

### Keeping the Joy of Living

#### Ecclesiastes 9:1-18

Ecclesiastes 9:1-6: *“All things come alike to all: one event happens to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. <sup>3</sup> This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. <sup>4</sup> But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.”*

#### Background Notes

Everyone agrees that Ecclesiastes is not an easy book in the Bible to understand or interpret. However, if we keep two major points in mind as we study, we will be greatly helped in our understanding of Ecclesiastes. What are these two points?

**1. Always keep in mind the complete theme of the book.**

The theme of Ecclesiastes is not just that life and labor “under the sun” are futile and a big zero. That’s only half of the theme of Ecclesiastes. The complete theme is that although life and labor “under the sun” (without God in the picture) are meaningless, when life and labor are viewed with God in the picture, and viewed from His “above the sun” perspective, and viewed from what He has revealed to us in Scripture, *then* we can find joy and meaning in our life and labor. This point must be kept in mind all the way through the book of Ecclesiastes. In any given passage, we must ask: Is Solomon viewing things only from the “under the sun” human perspective, or is he bringing the “above the sun” divine perspective into consideration?

**2. Always keep in mind the structure of the book.**

Solomon didn’t wait until the end of the book to give us the divine perspective of what life is all about. No! The divine perspective is sprinkled throughout the book, as we’ve seen. Solomon’s conclusion that we can live life joyously because life is a gift from God has already been brought before us (chapters 2, 3, 5, & 8). This same divine conclusion also taught in chapter 9.

Remember, this conclusion is not that we should live a life of hedonism, or indulge in a selfish lifestyle. Why not? Because our lives are to be subject to fearing the Lord, and to keeping His commandments as revealed in His Word. The New Testament backs up this conclusion of Ecclesiastes as the norm for living life. 1 Timothy 6:17: *“God richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.”*

One further background note. Some people have proposed that the Bible is teaching “soul sleep” in verse 5: *“the dead know nothing.”* The answer is, No - of course not!

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Man’s limited knowledge should not diminish a believer’s joy of living.

What is the “all this” that Solomon mentioned in verse 1? *“For I considered all this in my heart.”* The “all this” is that the ways of God are beyond all human wisdom – as we saw in the second half of Ecclesiastes 8. God has purposely designed our moral universe this way. But that doesn’t mean that **God** doesn’t know, or that **God** doesn’t have control!

From our perspective, we don’t know what the future holds. Will we be faced with love and happy circumstances in life, or with hatred and unhappy circumstances? *“People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them”* (v1). From our perspective alone, the events of life often seem haphazard and random. They appear to happen without rhyme or reason. Whether one is righteous or unrighteous, religious or unreligious, good guy or bad guy, all eventually die (v2-3).

Therefore, if that’s the way it is, shouldn’t we just live life for the moment? Verse 4: *“A living dog is better than a dead lion.”* At least when you’re living you are conscious – whereas *“the dead know nothing”* (v5). It’s important to remember that verses 1-6 are written from the human perspective. (Notice the key phrase “under the sun” in both verses 3 and 6.)

From our earthly perspective, with limited knowledge and without divine revelation, we would have to conclude that we should just live life for what we can get out of the moment. But we know from what God has revealed to us in His Word (even in the book of Ecclesiastes) that life is not random, and haphazard, and meaningless. God is in total and sovereign control of all people and events, at all times and in all places.

What should our response be then? Because we have limited knowledge, and we don’t know what the future holds for us, should we be discouraged and depressed? No! With divine approval, we can live our lives “under the sun” joyously. Life is a gift from God who is “above the sun” – the One who is the Creator and Controller of all things.

That's what verses 7-9 are all about: *"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works. <sup>8</sup> Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil. <sup>9</sup> Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life that He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor that you perform under the sun."* (In view of the context, "fleeting life" is the best translation of verse 9.)

So the norm of life for the believer is to eat our meals with happiness (v7), dress appropriately (v8), purpose to have a happy and joyful marriage (v9), and know that we can use our hard earned money for these ends (v9).

Of course it goes without saying that, for the believer, all we do in life is subject to God's further revelation for Christian living in the New Testament. So, man's limited knowledge of the future should not diminish a believer's joy of living.

## **2. Man's limited knowledge should not diminish a believer's dedication for work.**

Verses 10-12: *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. <sup>11</sup> I returned and saw under the sun that— The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. <sup>12</sup> For man also does not know his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them."*

Is verse 10 good advice - or bad advice? It depends on your view of Ecclesiastes. In the positive view of Ecclesiastes that we are presenting, it is good advice. It's part of the good advice in verses 7-9. Just as our limited knowledge should not diminish our joy of living, so our limited knowledge should not diminish our dedication for work.

Whatever area of work or service the Lord gives you to do in this life, use *all* your talents, abilities, and capacities to do that work to the best of your ability! Don't lose out on this opportunity and responsibility and privilege to serve now, because when you die, it will be too late. The time for dedicated work and service is now.

Obviously, the committed believer's dedication to any area of work will be subject to all of God's Word. Under the sun, you'll find that sometimes circumstances and results do not always favor the wise and dedicated (v11) and sometimes even the wise and dedicated are cut off by death or evil times like trapped fish or birds (v12). But still, man's limited knowledge should not diminish a believer's dedication for work.

### 3. Man's limited knowledge should not diminish a believer's appreciation of wisdom.

Verses 13-18: *"This wisdom I have also seen 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, besieged it, and built great snares around it. 15 Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man. <sup>16</sup> Then I said: 'Wisdom is better than strength. Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. <sup>17</sup> Words of the wise, spoken quietly, should be heard rather than the shout of a ruler of fools. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good."*

The teaching of this section of Ecclesiastes 9 is very similar to the doctrinal point of Ecclesiastes 8: wisdom "under the sun" has its benefits - but "under the sun," wisdom will not be appreciated. Even the wisdom of a poor wise man that delivers a small city against overwhelming odds will be ignored when the crisis is over, and in time he will be forgotten.

What's the lesson here? Learn to appreciate wisdom. Even though he is not always heeded and the effect is limited, the quiet words of a wise person are better than the shouts of a ruler of fools (v17). Wisdom is better than military strength (v18). And even though the bad counsel of one sinful fool can destroy much good (v18), don't despair. Man's limited knowledge should not diminish a believer's appreciation of wisdom.

### Practical Application

#### **Don't be surprised if people forget you.**

The little parable about the poor wise man (v14-16) is very practical. Don't be surprised if people forget you - even if you've helped them, or even if you've delivered them out of trouble! Oh, you may get a little recognition – maybe a newspaper write-up or even a small monument - but it won't be long before you are all but forgotten.

A number of commentators have seen a picture of Christ in the "poor wise man." As this humble man was forgotten in spite of all the good he had done, so the Lord Jesus has been largely forgotten by this world, in spite of all the good He has done for mankind.

So don't be surprised if people forget you. That's the way it is, "under the sun." Don't be surprised if people forget you. But don't be discouraged, because God will never forget you!