

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 17**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Moving to chapter 9, we get his fullest treatment of two of his, and I'm sure two of your, favorite things: death and joy. Death in vv. 1-6, and joy in vv. 7-10.

#### **I. Death**

First, death. In v.1 the preacher reminds us that in his examination of life under the sun he has found that "the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God." This is an affirmation of God's Sovereignty which we have seen throughout the book. Men, and here he has righteous and wise men in view – men and their deeds are in the hand of God.

This is generally a comforting truth, even one which the righteous exult in; yet nothing is normal and predictable in the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon affirms the sovereignty of God, and then he immediately subverts the joy and comfort which are often associated with it in the rest of Scripture. He says, in the second half of v.1, whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Here it is GOD'S love or hatred which is in view. His favor or his wrath. Both of these options lie before man.

The point here is this: from his orthodox theology, he knows the righteous are in God's hand. From his OBSERVATION of providence he can't tell if this means God loves them or hates (or is angry with) them. To him it appears providence is blind to the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. To put this in NT terms: the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Go measure it and see if there's a rainfall to righteousness correlation. If you think you know which providences reflect God's love and which reflect his wrath or judgment, you will draw a number of silly conclusions. Tornadoes are not a good thing; they are a sign of a fallen, groaning creation. And since Kansas gets hit with more tornadoes than anyone else, God must hate Kansas. Apparently, he hates all the red-states in tornado alley, which means he's a democrat.

If you think that's silly, you should recall what a famous TV preacher said after the earthquake in Haiti. Let one good earthquake hit SF or Las Vegas and a half-dozen evangelical leaders will tell you exactly what it means. You cannot look at the outward estate of men and conclude much of anything, the Preacher says,

about whether God loves them or hates them. But, of course, we do this all the time. We are like Job's friends. If they are suffering we assume something is wrong. Forget the fact that suffering can be redemptive. If they get a job promotion we assume they are blessed. Forget all the dangers of wealth. If they lose assets we assume it's a misfortune. Forget that blessed are the poor stuff. And exhibit A in the preacher's case for inscrutability is in vv. 2-3. All suffer the same fate. Death comes to all indiscriminately. He's said this before, but here he gives a more extensive set of 6 contrasting classes of people.

The same event (he means death) happens to the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, the one who sacrifices and the one who doesn't sacrifice, the good and the sinner, and finally, he who swears an oath and he who shuns an oath. Here the character-consequence, behavior-outcome sequence of Proverbs breaks down again. All die. The good as well as the evil. No form of righteousness, sacrificing, goodness, vow-taking, or clean living makes any difference in the end. The outcome is inevitable and behavior-independent.

His disgust is registered in v.3 where he calls this state of affairs an EVIL. It is unacceptable. On top of this he says, in the second half of v.3, alluding to the reason for the universality of death, that the hearts of the children of men are full of evil and MADNESS while they live. Here he uses language reminiscent of the flood, where the heart of man was continually evil, and God sent the waters of destruction.

In vv.4-6 he turns to the advantages of being alive. (Springsteen) We can never assume this with the Preacher, so it's nice that he spells it out for us. Verse 4: he who is joined with all the living has hope. As the SC state motto puts it: Where there's life (breath), there's hope.

Next Solomon gives us a proverb: For a living dog is better than a dead lion. Dogs were not pets Israel. They were unclean, despised scavengers. Lions, of course, were mighty and revered. The point is, it's better to be alive, even as a dog, than to be a dead king of the beasts. And if you want to know what advantage the living have, you can see that at the beginning of v.5: the living know that they will die! By which he means the living have self-consciousness. They have time for decisive action.

In contrast the dead are said to know nothing, they have no reward, and their memory is forgotten. Now Solomon is not really thinking of the afterlife here. His point is, with respect to the living, with respect to human activity, the dead know nothing, they have no more reward for their toil – and, of course, their memory is quickly forgotten.

Verse 6 makes this earthbound perspective clear: Their love and their hate and their envy (or rivalry) have already perished. This is a sad verse. When a person

dies it is not simply the cessation of brainwaves or bodily function that is lost. We lose their love and all their passions, their hatred and envy, the whole roiling spectacle of a life just vanishes. All their likes and dislikes, all their relationships and opinions – gone, the Preacher says forever. They have no more share, the text says in all that is done under the sun. The point for us is clear: time is short and the hour is late. So how then shall we live?

## **II. Joy**

This brings us to joy in vv. 7-10. This is the sixth passage in the book that focuses on embracing and enjoying life and its basic gifts. So, I know what you are thinking: I'm really tired of all this joy, joy, joy in the book of Ecclesiastes. Let me assure you: there's more darkness to come and, this passage really is different. This is, by far the fullest account of this theme in the book – I said that before, I know – but that was up to that point. This passage is the most robust affirmation of life in the ENTIRE book – with a good bit of new material. I want to look at these verses under six imperatives: Go, Eat, Drink, Let, Enjoy and Do.

### **Go**

First, Go. The transition from verse 6 to verse 7 could not be more abrupt or shocking. The preacher's point is: You are running out of time. Your and your love and hate, will soon enter the land where there is no earthly knowledge or reward. So get up. Stop sulking. Be done with petty grudges and petty distractions. Redeem the time. The situation is urgent. You can't unstick the hourglass on the table, so don't waste another day. GO.

### **Eat**

Second: Eat. Here we start to see what we are to pursue. Eat your bread with joy. Dead men don't love, or hate, or envy, and they don't eat. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, so you too should not just eat, but eat with joy. Don't view food as having only practical utility. Food is for delight. Don't eat like a pig. Don't rush your meals. Savor every sandwich. There are no delis where you're going. The Lord has set a table before in the very shadow of death.

### **Drink**

Third, Drink. Drink your wine with a merry heart. This is a new item not in the previous texts. God gives wine to make the heart of man glad (Ps 104) so don't despise his gift. Drink with a merry heart and drink to obtain a merry heart. Martin Luther, writing in 1530 to a man who asked for some advice, said this: Accordingly if the devil should say: "Do not drink," you should reply to him, "On this very account, because you forbid it, I shall drink, and what is more, I shall drink a generous amount." He goes on to cite his own practice: What do you

think is my reason for drinking wine undiluted, if it is not to torment and vex the devil? Drinking is a form of spiritual warfare. Who knew?

We can eat and drink, and engage in all the imperatives here, because of the last phrase in v.7: God has already, or long-ago, approved what you do. The point is not that God places His stamp of approval on any behavior. The things commanded here are part of God's good creation order, and when you enjoy them God already pre-approves of it. Everything created by God is good, Paul says, if it is received with thanksgiving.

## **Let**

Fourth imperative, in v.8: Let. This is also new. Let your garments always be white. (Even after labor day) White garments were functional and celebratory. Functional because they reflected the heat in this culture. Celebratory because they were signs of festivity and joy. The saints are clothed in white in the book of revelation as a sign of purity and victory. But we shouldn't over-spiritualize in a passage like this. White garments are contrasted with sackcloth as signs of joy. The preacher's point then is - dress so you can celebrate life. Get some color in your wardrobe. There will be plenty of days for sackcloth. Dress for merriment.

The second, and related "let," is "let not oil be lacking from your head." Ashes go with sackcloth; oil goes with garments of gladness and joy. God anoints our heads with oil, and so should we. Oil was a perfume in this culture. It had a nice aroma. So don't smell. You will smell very bad, very soon.

## **Enjoy**

The fifth imperative, in v.9, is enjoy. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. Here the good creational gift of marriage is celebrated in its fullness. This enjoyment embraces the whole range of married life. Notice its enjoy LIFE with the wife whom you love. This means enjoy her companionship, enjoy sharing the burdens of work and family together. Enjoy life in all its goodness.

And do this, the next phrase says: all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun. All the days of your fleeting, little vaporizing life, enjoy your wife. Though you might want to leave the fleeting vapor part off the anniversary card. Luther again: the preacher is not urging a life of pleasure and luxury characteristic of those who do not sense the vanity, for that would be putting oil on fire; but he is speaking of godly men, who sense the vexation and troubles of the world. It is their downcast hearts that he wants to encourage.

It turns out, that in the world of created things; we can only enjoy what we do NOT worship. What we do not seek to gain from, what we do not seek leverage over. This enjoyment of marriage is, in the last phrase of v.9, our portion in life

and in our toil at which we toil under the sun. The dead have no more portion in all that is done under the sun. Marriage is our portion while we have breath.

## Do

Sixth imperative. Do. Verse 10: whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. There is a contrast here between *finding* out the scheme of things, which is futile, and *finding* the labor that God has put in your hand to do. There are three sub-points here:

First, just do it. Don't be overly wise here: do the stuff that is right in front of you that needs to be done.

Second, do it mightily. The preacher commends formidable, arduous labor. In Pauline terms: do you work heartily as unto the Lord.

Third, do it NOW. The text says, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol (or the grave), to which you are going. Again, the point here is not to speculate on the afterlife, but to affirm that human labor in this world comes to an end.

Don't labor as if your career is going to be 350 years long. Remember what's coming – and make today's work count. Notice that work, like the other goods in this series of imperatives, is an END in itself, it is not simply the means to some other end. Work is for joy, it is its own reward. It is not for leverage or gain or control.

Let me close with Luther again: I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find joy wherever I can.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).