

# ***Ecclesiastes***

## **Chapter 9**

*Death Comes to All*

**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.**

**9:1** *are in the hand of God* – At the close of the preceding chapter it is said, “No man can find out the work that is done under the sun.” The reason is now given: All is controlled by God, whose ways are unsearchable. (CB)

God is the Creator and Sustainer of life, but this passage also implies His role as Judge over the lives of all people. (TLSB)

But God has given us the gifts of forgiveness and wisdom through His Word. He has made us His own people, of whom Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). (PBC)

*whether love or hate.* The future is under God’s control, and no one knows whether that future will be good or bad. (CSB)

The problem of 8:14 is addressed again. Chemnitz: “We must not and cannot determine on the basis of the outcome whether we are pleasing to God” (*LTh* 2:513). (TLSB)

He cannot tell from mere outward things, whether love or hatred is to be his lot: all is in the unknown future. (CB)

In previous chapters Solomon has made it clear enough that the way a person is treated in this world is no indication of his standing with God. Moreover, the Scriptures teach us that as God’s people we can frequently expect the world’s hatred. God Himself permits it to come our way. To what measure and at what times we’ll experience hatred or love, only God knows. (PBC)

**9:2** *same event.* Not only the wise and foolish (2:14), but also the good and the bad are seen leveled, in the sense noted at 3:20. For the Teacher’s conviction (beyond mere observation) that God ultimately will see justice done. (CSB)

Death, followed by judgment before God’s throne (cf 3:19; Ps 49:10; Heb 9:27). (TLSB)

*the clean* – These are those who kept the many OT ceremonial laws given to Moses at Mt Sinai along with the Ten Commandments. These regulations (discussed in the book of Leviticus) included washing, eating the right (clean) foods, and making distinctions between infectious and non-infectious diseases. Leviticus 13:38-46 furnishes an example. (PBC)

*who sacrifices* – The OT ceremonial laws called for various sacrifices on different occasions. Pious Jews faithfully offered these sacrifices during the fourteen centuries between Moses and the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70. For example, when Jesus was a baby Joseph and Mary took Him to the temple to consecrate Him to the Lord and “offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons’” (Luke 2:22-24) (PBC)

*who swears* – This is profanely. (CB)

**9:3** *evil ... evil.* The apparently common destiny (both the righteous and the wicked die) encourages some people to sin. (CSB)

The fact that righteous people die like wicked people seems to us to be an injustice. (TLSB)

*go to the dead* – Where there is no more hope. (CB)

Viewing life and death from a purely human perspective, it's only natural to conclude that it doesn't matter how you live. Death is such a stark reality that it can overpower people's innate sense of eternity, as well as their natural knowledge of God and the voice of conscience. (PBC)

*madness is in their hearts* – We observe that good people die along with the wicked. As we do so, we can sense the evil within our own hearts. “Out of men's hearts.” Declares Jesus, “come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (Mark 7:21-22) (PBC)

One commentator describes this madness as “unbridled and unprincipled conduct, which results from the conviction that life is meaningless and that there is no moral law operating in the world. (PBC)

The human mind is hindered by irrational thinking. (TLSB)

**9:4** *who is joined with all the living has hope* – These words remind us an ancient expression, “Where there's life there's hope.” Solomon's words apply to the wicked and to the godly. For the worldly person death brings an end to all his hopes and dreams. It also brings an end to all his hopes and dreams. It also brings an end to his time of grace and any hope of salvation. There is a way in which death marks the end of some of our hopes. For example, only while we remain on earth can we hope to testify to others. Remember Paul's words, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Philippians 1:23-24). (PBC)

Is focused on what may still happen in this life. Nevertheless, the life to come is the greater hope for believers. Luther: “A good minister of the Word of God preaches the Word of God on account of the good citizens, regardless of how many people find fault with him. If a teacher has two good pupils, he should work for the sake of these, even though he may have 20 others who are lazy and hopeless. A magistrate should also do his duty even if he cannot keep the entire state in its appointed task; he will still find one or another citizen with whom he can accomplish something.

Therefore Solomon is saying this to keep us from either being crushed by despair or becoming presumptuous. One should not despair about the living as one does about the dead, about whom one cannot have any hope” (AE 15:146). (TLSB)

*living dog is better than a dead lion* – The typical dog in the orient was a scavenger. To call someone a dog was a real insult. For instance, when he was accused of wrongdoing, Abner felt insulted and blurted out, “AM I a dog’s head?” (2 Samuel 3:8) Revelation 22:15 describes the damned as “the dogs.” AS much as dogs are enjoyed and pampered in our day, the canine species still has not reached complete respectability. To call someone a “dirty dog” or just plain “dog” is hardly a compliment. The lion on the other hand has always been respected as the savage but majestic king of the beasts. Proverbs 30:30 describes the lion as “mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing.” Yet even a little scavenger dog roaming the streets is better off than a dead lion, because he still has life. (PBC)

**9:5** *the living know* – One advantage the living have is that they still play an active role under the sun. They are conscious of things. (PBC)

Those still alive can influence others, pursue their interests and passions, and make preparations for their end; those who are dead have whatever influence their memory affords them as it fades from the thoughts of those still living. (TLSB)

*no more reward.* The dead have lost all opportunity in this life for enjoyment and reward from labor (see v. 6). (CSB)

**9:6** *have no more share* – Those who hope for “another time around” through some sort of reincarnation are whistling in the dark. “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Once you leave this earth, it’s final. You’ll never come back. Never! (PBC)

**9:1–6** From a human, mortal perspective, it appears unfair that all people must die, as death deals equally with evil people as well as those who follow God. We need something to counter the hopelessness that there is nothing after death. For that reason, God comforts us with His promises of love and mercy. • Thank You, God, that we do not see death as the end of our lives. Your promises, fulfilled in Christ, give us the sure and certain hope of being with You forever. Amen. (TLSB)

*Enjoy Life with the One You Love*

**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.**

**9:7–9** The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains a section (10.3.6–14) remarkably similar to this passage, illustrating the international flavor of ancient wisdom literature. (CSB)

*The Gilgamesh Epic*, an ancient flood story dating back to about 2000 B.C., contains these words of advice to the hero Gilgamesh:

Thou, O Gilgamesh, let thy belly be full; Day and night be thou merry; Make every day a day of rejoicing. Day and night do thou dance and play. Let thy raiment be clean; Thy head be washed,

and they self be bathed in water. Cherish the little one holding thy hand, And let thy wife rejoice in thy bosom. This is the lot of mankind. These words help demonstrate that throughout the centuries non-Christians have also see the value of enjoying life. But only the Bible puts that enjoyment into proper spiritual perspective. Enjoyment must be balanced with out obligations to serve God and our fellow man. (PBC)

**9:7** Believers are reminded that God has displayed favor toward them and toward whatever deeds are done in faith. (TLSB)

*what you do* – God smiles upon you and gives you enjoyment of them. This implies that they are done in His fear. In the view of the truth that “dead have no portion” in this life, the living are exhorted to a cheerful enjoyment of God’s gifts and diligence in God’s service. (CB)

Death is certain. Life is short. Once you’ve gone, you’ll never return to live on this earth. Why, then, waste time fretting over things you can’t control? “Enjoy life,” urges the Teacher. You can enjoy life without abandoning yourself to sin and madness. (PBC)

Eat, drink, and be merry! – Not with the attitude of the Epicureans, not because life is meaningless and nothing else matters, but realizing that food and wine and clothes and human love are all gifts from the hand of God. God is favoring you with these gifts now, so why foolishly wait until some future date? (PBC)

**9:8** In Tablet 10iii of the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, the “ale-wife” expresses similar thoughts about enjoying feasting, dancing, and one’s spouse. (TLSB)

**9:8** *garments be always white* – The ancient Jews dressed up for the festive occasions in white clothing and anointed their heads with oil. Olive oil and white clothes were associated with happiness. The Bible uses these customs to symbolize the spiritual joy of God’s people. Isaiah foretells how the Savior will “bestow on” His people “the oil of gladness” (Isaiah 61:3). St John depicts the saints in heaven as those who “have washed their robes and made them white” (Revelation 7:14). (PBC)

White clothes were more expensive to make and maintain, so they were only for wealthier people. The reader is being encouraged to be indulgent. Luther: “The Romans and Greeks favor a purple garment; but the Orientals, and especially the Jews, favor a white one, on account of the washings and cleanliness which they practiced so scrupulously” (AE 15:149). (TLSB)

*oil* – People anointed their heads on festive occasions. (TLSB)

**9:9** *enjoy life with the wife* – One of life’s greatest blessings is a loving husband or wife. (PBC)

Positive reference to a beloved wife contrasts with 7:26, 28. God’s blessings to us in marriage, especially in expressing and experiencing love, grant comfort and encouragement in the difficulties of life. (TLSB)

**9:10** Time for growing, for learning, for receiving God’s grace, for doing things that may benefit others is before we reach the grave (Jn 9:4). (TLSB)

*do with all your might* – You can’t go back and do it over again. If you didn’t study in school, if your wasted your talents, if you neglected your children, if you have hurt others through

your negligence – you may not get a chance to make amends or to do the job over the right way. (PBC)

in Sheol – The word translated “grave” is the Hebrew term sheol. Depending on the context in which it occurs, sheol has a wide range of meanings: the state of death, the grave, sometimes even hell. Whatever its specific designation, once you have entered sheol you can no longer return to life on earth. (PBC)

**9:7–10** God looks with favor upon the one who lives by faith. When God blesses you with wealth, enjoy that blessing and be a blessing to others. Make proper use of the time God gives in life. Know that denying yourself simple pleasures does not gain God’s favor. Simple and godly pleasures are only the beginning of the gifts of His love and forgiveness that He grants in Christ. • We thank You, Lord, that we can look at the simple blessings in life as a source of true joy. We receive all such things as signs of Your love and mercy. Amen. (TLSB)

*Wisdom Better Than Folly*

**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.**

**9:11** *time and chance.* Success is uncertain—more evidence that man does not ultimately control events. (CSB)

God is in control. He may allow events contrary to our expectations so we are reminded of His impending judgment upon us. (TLSB)

This is another view of God’s sovereignty over men and their works. (CB)

No matter how ably and hard we work, we dare not boast about the outcome. That is in God’s hands, and we must humbly leave it there. We should learn to depend on God and not on human factors. As the psalmist states,

Psalm 33:16-19, <sup>16</sup>No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. <sup>17</sup>A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. <sup>18</sup>But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, <sup>19</sup>to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.”

**9:12** *his time.* Of disaster. (CSB)

A time of calamity or distress. The person has trusted his or her abilities and gone on unaware of God’s work. Luther: “A fish snaps at the bait and swallows the hook. Birds confidently enter and eat, with nothing further from their minds than a trap; and then suddenly they are captured. So it

is that when we have chosen something good and hoped for it, we are deceived. And when it seems that something evil is impending, it is something good that is impending.... Experience itself teaches us that human affairs are carried out not by our plans but usually contrary to our plans. This is the source of the statement of luckless people: ‘That is not what I had in mind!’ ” (AE 15:153). (TLSB)

Solomon goes on to state that the hour of death comes quickly and unexpectedly for many. (PBC)

*in a snare.* Success is unpredictable, because man is not wise enough to know when misfortune may overtake him. (CSB)

Just when people are out celebrating, thinking that they’ve got it made, tragedy strikes; and an accident, a sudden illness, a loss in the family, financial ruin, national disaster. This is another reason for us to live life one day at a time, trusting in God. (PBC)

**9:13-16** Cf 2Sm 20:16–22, where Solomon’s Uncle Joab besieges a city for one person who has taken refuge there. One woman in the city convinced the rest to hand over the person Joab was seeking, and Joab spared the city. The woman’s name is not recorded. (TLSB)

**9:15-16** No great recognition is given to the man’s wisdom or the part it played in saving the city. (TLSB)

**9:15** *But nobody remembered.* Further warning against placing too high hopes on one’s wisdom. Its reputation fades, its good is soon undone (v. 18b), and it has no answer to death (2:15–16). (CSB)

**9:16** *a poor wise man* – His past manifestation of wisdom does not secure present regard to his counsels. (CB)

Once the city was safe nobody remembered that poor man. Maybe as soon as the danger had passed people attributed their deliverance to luck. Or perhaps some boastful official took all the credit for himself. (PBC)

**9:17** *words of the wise* – In the quiet counsels of the wise. (CB)

Even a king’s forceful advice cannot help those who are incompetent or unwilling to succeed. Wisdom is greater than authority. (TLSB)

*shouting of a ruler among fools* – Foolish people will follow the boisterous cry of a foolish leader, and despise the counsels of the poor wise man. (CB)

Learn to listen beyond the loud impressive voice. Sometimes the most priceless wisdom is concealed in the plainest wrappings. Often the voice of God Himself comes not with the roaring of the wind or the shaking of an earthquake or the raging of a fire, but with “a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:11,12) (PBC)

**9:18** *one sinner destroys much good* – By his folly, the effects of which are here opposed to those of wisdom. (CB)

Cf Gn 3, Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. (TLSB)

Wisdom seems to be a very fragile gift. It is easily forgotten. It often goes unrewarded. And it is quickly undone. Still, says wise King Solomon, for all its delicacy, “wisdom is better than weapons of war.” Wisdom builds up and save life, rather than destroying it. (PBC)