

Enjoy All the Days of Your Vain Life
Ecclesiastes 9
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Read Ecclesiastes 9

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

I've been getting into Ancestry.com, have any of you worked with that website? I've traced several lines of my family tree back to the early 1500s, which is truly amazing; though I'm mostly accepting other people's work as accurate, which I've been told you shouldn't do. It's mind-blowing, though, to see how many branches of a family tree there are, and how many names of people in the past 5 centuries I'm related to (and that's just tracing parents, no siblings). I don't know if you've done the math, but everyone has 8 great-grandparents, then 16 great-great-grandparents, then 32 great-great-great grandparents, then just keep going. By the time you get to my 10th great-grandparents who were born in the 1600s, you're talking about 16,382 people!!! 16,382 people that had to live long enough to find a mate and have a child, who then lived long enough to have a child, who lived long enough to get married and have a child, etc. If any one of those people didn't make it to adulthood, my family line is totally different and I don't exist. My existence, your existence is a totally fragile miracle. The other thing that I thought as I scanned my ancestors' names and where and when they were born/died is that it's sad knowing that this might be the only thing anyone will ever know about them. Many of my relatives probably had exciting lives, maybe were highly esteemed by the people of their day. Maybe they were scoundrels and the shame of their villages. Who knows? All they are now is names, dates, and places listed on tombstones and public records.

I was recently watching a documentary on Payne Stewart, the golfer who died in a plane crash in 1999 at the age of 42. In addition to being a wonderful golfer, Payne was a very kind man, beloved by many, and also getting very serious about his Christian faith. And it brought up memories of other Christians that died at young ages. My favorite Christian musician of all time, Rich Mullins, died in a car crash at the age of 42, six years younger than I am now. Before him, the wonderful, prophetic piano player and singer, Keith Green, died in a plane crash with two of his children at the age of 28. One of my favorite people from one of my dad's churches in Florida, Jon, died in his early 30s of a heart attack while playing basketball. Why, God, why? Why did you take these on-fire Christians in the prime of their lives when they had so many years left and could have done so much good for You? I don't want to hear those trite lines about God needing another angel in heaven, that doesn't sit well with me. And I also don't believe that God caused their planes or cars to crash, though I definitely believe that God is the first cause of all things and, in His providence, allowed and ordained the circumstances around their deaths. But that doesn't take the sting of death away. What does?

You may be thinking, "What a great intro. Happy Thanksgiving – you're going to die!" We've wrestled on and off with death and significance in the book of Ecclesiastes. Today we're going to look in-depth at chapter 9 that explores these themes even deeper. The first section tells us that **I. Morality is No Protection Against Mortality (vv. 1-6)**

¹ But all this I laid to heart, examining it 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. ² 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. ³ 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, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ 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.

Verse 2 – “the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked” and verse 3 – “the same event happens to all.” What is this “same event” that Solomon keeps mentioning? Some commentators think that it means that it’s any event that happens to the righteous and the wicked – like getting cancer or losing a parent or being fired from a job. It’s the idea that Jesus is getting across in Matthew 5:45, that God “*makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*” Things happen to every human being, whether they are pleasing God or not. Now, obviously, there are things that you can avoid by doing the right thing – you are less likely to OD on drugs or be shot in a drug deal if you never get involved with illegal drugs in the first place. We’re not going to say that life is totally random. But at the same time, “Karma theology” doesn’t really get much support in the Bible – that life will treat you exactly how you deserve based on how you acted. Furthermore, we cannot use our circumstances to determine whether God favors us or opposes us, as verse 1 says – “*Whether it is love or hate, man does not know.*”

Other commentators think that this “same event” is death, the ultimate and last event of your life. It’s the great equalizer. It doesn’t matter whether you’re righteous and wise or wicked and selfish, you are going to die. You could be trying to help save someone else’s life by getting them out of a burning building but get trapped in it yourself, or you could be shot while robbing a bank; it doesn’t matter whether you’re acting nobly or wickedly, death will come for you. John the Baptist was serving God faithfully and got his head cut off for it. There are really fit people whose hearts give out while they’re relatively young and chain smokers who live into their 90s. How does Solomon feel about that? It feels evil, he says in verse 3. It feels unfair.

But is it unfair? The deeper point is also in verse 3 – “*the hearts of the children of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.*” This echoes Romans’ teachings that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that the wages of sin is death. We can talk about the wicked and the righteous in some sense, but all of us have sinned and earned the penalty of death. It actually is fair because we’ve all wicked and fallen, we’ve all earned the punishment that our sins require.

The problem with death, according to verses 4-6, is that the dead can’t do anything, they can’t experience anything, they’re just gone and forgotten. Many people just live life for the here and now, putting off all thoughts of what happens after death. But we need to take a good hard look at death because it is certain. Every one of us is 2 ½ months closer to our deaths since I started preaching through this book. I have to come to grips with the fact that *at most* I only have as many years left as I’ve already lived – I’m 48 and the way I eat and drive, living to be 96 is a pipedream. Maybe you’re younger than me and you have a lot more years than I do, but maybe not. Barring some serious medical advancements, none of us has more than 100 years, which is a blip on the timeline of eternity. Remember one of the ways to understand *hevel*, the Hebrew word all over Ecclesiastes that we translate as “vanity”: a breath. But remember, also, what verse 1 assures us: that we are “*in the hand of God.*”

How do you respond to the sober truths of the first six verses? You enjoy God's gifts to you,

II. Have a Blast While You Last (vv. 7-10)

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

My niece had a birthday recently and I didn't know what to get her. She has just moved to a new city, so I just said, "Find some restaurant, some museum or some experience that you want to do but you wouldn't necessarily spend the money on, and I'll pay for it." She texted me back the next day, "I thought of something I'd love for my birthday! I've been wanting to visit the nearby Aquarium of the Pacific plus the whale sighting tour." I sent her the money, she took the tour and she loved it. Do you think I would have been happier if she had had a dull time and not enjoyed it? Of course not, her enjoyment of it made me happier. How much more so our Heavenly Father? Enjoy the things that He's given you as a gift, acknowledge them as gifts from His hand, and He will be more glorified.

Can we just read verse 7 again and pause and think about it? "*Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.*" This is a great verse for Thanksgiving week: eat and drink because God wants you to! This is about the 5th time in this book that Solomon has told us to eat and drink with enjoyment, maybe we should really take his advice. Slow down and enjoy your meals. Which I need to learn; my wife stopped me in the middle of eating a CFA sandwich the other day – "You don't have to inhale it." The second part of that verse - "*God has already approved what you do*" – does that mean that we can do anything our little hearts and our hormones and libidos desire? Uh no. It means that God has designed you for the appropriate physical pleasures, so get to it. God enjoys it more when we enjoy it more.

In addition to enjoying what you eat and drink, wear some nice clothes and use the good perfume or cream when you get dressed up. Enjoy your wife or your husband. Whatever you find to do, do it with all your might, a phrase that is definitely echoed in the NT. Why? Because the place of death has none of those things, this is your opportunity to do them. We all read the Robert Herrick poem in high school or college: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Old time is still a flying. And the same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying."¹ Do it now, enjoy it now because tomorrow may be too late. God made this world with physical bodies and physical things to enjoy; we are NOT Gnostics who say that everything physical is bad and only the spiritual and intellectual things are worthwhile. This makes God a lot less like a stern taskmaster waiting to put us back in line and more like the host of a wonderful banquet helping His guests all have a great time.

This is also a rebuke of our mindset that we have sometimes that starts with "just as soon as." Just as soon as I get my driver's license, just as soon as I graduate, just as soon as I move out of my parent's house, just as soon as I get married, get my dream job, have kids, just as soon as I retire... THEN I'LL BE HAPPY!² You keep putting your happiness and joy in the future, thinking that some future stage of life will take away your problems. But I have news for you and it's one of my father-in-law's favorite sayings: "wherever you go, there you are." You bring all of your issues to every place you live, every relationship you're in, and every stage you're in. You'll be just as frustrated in

¹ <https://poets.org/poem/virgins-make-much-time>

² Adapted from Wiley Lowry's sermon "We're Not of this World for Long" from October 3, 2021 found at fpcjackson.org.

your next stage of life as you are now, just with different problems. Solomon's antidote to the "just as soon as" mindset is to tell us to take the joy and contentment that today offers you; enjoy your meals, dress nicely, find joy and love with your family, and find satisfaction in your job. Don't take them for granted; it's a great exercise on Thanksgiving week to make a list of things that you're thankful to God for.

Martin Luther said that "the world is ungrateful, always looking elsewhere and becoming bored with the things that are present, no matter how good they are."³ We should be counter-cultural to just enjoy what is before us, our daily bread and drink, our families, our homes, our work. When we are unsatisfied and yearning for more, we insult God; when we are grateful, we glorify Him.

As our first two sections explored our lives in light of their ends, so our final verses remind us that **III. Strength and Wisdom Are No Guarantee Against Death (vv. 11-18)**

¹¹ 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 favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² 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. ¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Here's how the novelist, George Orwell, rewrote verse 11: "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account."⁴ If you understood that, you have a much higher IQ than I do! But the bottom line is that life is unfair and unpredictable, and anything can happen. The most talented singers don't necessarily get the recording contracts. The most deserving applicant doesn't always get the job. People aren't always rewarded according to what they deserve.

It's very common among Christians to correct ourselves when we say something happened by chance or by luck. We say, "it was good providence" instead, meaning that things aren't random and purposeless, but have been designed and allowed by God. But then we get the end of verse 11 – "time and chance happen to them all." Maybe we should chalk some things up in life to random chance, at least it seems random from our point of view. Several commentators I read, though, said that "chance" is a bad translation; it's more like "time and happenings happen to all," but that is a clunky way to say it. Life happens and it is messy.

Solomon's story of the poor, wise man who saved the city but no one knew it reminds us that wisdom is often unnoticed and unappreciated. It's a vivid example of someone not being rewarded. The bigger point is that wisdom helps in all situations, but don't think developing wisdom or various strengths will keep you from being treated poorly in life or escaping the snares of death.

³ Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:142.

⁴ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (1946), quoted in Helen Sword, "Inoculating Against Jargon," *The Chronicle Review* (June 8, 2012), B13.

Conclusion

The season of Halloween is now behind us and I'm sure you saw all the haunted houses and people's decorations on their lawns featuring scary creatures, dead people, and graves. I'm not anti-Halloween, I loved it as a kid, and as an adult I try to use it as an excuse to get to know my neighbors – what other time of the year do 50 to 100 of my neighbors come to my house uninvited? I saw one meme online that asked “When else does the mission field come knock on your door?” Why not give their kids candy and try to introduce myself to them? But Halloween is when people love to indulge in the really dark, evil stuff, and I'm sure there are people who do wicked things and dabble in witchcraft and the occult, all that stuff. I'm not for any of that. But most people just love a good thrill and watch a scary movie or two, and see it as all in good fun. But for the rest of the year, if you brought up death to them, unless you were talking about someone you knew who had just died, they would probably not want to talk about it. People want to avoid death at all costs. They don't want to dwell on it. “Don't be morbid, you're being a downer.” And yet, that's like walking down a road that has signs on it saying, “Road Ends 500 Feet, Cliff Ahead” then “Road Ends 300 Feet, Cliff Ahead” then “Road Ends 100 Feet, Cliff Ahead” and just saying to yourself, “Nah, they don't really mean that. I don't need to take those signs seriously, I'm just going to keep walking and not be so negative as to think this road ends.” What's going to happen when you reach the end of that road? The road ends and you fall off the cliff.

Verse 12 says that “*man does not know his time,*” for when he will die. But that does not mean that we should be completely unprepared for death. Maybe we need to get more comfortable with death, even when it's not Halloween. As Doug Serven wrote, “We need to go to funerals sometimes and sit and cry with the family. We need to walk to the coffin and go to the graveside service and watch the body go into the ground. We need to make a casserole and bring it to the family and sit. We need to visit a nursing home and sit. We need to watch a sad movie and think about why we squirm. There is something real when we remember that our lives are but a breath, a wisp, a vapor, and that soon enough we will die.”⁵

And we can press further than that. It's one thing to face death head on and put on a brave face around it, it's another thing to know that death truly has no hold on you. 1 Corinthians 14:54-58 – “*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Do you want to be death's victim or do you want victory over death? Jesus Christ is the only way to have victory over death. You will still die physically, but you will not die spiritually; instead, you will be raised to new life in an imperishable, heavenly body. Because Jesus came to earth on His divine rescue mission, and stood in our place in both fulfilling the law perfectly and paying the penalty for our sins when He was crucified, death has no hold over us. Death has no sting, it's no longer a threat. We still anguish over our departed loved ones, we still want to live; we don't have a death wish. But for those who know that Christ Jesus is their Lord and Savior, death is not the terrifying end. It is the transition to our new life.

Of all people, Christians should face death bravely and be ready to die well. Commentator David Gibson says that “To die well means that you realize death is the limit God has placed on creatures who want to be gods... To die well means I realize that every time I see a coffin, it preaches to me

⁵ Doug Serven and Bobby Griffith, *Everything is Meaningless?* (Oklahoma City: White Blackbird, 2016), pp. 46-47.

that the world is broken and fallen and under the curse of death – and I am a part of it... To die well means realizing that from the day I was born I lived under the sentence of death, and I am amazed that God spared me as long as He did.”⁶ I would add that to die well means that I entrust myself to the loving arms of my heavenly Father and trust in the saving work of my Savior, Jesus.

And there will be eating and drinking in heaven! One of my children once came home from one of those DARE presentations in elementary school where they tell you the dangers of drugs and alcohol, and was talking about how he would definitely follow it. I said something along the lines of, “That’s great, but you know there will be wine in heaven, right? And the best wine that was ever made.” He really did not believe that could be true. But Isaiah 25:6-8 says, *“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. (Just in case you think this was written about a time in the past) And He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.”*

We eat and drink here to enjoy the life we have under the sun. One day those who are saved through Christ will eat and drink in the New Heavens and the New Earth, where death will no longer be a threat; it will no longer exist; and we will enjoy the pleasures of God forever. He will prepare a table for us and anoint our heads with oil, as our cups overflow, and goodness and mercy will follow us as we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And all who long for that day said, “Amen.”

Benediction:

It’s been about 20 months that I’ve been your pastor, and can I just say how thankful I am for each and every one of you? God has blessed us with a godly, loving, serving church full of friends. Your pastor loves you, God loves you more.

Romans 15:5,6 – *“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

⁶ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), pp. 109-110.