

# Life is Better than Death

📖 Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

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Last time we finished Ecclesiastes 8, which gives a positive, yet limited outlook on wisdom. Wisdom is valuable for navigating the difficulties of life, but it does not resolve all of life's enigmas, such as why we face times of adversity and prosperity, or why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. There are things that happen in this world that don't have explanation, and wisdom is not able to penetrate these things that are hidden in God.

In 8:10ff, Solomon is emphasizing the limitations of wisdom. We started with 8:14 because it helps us see the context. What Solomon reports in v 14 is the righteous receiving bad things and the evil receiving good things. He thought this was contradictory to the justice of God. He hoped that wisdom could penetrate the plan of God to uncover why God permitted this injustice. Ultimately, he found that it could not, but in 8:10 we see what Solomon saw and considered a case where divine justice was not exercised, and it bothered him. Unfortunately, this verse in the NASB needed some heavy re-translation work. What Solomon saw was wicked men approaching the temple and going into it. As they left they boasted that they got away with doing evil. This was an enigma to Solomon. How could people approach God wrongly and not get punished for it? In 8:11 Solomon reinforces the point saying that "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil." In other words, because the Lord did not execute swift justice, it encouraged others to do evil. Why would God not exercise justice to stop them from doing evil? And can wisdom answer this question? In 8:12 Solomon states that it is an exception to the general rule. A sinner may do evil a hundred times and still live a long life; but it's a fact that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. In verse 13 he turns to the general rule of thumb for those who do evil. "But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow." Generally, that's true, though there are exceptions. But generally, this one will not live long "because he does not fear God." And to fear God is to live your life as if you are in the very presence of God. In fact, fearing God is very prominent in how to live life in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but it is also taught throughout the Bible. In 8:14 he then states the enigma we have been discussing, that the righteous receive evil things and the evil receive good things. These are exceptions, but they are troubling exceptions. He wanted to know if wisdom could penetrate and resolve why God

permitted these exceptions. In 8:15 he deferred for the time to the exhortation to enjoy life. "So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun." This is a positive outlook on life. Solomon is not commending hedonism, but the enjoyment of life under the sun, giving thanks to God for the fruits of one's labor and enjoying them. This, he says will "stand by" him, meaning it will revitalize and motivate him to keep going all the days of his life, days that God has given him, since each day is a gift of God. In 8:16, he returns to seeking out and gaining wisdom so that he might understand everything which has been done on the earth. In other words, he doesn't understand, especially these exceptions that seem to be contrary to God's justice. This task caused him insomnia, because no matter how much wisdom you may have, the problem is inaccessible to wisdom. How can one understand all that God is up to at any one point in time, much less for all of time? Yet this is what Solomon set out to find. In 8:17, "and I saw every work of God, I *concluded* that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun." He concluded that no one can understand all that God is up to or why those who are evil receive good or those who are good receive evil. These are impenetrable enigmas. He concludes, "Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover." What he means there is mankind corporate. Even though mankind corporately has tried to discover it, they have worked hard to discover it, yet they won't. And finally, even if a wise man should claim that he knew, he understood, he really does not. Ultimately, there is no one who does. There are people who claim to know. These are the talking heads. They are making a lot of speculations. The one who fears God will shut himself up to what God has revealed. He will not go beyond what is written. What we have written is the broad outline of the plan of God, that ultimately all things work together for good for those who love God, and that in the end God will judge all men, so that those who did wrong will be held accountable, and those who did right will be rewarded. In short, then, there is a purpose for bad things happening to good people and good things happening to bad people. We just don't perceive what it is. And all the wisdom we gain can never allow us to perceive it. We will simply have to wait and trust with the eyes of faith.

In Ecclesiastes 9 we come to Solomon's reflections on this troubling problem and the role of wisdom. So he will continue to deal with this problem and he will address the question of, if wisdom cannot penetrate the problem, why take the time to acquire it? His basic answer is because it is instrumental in helping us enjoy life. In 9:1, **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.** When Solomon says **I have taken all this to my heart**, he means by **all this**, all that he has been talking about, namely, why there is an apparent breach of the justice of God, why good things happen to bad people, why sometimes there is adversity and other times there is prosperity. When he says **I have taken all this to my heart**, he means "I reflected on all this," I thought about it deeply. His goal was **to explain it**, that is, "clear it all up." His conclusion was this; **that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God.** What he means is that the circumstances of the righteous men, who are wise, and **their deeds**, are in God's sovereign plan. God has a plan

for our lives. The way God's plan unfolds with respect to man, made in the image of God, is that God establishes our circumstances. This is the way Dr. Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary used to explain it. God, in his dealings with mankind, sets the circumstances for man, and man is responsible to respond correctly in those circumstances. So you see both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Man doesn't determine the circumstances. We can't do that. That's what he says next. **Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him.** He means you can't determine what circumstances you will face next in your life. You don't **know whether it will be love or hatred;** meaning you can't predict whether what happens next will strike you as God loving you or God hating you. If it's prosperity, then you would say God loves me. If it is adversity, then you would say God hates me. It can be very frustrating living life, but the proper response is to walk by faith.

In verse 2 Solomon says, **It is the same for all.** That is, we are all facing the same predicament. We don't know what is coming next in our lives. Of course, this is the very thing we want to know so we can prepare for it. But we can never know. And it's this way for everyone. He illustrates this next; **There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked.** By **fate** he means "death," as the end of verse 3 makes clear. All men share the same **fate**, whether **righteous** or **wicked**, they all go to death. Whether one is justified before God or not doesn't change that. Now he doesn't go beyond the temporal. He never looks at the eternal. So, he's not considering that and if we were to consider that, of course, there would be a difference. He also adds, **for the good**, and the LXX adds "and the bad," which is the proper pairing that is missing in the Masoretic Text. But he means, how one lives, whether good or bad doesn't change the fact that they will go to death. Neither **For the clean and for the unclean.** What he is referring to there is either the ritually clean or unclean of the Jew and the Gentile. It doesn't matter either way, Solomon would say they're all going to death. **And 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.** It makes no difference; we're all going to die, so what difference does it make and who cares?! Those were Solomon's reflections.

In verse 3 he says **This is an evil in all that is done under the sun.** He's saying, it's not fair, it's not just **that there is one fate for all men.** Actually, it has been somewhat of a troubling problem. Why is it that physical death is not removed by the application of the atonement to the believer? Why do we still have to die physically? Well, actually, one generation will not die physically, the generation that is raptured. But the removal of physical death is not part of what is applied in the atonement at the moment of faith. Why not? Well, I don't know, but I'm sure God has reasons. It certainly troubled Solomon. **Furthermore**, he adds, **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. The hearts** or "minds" of **the sons of men**, that is, all mankind, **are full of evil.** It's a way of saying men are depraved, all men are depraved, their thoughts betray them. **And insanity is in their hearts.** The word **insanity** is really "foolishness." Foolishness is bound up in their minds **throughout their lives.** It's not just when they are youths, it's **throughout their lives.** The longer I live the more foolishness I see committed by older

people. Just look at our government, its full of people who are full of foolishness. There's not that much difference between the older and supposedly wiser people than the younger and supposedly more foolish youth. And then guess what, **After** all is said and done, **they go to the dead.**

So, in verses 1-3 Solomon is bemoaning the acquiring of wisdom. I mean, what point is there? It makes no difference, we're all going to the same place. We're all going to die. It doesn't matter if you live a good life or an evil life, it doesn't matter whether you acquire wisdom or not, we're all going to die. So why get wisdom? It's a pretty pessimistic outlook.

But then in vv 4-6 he does find one advantage to being alive. So let's look at that. **For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion.** One thing **the living** have that the dead do not have **is hope.** The Hebrew in this context means "a chance of something." The dead don't have a chance of anything. So one thing **all the living** have is "a chance for hope," "an opportunity for something good." And then he illustrates saying **surely a live dog is better than a dead lion.** Now the reason he chose a **dog** and a **lion** is because a **dog** was despised, a yucky animal, just a nuisance, very unlike our culture which thinks of them as man's best friend. This is why in the David and Goliath contest, the Philistine said, "Am I a dog that you would come at me with sticks?" You basically threw sticks at dogs to get them to leave. The lion on the other hand, they considered to be a great and noble creature they honored. So with that view of these two animals in mind, it is better to be alive and despised than dead and without honor because at least when you are alive you have hope. The living have some hope for enjoyment of life, but the dead do not.<sup>1</sup>

Verse 5, **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.** When he says **the living know they will die;** he considers this an advantage over the dead, who **do not know anything.** I think he means that at least the living have the prospect of death, though it has not come yet, whereas for the dead they don't even have the prospect of death, it's already come. So they don't have any time to do anything. As the verse goes on to affirm. **Nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten.** That is, since they are already dead, there is no **longer** any opportunity for **reward** in life, no enjoyment of life. And further, the NASB says, **for their memory is forgotten,** as if that is the reason or cause, but the Hebrew says "and even the memory of them fades or disappears." Once people die their memory may extend a generation, or possibly two, but usually their memory is forgotten by the third generation. So, in this sense, it is better to be alive than to be dead.

Verse 6, **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.** Solomon is obviously saying that being alive is better than being dead. Once you die your **love,** your **hate** and your **zeal** perish with you. Those capacities are over when you die. As Solomon says, **and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.** They don't get to partake in any of the enjoyment of life that takes place **under the sun,** and certainly not of any of the greater enjoyment that a believer can have by living beyond the sun.

Now some have thought that what Solomon was saying here is that the living are conscious and the dead are unconscious. The passage is sometimes used to support the concept of soul sleep. However, "As Ginsburg has noted, the concepts of consciousness and unconsciousness here are not in their barest forms as though these verses taught soul sleep. Instead they should be understood in the context of enjoying life (Ecc. 9:7-9) and possessing the capacities for enjoyment; the living have those capabilities but the dead do not (*The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, pp. 414-5)."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the point is that being alive is better than being dead because those who are alive still have the opportunities and capacities to enjoy life but the dead do not. Once you die you can't come back and relive any of the gifts God has given. All, in that sense, is lost. You only live once, so live it in service to God and in enjoyment of His gifts. That is what Solomon turns to next in verses 7-9.

**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.** This is one of the places Solomon spells out how we should live life. Here he does it in view of the uncertainty of the future. You don't know whether tomorrow you will have adversity or prosperity. And you know that you will die and then lose all opportunity for enjoyment. So Solomon says, enjoy life as God's good gift while you still can. Now some think that he is saying live a life of wanton pleasure, but that's not the point. He has said before in less detail, that we should eat and drink and find some good thing in each day's labor (2:24-26), that we should rejoice and do good and eat and drink and find good in all our labor (3:12-13) and be happy in our activity (3:22) and enjoy each day and the reward it brings which is from the gift of God. Here he agrees with all those things but goes much further. Verse 7, **Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart.** Why make life dreary! Go enjoy your dinner, drink your wine with a cheerful heart. Enjoy these as some of the simple gifts of God. You can do this because **God has already approved your works.** He's speaking of the work of your hands, your labor, because the bread and wine are the reward for your labor. So go ahead and enjoy them. There's nothing wrong with enjoying the fruit of your labor. There is everything right with it. So, go ahead he says, enjoy it, have a cheery heart.

We might comment just briefly about drinking **wine**. There's nothing wrong intrinsically with drinking **wine**. Wine was specified for the Passover and it was used in the Passover. It was also used in Communion by the Church for the first 1,830 years of the Church's existence. It's such a small portion that it shouldn't be a problem. However, some people can't handle wine, so they should probably leave it alone. But there is nothing fundamentally wrong with drinking it. You just shouldn't get drunk. Paul told Timothy, "drink a little wine for the stomach." Jesus said "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until I come in My kingdom." So Paul recommended it, Jesus drank it and will drink it again in the kingdom. What percentage of alcohol was in the wine and will be in the kingdom is not exactly known, but sometimes it was diluted 1:3 or 1:4, so probably around 3-6%. Of course, people argue about this all the time, but I think the principle is the main idea; drink controllably, you can drink

with cheer as Solomon says, but there is a line and you have to know when to stop, and if you can't stop, you have a problem and you don't need to drink.

In verse 8 he adds more things we can do for enjoyment of life. **Let your clothes be white all the time. White clothes** represented clean clothes. Wear clean **clothes** all the time. Don't go around dirty, that's not enjoying life. Go around clean. **And let not oil be lacking on your head. Oil** on the head was a form of lotion in the ancient world. It was a skin and hair moisturizer. They lived in a very dry climate. They had dry hair and dry skin, so they would anoint themselves with oil. It was a matter of good hygiene. Verse 8 is really dedicated to enjoying life by having good hygiene.

Finally, verse 9, **Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun. Enjoy life** with your wife. You don't have a long time to enjoy your wife. So you should take every opportunity to enjoy life together. Unfortunately, I see many Christians not doing this. I won't go into details. But there is no romance, no spending time together, no enjoyment, their marriages are riddled by trouble. It's not good. Marriage is something to be enjoyed. Marriage is the second divine institution. And if it's not working properly, it's going to fall apart. And then the family is going to fall apart. So you should enjoy it, enjoy the **woman whom you love**. The reason is because **the days of your life are fleeting**. You don't have marriage very long. It's very short in the grand scheme. So enjoy it while you can. The dead can't enjoy it. And remember that each of the **days of your fleeting life** have been **given to you** by God. Each day is a gift of God. Treat it like one.

Why? He says, **for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun**. There is **reward in life**, it's not just **reward** for the afterlife. The **reward in this life** is the simple joys of enjoying the fruit of your labor, having clean clothes, moisturizing your skin, enjoying your wife. They are just simple things, but they are rewards for **your toil...under the sun**, because life **under the sun** is difficult, it's life in a fallen world, and there's frustration and sin and all of that, but take time to enjoy some of the reward each day. Solomon wants you to be able to relax a little. I want you to be able to relax. Being a Christian is not about being uptight. It's about being able to rest in the Lord, being able to accept what He has given you as a reward and treating it as such. You're not being stingy by enjoying life, you're not being selfish. It's a reward from Him to be enjoyed and He is to be thanked for it.

Verse 10, **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**. In my estimation **Sheol** is the grave or death. There's **no activity, planning or knowledge** in death. That is for this life. And this life is fleeting, so **whatever your hand finds to do; work, hobbies, etc...do it with all your might**. Put thought into it, plan it all out, gain knowledge and skill about how to accomplish it, use that skill in actively accomplishing it, make the most of this life, because once you're in the grave, you can't do that anymore.

All in all, what Solomon is teaching us is that life with all its enigma's is better than death. Vv 1-3 paint a picture that on one hand it seems that there is no advantage for living a righteous life over a wicked life or being clean over being unclean or sacrificing or not sacrificing because we all go to the grave. But, vv 4-6 show that there is an advantage to the living. The living still have hope for the future, they still have their daily reward, they still have their love, their passion and their zeal, all things not shared by the dead. So then vv 7-10 instruct us how to live wisely while we are still alive; eat with joy, drink wine with cheer. These are a reward from God. Wear clean clothes, have good hygiene. Why go around looking somber all the time? Enjoy your wife; enjoy her, not just being with her, her, and, of course, doing things together, making the most of your life together. Life is short and this is your reward from God for all your hard work that is very difficult and frustrating due to the fall. Finally, whatever you do with your hands, do it to the best of your ability, do it with careful thought, skill, knowledge and do it for the glory of God, because once you're gone, you can't do that anymore. So live life to the fullest, as God intended us to live.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 9:4.

<sup>2</sup> Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 998–999.