do**. This certainly pertains to one's occupation but more generally speaks to whatever one is able to do. The Hebrew word translated *whatever* literally means "all" or "everything." The phrase **do with all your strength** means to give it everything you have. We should give our very best effort to everything God allows us to do. Why? Because when a person dies and goes to the place of the dead, **Sheol**, there will be no more opportunities this life on earth affords.

There is the fleshly tendency to dive headlong into good things and to make them ultimate things.

Solomon was exhorting his readers to enjoy the things of the world properly to the glory of God. Within the Christian tradition there has been a tendency to equate true spirituality with shunning the good things of creation rather than enjoying them. Those who shun the good things of creation deny their God-given purpose and may fall into self-righteous legalism.

On the other hand, there is the fleshly tendency to dive headlong into good things and to make them ultimate things. Those who abandon themselves to food and drink do so because they assume this is all there is before they die. This is outright self-indulgence.

In both cases, these approaches are unbalanced. When we look to ourselves or created things rather than the Creator to find ultimate satisfaction, we become chained to a path that only leads to despair and destruction. These two approaches are common because sin fractures and distorts everything.

When it comes to God's good gifts, we must remember that sin does not un-create everything. Because good things are God's creation, we cannot reject them as evil. Because we are God's people, we must not use God's good gifts in evil ways. God gives us good gifts to show us His favor.

But because those good gifts do not ultimately satisfy our hearts, they are simply tools that make us aware of His goodness and make us homesick for heaven—where unstained joys await us for eternity. We may pass through this world and enjoy all that it has to offer if we remember that the final delight of being with God will totally overwhelm whatever joys and delights this world offers.

Verse 11 says literally, “time and happenings happen to all.” Situations arise, circumstances change, unforeseen events occur. This is why the Teacher encouraged his readers to put their faith in something that is not under the sun, because unforeseen things happen, and these things might change our best-laid out plans. As in 9:12, we do not know our time.

This is not unlike the words of James 4:13-15, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes. Instead, you should say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’

Understanding this principle is key to a life well lived. If we do not know when we will die, then we must live now while we can. If we have a chance to do something for the glory of God, then let us do it now because we do not know what the future will bring.

Believers should not worry their way through life—but enjoy it. We cannot waste away our days with meaningless pursuits—grudges, arguments, frustrations, anger, worries, or any other thing that would distract us from ultimate things. Life is too short. Because life is short, let us use and enjoy the days God gives us to the fullest, making the most of our lives for Christ’s glory.

(In PSG, p. 116) **How does enjoying the blessings of life honor God?**

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

INTRODUCE: Countless songs, books, and movies have been written about living in the moment and making the most of our time on earth. Perhaps one of the most common approaches to this reality is creating a bucket list—items a person wants to do, see, or accomplish prior to “kicking the bucket.”

ASK: *What is on your bucket list? How does the potential of death add urgency to doing the things on your list?* (PSG, p. 109)

TRANSITION: *In today’s study in Ecclesiastes, we will see the Teacher (Solomon) reflecting on death’s certainty for all people, so he addressed the question of how the wise person responds in the days he or she is granted.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

REVIEW: Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*) or page 9 of the PSG to review the main ideas found in Ecclesiastes. Distribute **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Ecclesiastes Time Line*), noting the progression through Ecclesiastes.

MINI-LECTURE: Briefly confirm the following points that have been previously established in the study of Ecclesiastes and will be reinforced in today’s study: (1) God decides what is best for believers throughout their lives; (2) Nobody can control God; and (3) For both believers and non-believers, there is constant uncertainty.

HIGHLIGHT: Note from the PSG (p. 110): *No matter how much people want to know the future and control it, they are unable to know what God is going to do in the future, because nobody can control God. This is part of being human, and once again the Teacher confronted his audience with the limits of human power and knowledge (Eccl. 9:1-2).*

TRANSITION: *Humans may have finite knowledge about the future, but believers can trust that God, in His sovereignty, rules and works according to His perfect and eternal purposes.*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Ecclesiastes 9:1-3, guiding the group to listen for Solomon’s words that reveal his understanding that God is in control of everything. Read aloud Isaiah 45:5-6, while the group reflects on how they might describe God’s sovereignty.

RELATE: *Solomon noted that all people have evil in their hearts and must prepare for death.*

ASK: *Why are people, unbelievers and believers alike, reluctant to think about their mortality and what they should do to properly prepare for death?* (PSG, p. 112) ***How does the reality that all people are sinful strengthen the Teacher’s argument that all die?***

COMPARE: Invite a volunteer to read Romans 5:12-19 and lead the group to compare the hope through Christ for all believers as opposed to those who reject Christ.

DISCUSS: Guide the group to discuss how hope in Christ makes a person grateful for each day of life.

READ: Read aloud **Ecclesiastes 9:4-6**, as the group listens for the hope that's for the living.

SHARE: *The contrast between a dog and a lion made more sense in Solomon's time. Dogs were considered scavengers comparable to rats or vultures today, while lions were considered powerful and stately. Solomon concluded that it is better to be "a live dog . . . than a dead lion." While a person is alive there is hope for a future with Christ.*

ASK: *How does the resurrection of Jesus change a believer's attitude toward life and death?* (PSG, p. 114)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 9:7-10**, while the group listens for Solomon's words regarding enjoying life.

CLARIFY: Explain that white clothing was associated with joy and celebration and that oil on one's head represented God's blessing and the joy it brings.

LIST: Create teams, directing each team to examine Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 and make a list of the actions and attitudes that Solomon encouraged people to take to enjoy life. Call for volunteers to share their findings.

HIGHLIGHT: *God intends us to enjoy the blessings of life He has given us in acknowledgment of Him.* (PSG, p. 115)

ASK: *How does enjoying the blessings of life honor God?* (PSG, p. 116)

HIGHLIGHT: Point to **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*). Ask: **How has your view of these things changed as a result of our study through the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes? What might need to change in order for you to make the most of your life for Christ's glory?**

TRANSITION: *Believers recognize life as a gift from God and are called to live differently in the face of death.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

APPLY: Read the following statements, directing the group to signal with a thumbs up or thumbs down whether they agree or disagree with the statements: (1) *We can never use our circumstances to determine if God loves us and accepts us.* (2) *Life is meant to be more than an exercise in endurance.* Allow time for several people to share why they agree or disagree with each statement.

ASK: *How can a person live with a healthy understanding of death without being fearful of death?* (PSG, p. 115)

DISCUSS: Guide the group to discuss one of the question sets on page 117 of the PSG.

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking the Lord to lead us to enjoy the blessings of life, knowing that we have a future with Christ. Pray that God will help us to honor Him in all that we do and guide us to live gratefully throughout all the days we are granted.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Secure lyrics for “Take My Life, and Let It Be,” by Frances R. Havergal. Enlist four volunteers to each read one verse of the hymn. Be prepared to display the chorus for the group to read in unison between the verses.

CREATIVE WRITING

Gather chart paper and markers.

After studying Ecclesiastes 9, lead the group to construct a recipe for joyful living that incorporates the areas addressed by Solomon that are listed on **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*). Create teams, directing the teams to record the recipe on chart paper and be prepared to share the recipe with the group.

VISUAL

Gather an hourglass, paper, and pencils.

Prior to the session, secure an hourglass to bring to show the group. Discuss how our lives are represented by sand in an hourglass. Call for the group to describe how the hourglass reinforces that everyone has a limited number of days. Provide paper and pencil instructing each person to draw an hourglass that represents their lives today. Instruct them to use the area around the drawing for note taking as the group studies Ecclesiastes 9.

REFLECTION

Direct the group to remember the first time they faced the reality of death, reflecting on how that experience made them feel. After studying Ecclesiastes 9, ask: ***How would you explain to a friend why contemplating death should cause us to enjoy life more?*** Allow volunteers to share their reflections with the group.

LOGICAL

Lead the group to respond to the following quotes regarding life and death by identifying differences and similarities between the quotes. Number the quotes and ask each person to determine the quote that resonates most with them by displaying the quote number with their fingers. Discuss how these quotes relate to Ecclesiastes 9.

- (1) “If today were your last day of life, how would you spend it? Would you do what you’re doing now?”
—Max Lucado, *Great Day Every Day: Navigating Life’s Challenges with Promise and Purpose*
- (2) “Take care of your life and the Lord will take care of your death.”
—George Whitefield, as quoted in *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*
- (3) “I am not tired of my work, neither am I tired of the world; yet when Christ calls me home, I shall go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from his school.”
—Adoniram Judson, as quoted by Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson*