



Facing Death?

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

ECCLESIASTES 9:1-10

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.

What is on your bucket list? How does the potential of death add urgency to doing the things on your list?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 9:1–10:20

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).

Nonetheless, death is certain and is the great equalizer. It puts everyone on an equal playing field. Believers must beware of thinking that if all people share the same kinds of burdens in life and then die, then fearing the Lord makes no difference. Instead, this should encourage believers to trust in God's purposes, knowing that their devotion to Him will be vindicated because He will one day make everything right. In the meantime, it is this knowledge that not only makes life bearable but also enjoyable. Furthermore, it does no good trying to figure out all of the circumstances pertaining to one's death (9:3-12).

These conundrums of life are at least more bearable when people apply themselves to wisdom. Wisdom will help people deal with the challenges of life, but it does not mean they will be appreciated for their wisdom (9:13-16). Also, the multitude of benefits that come from wisdom can be easily destroyed by foolishness (9:17–10:1).

The Teacher concluded these observations using government as an example. Usually the folly of a fool is self-evident, but it does not prevent a leader from promoting the fool to a position of authority. Unlike the fool who does not fear God, the wise person who does must always be cool headed and careful with what he or she says, especially to those in authority and about those in authority. It is wise to be humble and patient. Moreover, when leaders neglect their duties, everything suffers. But the appropriate actions of mature leadership give the people reasons to rejoice (10:5-20).

As you read Ecclesiastes 9:1-10, consider the significance of the Teacher's observations about life and death. How does a person find balance between enjoying life and being conscious of the brevity of it?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SOBER TRUTH (ECCL. 9:1-3)

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.

VERSE 1

The Teacher began with an important statement and it is essential that everything he is about to communicate be understood in light of this truth. He stated ***the righteous, the wise, and their works are in God's hands***. To say they are *in God's hands* means they are in His control. The *righteous* describes the person who keeps God's law, and the *wise* live by the instruction of God's Word. These terms are interrelated, and it is best to think of these subjects as the same people. Those who are righteous and wise acknowledge God in everything they do.

With this in mind, the Teacher revealed his first thoughts in this passage concerning the human condition: people in general do not know how God is going to deal with them. God is sovereign and will deal with people as He sees fit. The core of the problem is human depravity caused by sin (7:20; 9:3). God is a just God who must punish sin and at the same time a gracious God who forgives sin (Ex. 34:6-7). So is God going to be against us or for us? It is impossible to answer this question by just looking at what goes on around us. People cannot determine if they are in God's favor or disfavor based merely on their present experiences in life.

VERSE 2

It is impossible to understand these issues from a human perspective, because the righteous appear to be no more favored by God than the wicked appear to be rejected by God. There was no visible difference from the Teacher's vantage point. So from a human point of view it may raise the question, "What advantage is there to being righteous if the righteous and the wicked experience the same things in life and in the end share the same 'fate'—death?" The Teacher recognized that, in the final judgment, things will go well for the righteous and poorly for the wicked (8:12-13). But what about in the meantime? Solomon already indicated that prosperity is not necessarily a good thing (6:1-6), and that God uses adversity for His good purposes (7:1-15; see also Rom. 8:28).

Why are people, unbelievers and believers alike, reluctant to think about their mortality and what they should do to properly prepare for death?

VERSE 3

Recalling the fall in Genesis 3, everyone is under the curse of sin and cannot escape the ***evil in all that is under the sun***, which is death. Calling death *evil* means it is distressing, calamitous, and grievous. No one can escape this curse. Instead of facing this truth, sin-marred people are driven by the ***madness ... in their hearts***. They follow a variety of futile paths in the short time they live (1:12–2:26), failing to make the best use of their time and to reckon with the dilemma of their sin and the inevitableness of their death.

The Teacher gave more details concerning the effects of the fall. The phrase ***the hearts of people are full of evil*** means sin dominates everyone's lives, and ***while they live*** means human sin begins with conception and remains until one breathes one's last breath. Moreover, sin's effect is *madness*, and for this reason, people's sinful actions in this fallen, chaotic world are an enigma to human reason or logic. What's more, it is for this reason we desperately need the grace of God to save us from sin, to transform us, and to renew our minds (Rom. 12:2). The only way to prepare for death is to trust in God and His provision for us through His Son.

SEEK LIFE (ECCL. 9:4-6)

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

VERSE 4

The Teacher concluded that, in spite of the overwhelming perplexities and difficulties intrinsic to the human condition, it is still better to be alive than dead. He illustrated this by comparing the most admired and mightiest of beasts in the ancient Near East, a **lion**, with perhaps the most despised animal in the ancient Near East, a **dog**. Lions were icons of royalty. For example, Jacob used the metaphor of a lion to describe the coming Messiah (Gen. 49:9). In contrast, the dog was 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). 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. Why? Because hope is lost when one dies. In contrast, regardless of their status or situation, there is still hope for the living.

VERSES 5-6

What is this hope for the living? Ironically, it is that they know their death is inevitable and that sooner or later they are going to die. Consequently, the living still have an opportunity to be prepared for their death (12:14). But as for the dead, their opportunity to resolve the problem is gone. Solomon was not saying there is no life after death; his point was that the opportunities God gives people while alive on this earth will be forever lost to them when they die. Life is meant to be more than just an exercise in endurance. It is the same idea Jesus propounded when He said: “We must do the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

This teaching harkens back to the Teacher's words in Ecclesiastes 3:1-14. There is a time for one's birth, one's death, and everything that happens in between. Every season and event in life comes from God and is according to His purposes for His glory. God does what He does so that we will worship and serve Him. Nevertheless, all of these opportunities to glorify the Lord will evaporate when we die. For this reason, we need to take advantage of this short window of opportunity while we have it. It is good for believers to be ever mindful of Jesus' resurrection and the hope of eternal life we have in Him. But it dishonors our Lord if we allow our looking to this blessed hope to keep us from glorifying Him with our lives in the present.

How does the resurrection of Jesus change a believer's attitude toward life and death?

ENJOY (ECCL. 9:7-10)

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. 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 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 verse 7, Solomon asserted we can enjoy life because ***God has already accepted your works***. This is not saying God approves of everything a person

wants to do. Rather, it means God intends us to enjoy the blessings of life He has given us in acknowledgment of Him.

Using several imperatives and other Hebrew grammatical forms denoting desire, Solomon emphasized what is commendable to God. **Go** is a call to take action. Bread and wine were the staples of every meal. So the call to ***eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart*** was a call to enjoy God's daily provisions.

In ancient Israel, people associated wearing **white** clothing with joy and celebrations. Likewise, oil symbolized joy. The Teacher was saying be clothed or covered in joy at all times and let your joy be apparent to others.

How does the reality of death motivate a person to take action? How can a person live with a healthy understanding of death without being fearful of death?

DID YOU KNOW?

Oil, an indispensable commodity in the ancient Near East, had many uses: the preparation of food, fuel, treatment of wounds, and in religious ceremonies. Oil also was a symbol of blessing and joy (Ps. 45:7). Being anointed with oil represented God's blessing and the joy it brings.

VERSES 9-10

In his patriarchal culture, Solomon instructed men to ***enjoy life*** with their wives, but the principal is for 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.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Marriage*

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

Enjoying life also involves ***whatever your hands find to do***. This certainly pertains to one's occupation but also 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.

How does enjoying the blessings of life honor God?

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?

APPLY THE TEXT

- All people must prepare for death.
- Believers can live with hope and purpose, knowing that Christ defeated death through His resurrection.
- Believers should treat life as a precious gift, making the most of their lives for Christ's glory.

Discuss the role the group should play in helping others prepare for death in a healthy way. What changes might the group need to make in light of this discussion?

Who do you know in need of hope and purpose? What can you share with them from Ecclesiastes 9 that will help them?

List the blessings of life for which you are most grateful. How can you celebrate these blessings, being sure to honor God in the process?

PRAYER NEEDS
