

An Empty Life? (11): The Universal End

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Turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter 9. The author of this Book of Ecclesiastes, he called himself the Preacher, has a thesis and his thesis is: Life is empty; life is vain; life is meaningless; life is futile; life is frustrating; life is trivial; life is without satisfaction. And furthermore he says people attempt to fill that emptiness; they attempt to get relief from the lack of satisfaction; they attempt to find some meaning in a meaningless life in various ways. Some people, he says, go the way of philosophy or practical knowledge, or savvy, or commonsense, and they try and find some meaning in a meaningful life. They attempt to import some meaning into their lives and he says it doesn't work.

Basically in Ecclesiastes, chapter one, he says, "I'm smarter than you are; I've tried that. It didn't work. He says other people try and find meaning, or at least satisfaction in this life through pleasure. Whether they're ancient hedonists or modern hedonists following a Playboy philosophy, they attempt to fill up what is lacking in this empty life by every imaginable pleasure and the Preacher says, "By the way, I was the best partier that ever lived. I partied better than you. I've had more fun than you've had and that didn't work either." He speaks about people who attempt to find meaning in life through their work. Whether it's the vocation whereby they earn money, or whether it's something that they throw themselves into. Some enterprise to offer a better existence on this planet. They, through their work, will supply meaning to life. Other people, who through their family, will supply meaning to their life. The relationship that they've always wanted to have with the husband or wife, the children they've always wanted to have and nurture and see grow into outstanding young men and women. And he says, "You know what? Meaning isn't found there either." In fact, some of the greatest frustrations of life are found there. And then, there are people who seek meaning in life through affluence—through having lots of things and money. They attempt to fill a void in life. And he says, "You know what? All of those escape routes don't work. They don't supply meaning to life because there is this fundamental truth that life is meaningless." And you say, "Well, that's fairly bleak." And I say, "You're right; that is fairly bleak."

But that's not all he has to say. He also says this: "This is an absolute truth: That life is meaningless under the sun." That is, life is meaningless lived apart from God. Life is meaningless apart from an active, living trust in a sovereign God who

is good and wise and kind and cares for us. Apart from a relationship with a living God, apart from the acknowledgment of His providence over all things and especially over His children, life is meaningless. He knows that many people attempt to supply meaning apart from that relationship, so, in chapters six, seven, and eight, he has gone through various explorations showing us how vain those attempts are. He points to the quandaries of injustice in life and oppression. He points to the futilities of our existence and verse 1 that we will read today, is his summation of the quandary which Derek took you through last week in Ecclesiastes, chapter 8. And he's showing us that there's no escape route apart from God. There's no way to fill up your emptiness with anything but God, because God didn't design your emptiness to be filled up with anything but Him.

Before we read this great passage today, let's outline it so that we can appreciate something of the flow of argument. Also, perhaps, so that you can at least get an idea of where I would go if I could get there because I got through point one in the early service.

Verses 1-6 give us the Preacher's grappling with two facts that we all face. One is, we don't know how things are going to turn out for us in this life. We don't know what twists and turns are going to be along the way. We don't know the unexpected providences that are coming our way, and the other thing, of course, is death. We do all know that we are going to die. The mortality rate is 100%, last time I checked. And so he points us to these realities, the reality of unexpected events in life—twists and turns—and then to death. He asks us to think about those things biblically.

Then, in verses 7 and following, he is talking about how we ought to respond to those things. He wants us to think biblically, and now he wants us to respond to those things biblically. In verses 7-10, which is the second part of the passage, he points to the way a Christian can live life in this world, freed by God's providence to enjoy His good gifts in spite of the fact that death is coming, and that life is uncertain.

And then finally, in verses 11-18, the third part of this chapter, he points to the difference between wisdom and folly. Again, he shows that wisdom is better than folly, but wisdom isn't always heeded and it isn't always rewarded. And therefore, we need to know how to respond to the rejection of wisdom biblically and realistically.

Let's look at this great passage together today. Beginning in verse 1 of Ecclesiastes, chapter 9. This is God's Word.

For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him. It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean

and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead. For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun. Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siege works against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Amen. This is God's Word; may he add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, by Your Spirit pierce our hearts. Show us our sins. Show us our emptiness if we are empty. Fill us with Yourself. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Preacher says here that the person who knows God, the person who is trusting God, the person who is able to rest and believe in and trust in God's sovereign providence over his life draws comfort from that sovereignty. And even in the face of the uncertainties of life, and even in the face of uncertain death, he is able to enjoy life as a gift from the providing God. Having that perspective, in other words, changes his view of life from meaningless to meaningful, from futile

and vain, to happy and satisfying. Trusting in a sovereign God makes all the difference. And we want to walk through this passage as the Preacher takes us to some of the quandaries of life. The unexpected turns of this life, universal death, the universal end that we all face, and makes us take stock of our own hearts whether they're empty or full and points us to the only place where they can be filled if they're empty.

I. We need to think about the twists and turns of life biblically.

Let's look at verses 1-6 first. Here's where he first introduces the reality of unexpected providences and death. "For I have taken all this to my heart." All what? All the things that were spoken about in chapter 8. "I've taken all that to heart," he says, "and, I want to explain it this way." Righteous men, wise men and their deeds are in the hands of God. In other words, he's acknowledging that God's children, those who by His grace have been made righteous and wise are in God's hands. They are under God's special care; He takes comfort in this crazy world where there are injustices everywhere you turn by realizing that God takes a special care of His people. He declares that He has personally appropriated that truth as He has felt the difficulties of life; as He has encountered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; as He has seen suffering and oppression and injustice. He has taken comfort that God is in control and that God cares for His people--those who are righteous and wise, their persons and actions, their lives and deeds are at the disposal of, and under the care of, and under the provision of, and under the special providential protection of God--and that makes all the difference he says. Realizing that changes the way that you look at this world.

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that even though that is true, that God cares for His own, it is also true that none of us knows what we're facing, and all of us know what we're facing. That is, that there are uncertainties in our life that none of us know about, but there is one certainty in life that all of us know about. And in the face of both of those things, the uncertainty and the final certainty, God's providence gives the believer comfort.

He first deals with the uncertainty of life in verse 1. "Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred." No man knows what awaits. What kind of treatment the righteous will receive is unknown. What kind of life he will experience is uncertain. No one can tell what the future will bring. Righteousness and wisdom, then, have no guarantees of leading to a blissful life. You can have a fine young person who loves the Lord, who has a very, very hard way ahead of them. And you can have a louse that seems to get off pretty easy. That's the way this life is even though we are under the care of a sovereign, provident God. This life is filled with unexpected trials. And in verse 2, he points to the grand example of this truth: that things often times go hard for the wise, even though they are under God's providential protection. The grand example of the truth that God

cares for the wise, but that the wise still face the bruising realities of life in a fallen world is seen in the universal end of us all—death. “Everyone,” he says in verse 2, “everyone dies; it is a universal evil. It is the same for all,” he says. The righteous may not be visibly preferred by providence. The righteous die just like sinners die. This is seen in the universality of death. Death comes to all—the righteous and the wicked, the good man and the evil man, the clean and the unclean, the faithful worshipper and the indolent non-worshipper, the good man and the sinner, the loyal covenant keeper and the disloyal covenant breaker. He's forcing the reality of universal death on us and saying, “You've got to have an answer to that.” In the face of universal death, you've got to have some sort of answer for meaning in life that makes sense.

You know, this is something that the religions in the cultures around Israel dealt with in various ways through denial and through mythology. Religions around Israel thought of the after life as another world in which there was oftentimes contact so they had constant beliefs in ghosts and spirits continuing to communicate to the living. And over against that, there's this constant refrain, “When you're dead, you're dead.” And you may say, “That doesn't sound like a New Testament concept of death. Where's the afterlife here?” Well, in verses 3-6, you're not going to find much afterlife. Not because the doctrine of the afterlife is absent from the Old Testament, because the Old Testament is de-sentimentalizing and de-mythologizing and calling us to a reality check with regard to death.

The ancient Egyptians would load up their Pharaohs with gold and implements and their concubines and their servants and bury them alive with the dead Pharaoh. Why? So that he could be whisked into the next world with all the accoutrements necessary for joy. Pagans around Israel would do the same, and to them there is this word of realism from the Preacher. “When you die, there is no memory.” No sentimentalizing, no view of death as some sort of mild transfer into a new world.

Death, the author of Ecclesiastes says, is the judgment of God. Look at verse 3. This universal death that impacts even those who are God's people, is viewed by the Preacher as something that is not natural. Forrest Gump said, “Dying's just part of living.” That's not what verse 3 says. Dying is a great evil. Not just because it's bad to be dead, but because dying is a sign of God's judgment. It is a moral judgment against the rebellion of evil men. The doctrine of total depravity is found there in verse 3 as well. And because of this, the Preacher views death as a pervasive evil; death is not viewed as a natural phenomenon, but as a moral evil. And you see that the Hebrew view of death is an unsentimental reality check; a reminder that death is a curse for moral rebellion.

And yet, all around us even today, we have modern pagans whispering into our ears sentimentalized, superstitious views of death to inoculate us against the moral shock of death and to make it a pleasant transition into another world.

Kahlil Gibran—I know you've had *The Prophet* on your coffee table; I know he's been there. Gibran says, “What is it to die, but to stand in the sun and melt into the wind, and when the earth has claimed our limbs, then we shall truly dance.”¹ Whatever that means. It's rubbish. And the Preacher is saying that when you die, you're dead. He's not denying the afterlife, you see. He himself even points to the ultimate judgment of God and the vindication that God gives after death. His point is to strip away the sentimentalized view that death is for everyone a transition that death is a transition into another state of blessedness. “No,” he says, “there is no eternal blessedness then for the man who does not know blessedness now.” And you only know blessedness now in living saving faith relationship with a God of providence.

Issac Asimov said, “life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome.” And Mary Baker Eddy said, “To infinite, ever present love, all is love, and there is no error, no sin sickness, nor death.” The Bahai faith teaches that “we are immortal, spiritual beings temporarily inhabiting mortal, physical bodies, when through death we cast off the limitations of this world and enter the realm of the spirit. We are in reality undergoing the equivalent of birth. For although we leave this world behind, we enter into a world of infinitely greater potential.”

And to that the Preacher says, “It is better to be a live dog than a dead lion.” You see, it's an unsentimental reality check and a reminder that death is not just part of the natural processes of this world. It is a curse for moral rebellion. And that is why Jesus Christ, through His death, died in our place to remove the sting of death for all who trust in Him to assure that we do not experience the eternal, but instead, eternal life.

James Boswell, in his *Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides* said, “No wise man will be contented to die if he thinks he goes into a state of punishment. Nay, no wise man will be contented to die if he thinks that he falls into annihilation. For however unhappy a man's existence may be, he would rather have it than not exist at all. No, there is no rational principle by which a man can die contented but by a trust in the mercy of God through the merits of Jesus Christ.” And you see, it is that truth, which this unsentimental reality check of Ecclesiastes, chapter 9 is meant to open us up to.

You see, we're too quick to read our Christian view of the afterlife and the hope of the resurrection of Christ into what are essentially pagan views of death. We are right to have that hope in the afterlife. It is as clear as the nose on our faces in the Scripture. We are wrong to diminish the moral dimension of death. We are

¹ A Lebanese mystic, author of *The Prophet*. Published in 1923, with emphasis on the individual's quest for enlightenment and inner peace outside of the constraints of organized religious institutions, his writings helped to create New Age spirituality. (ed.)

wrong to see death as simply a device that morally transforms everyone. Death is not the transformer; it is a curse. God is the transformer; His grace transforms. Death itself is judgment apart from that grace. And so the author, the Preacher, wants us to think about the twists and turns of this life biblically.

II. We need to respond to the twists and turns of this life biblically.

And then he wants us to respond to them biblically. Look at verses 7-10. He wants us to view the twists and turns of this life biblically because the Christian's confident trust in God's providence frees him to enjoy God's gifts. It saves him from being paralyzed by the trials of this life.

How do you respond to the sober truth like you find in verses 1-6? Well, if you love God; if you're trusting Him; if you believe in God's special providence; here's how you respond: You enjoy what you have. You receive it as His gift to you, as His evidence of blessing and favor and approval. You savor the comforts of this life appreciative to the God who has given them to you. You enjoy your wife and your marriage; you work with zeal because there is no work in death. You do it with all your might, all your thought, all your knowledge, all your skill; you don't live in the past. You don't work hard to hang on to the present. You don't think that the next thing is going to make you happy. You are contented in the lot that God has given you now, and you work out of a realization that God has approved you by His grace. God's providence, you see, liberates us from the paralysis of, "Oh, no, I'm going to lose this one day" by saying, "Right, you are. It's absolutely certain; it's not a possibility. You are going to lose this. It is not going to be this way forever. Enjoy now. Work for God, live for God, enjoy the things that He has given to us. Enjoy the good of this life. Serve Him productively. Care for others. This will go away."

III. We need to respond to the rejection of wisdom biblically and realistically.

And then, in verses 11-18 as those who have been made, by His grace, wise and righteous, we must also recognize, thirdly, that we need to respond to the rejection of wisdom biblically and realistically. Look at verse 11: "I saw again under the sun that the race is not to the swift the battle not to warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all." Here again he stresses that wisdom has its limits. Time and the uncertainties of life catch up with us all. Life is utterly unpredictable and filled with sudden turns and twists, and in verses 13-16, he gives us a story about how sometimes wisdom goes unheeded. "A poor man, but a wise man, saves a city. But after the city is saved, he's forgotten. It was his wisdom, not the weapons of war that saved the city, and yet it was unheeded." And so he says to us, "You have, by God's grace, been made wise

and righteous. Don't expect anybody to pat you on the back for that." Don't look for your ultimate reward here, for thought wisdom is indeed superior to folly, sometimes it's ignored and sometimes it's thwarted by sinners. Verse 17: "The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools." Verse 18, "Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good." Wisdom is superior, but that's no guarantee that wisdom will be accepted by fools. And so he says we need to approach life expecting time and the unexpected and the frustrations of this life to impact us, yet they are not God. God is God. Time is not God. The unexpected realities of this life are not God. The frustrations of this life are not in control; God is in control.

And when you look at life and you look at time and you look at those trials which catch you off guard coming around the corner, and you look at the frustrations and you look at them in light of a sovereign God caring for His children, it makes all the difference in the world. Look at life apart from Him; he says it cannot but be empty. Look at life through the lenses of His providence, and even the trials of life seem to be meaningful, and the enjoyments of life for the first time become possible. May God grant us to seek our meaning in Him and so face all the uncertainties of life, and the final certainties of life with equal confidence and joy. Let's pray.

Oh, Lord, apart from You we have no hope, no joy, no happiness, no blessedness. With You, there is no possibility that we can go without hope and joy and happiness and blessedness. Show us from Your Word that the man who is empty does not know God, but the man who is empty may find His emptiness remedied by running to God. And when he runs to God, he will find his emptiness so filled that he can say with the Psalmist, "Surely, my cup runneth over and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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