

Chapter 11: Wisdom is Better

Ecclesiastes 9:1–18

Since the structure of Ecclesiastes is not as intuitively obvious as other books of the Bible, it is worth reminding ourselves as we open our study of each new chapter about where precisely we are. Again, the first half of Ecclesiastes (chs. 1–6) deconstructed all the false hopes of salvation in this world under the sun, while the second half of Ecclesiastes (chs. 7–12) are constructing a vision of how to live in this fallen, broken world anyway. In chapter seven, the Preacher noted the importance of wisdom, and in chapter eight, the Preacher began to describe the nature of wisdom. Now, in chapter nine, the Preacher deals with the limitations and shortcomings of wisdom in this world, and yet nevertheless will conclude that wisdom is “better” (v. 18) than to live without it. Here, the Preacher explains that *wisdom relinquishes control and readies for eternity*.

Relinquishing Control (Eccl. 9:1–6)

In this exploration of the limitations and shortcomings of wisdom in this world, the Preacher begins by asking “whether we are in the hands of friend or foe.”¹ That is, the Preacher first gives another statement of his comprehensive evaluation of the world: “But all this I laid to heart, examining it all...” (v. 1a). In this case, he examines the fact that “the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God” (v. 1b). Now, the phrase “hand of God” could be a positive statement, referring to God’s care for and protection of his people (cf. Ps. 31:5; Isa. 50:2; John 10:28–29), or this could refer to God’s power more generally (cf. Deut. 6:21; Prov. 21:1; Isa. 66:2).² Throughout Scripture, the “hand of God” is a metaphor for his omnipotence over all creation, and his redemptive kindness to his particular people. So, does this reference underscore the general power of God, or the covenantal mercy of God toward his people? The final phrase is dismal: “Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him” (v. 1c). What are we to make of this?

It is probably too strong to say that the Preacher doubts altogether whether God is “well disposed” toward his people.³ On the other hand, it is probably also incorrect to suggest that this refers to the love and hate of human beings, even by appealing to the human love and hate referred to in v. 6.⁴ In context, it is clear that the Preacher is *here* saying something about the hand of God, but he is not entirely skeptical about God’s grace toward his people. Rather, Duane Garrett’s comments seem closer to the mark when he argues that “the apparent injustice in the world is proof of the sovereignty of God. No one by even righteous deeds can gain control over God and coerce

¹ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 80.

² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 90.

³ Pace Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 227.

⁴ Pace Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 142.

blessing from him....One must acknowledge that all is in God's hands."⁵ To fill this idea out a bit, it is worth noting that the word translated "deeds" ("...the righteous and the wise and their *deeds* are in the hands of God...") is not one of the normal words so translated, and it appears only here in the Old Testament. As Benjamin Shaw notes, the root form of this word appears frequently to mean "to serve" (especially in a religious context, where "serve" means *worship*), or describes *servants* or *slaves*.⁶ In sum, the Preacher is saying that our worship does not compel God to bless us ("love"), especially since God's may reject ("hate") our worship. For the pagans, right worship could reliably secure good rains, good crops, good fortunes, and good prosperity. The Preacher, however, sees that we cannot so easily manipulate God to give us the temporal blessings that we want.

Instead of reliably predicting our success based on the quality of worship we offer, the Preacher observes that the same things happen to the righteous and wicked alike—whether or not they are clean, and whether or not they offer their requisite sacrifices: "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" (v. 2). Importantly, we should recognize that the Preacher is not discounting the importance of such issues; instead, he is simply rejecting any idea that doing the right thing (even in worship) will reliably solve one's issues in life. Murphy writes, "Although [the Preacher] may have held a strict ethical code, his interest does not lie here, but in the futility of ethical conduct as a guide to the divine will, or to the human condition."⁷ Again, the Preacher is not denying the importance of worship; however, he is absolutely denying the idea that proper worship can secure good fortunes in this life.

To the Preacher, the fact that the righteous and the wicked receive the same lot in life is one of the calamitous evils of life under the sun: "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" (v. 3). Good conduct does not guarantee a good life, which leads people to commit evil without worrying about the consequences (cf. Eccl. 8:11). Worse, even the best conduct cannot earn any security from death. The same event will happen to everyone, regardless of the evil they committed in this crazy world.

Even the consolation that the Preacher offers on this point is not very encouraging: "But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion" (v. 4). Importantly, the word "hope" in this context does not so much refer to something in which we can hope, but "rather something that can be relied on, something that one can be certain about (cf. Isa 36:4)."⁸ That is, the living do not have hope that they may escape death. On the contrary, Duane Garrett explains

⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 330.

⁶ "So I have taken it here in the sense of 'service,' understanding by that word that Solomon might be intending the service that the righteous and the wise offer to God. Looking at the situation, Solomon concludes that these things are in the hand of God. We do not know from our observation whether these things are acceptable to God or not. That is what Solomon means by 'whether it be love or hatred.' Our own evaluation of the acceptability of our service to God is meaningless. These things must be judged by God, and he alone will determine whether they are acceptable to him or not," (Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.)

⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

⁸ M. Fox, cited in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 91–92.

the Preacher's meaning this way: "To be sure, the Teacher prefers life to death. Even a lowly dog is better off than a dead lion. But the reason the Teacher puts forward for choosing life is another surprise: because the living know they will die! The explanation is that the living may yet reckon with the reality of death and in so doing embrace the joy life has to offer, but no such possibility exists for those who have already died. Their time has passed."⁹ Indeed, this is the somber conclusion to this section of the passage: "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. 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" (v. 5–6).

Relishing Today (Eccl. 9:7–10)

Once again, though, the Preacher does not draw the conclusions from his observations that we might expect. The results of the previous section should not lead us into despair, but to embrace you in the short time we are given on this earth: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do" (v. 7). This is not the same thing as hedonistically saying, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). Rather, the Preacher counsels us to eat and drink with joy from a clear rationale: "for God has already approved what you do." D. B. Miller is right when he argues, "This is neither a statement that all of life is a matter of predetermined fate, nor a blank check of God's approval. Rather, it reminds the reader of Qohelet's conviction that God is the source of opportunities to enjoy life and that these should be embraced with enthusiasm (cf. 2:24–25; 3:12–13; 5:19; 8:15)."¹⁰ Michael Eaton gets us even closer to the mark, arguing that "This almost Pauline touch is the nearest the Preacher came to a doctrine of justification by faith. Man has but to receive contentment as God's gift (cf. 3:13); God will approve of him and his works. The believer is not struggling for acceptance; he is 'already' accepted."¹¹

It is on this basis that we can dress with white garments and lavish oil poured out on our heads (v. 8). More significantly, the Preacher encourages, "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" (v. 9). Many commentators note that the activities the Preacher commends has certain similarities with other ancient wisdom literatures, especially in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between those other wisdom literatures and Ecclesiastes, for "his counsels recommending an acceptance and enjoyment of the possible in every case contain a pointer to God."¹² Apart from reconciliation with God, these good gifts are vanity. After reconciliation with God, however, these good gifts are a cause for joy in the midst of life's toil and vanity.

Even in this section, however, the Preacher retains an awareness of the short-livedness of these

⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 331.

¹⁰ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

¹¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 145.

¹² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 84. Citing G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (English Tr., Oliver and Boyd, 1962), I, p. 457.

gifts: “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” (v. 10). “Sheol” is the name of the place of the dead. It does not correspond to what the New Testament more clearly describes as “hell” (that is, the place of judgment and torment after death for the wicked), but more to the idea of “the grave” (that is, the place beyond the land of the living where all go after death, as they await judgment). In Sheol, there is no further ability to enjoy the pleasures of “earthly life.”¹³ Elsewhere in the Bible, we read that the dead in Sheol can no longer praise the Lord (Ps. 6:5; 115:17; Is. 38:18)—that is, they cannot praise him as they could during their earthly lives.

Readying for Eternity (Eccl. 9:11–18)

After a brief interlude in the previous section where the Preacher commends joy, he returns to his previous theme of our inability to control the outcomes of our lives through our actions: “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” (v. 11). The swift do not necessarily win the race; the strong do not necessarily win the battle; the wise do not necessarily have bread; the intelligent are not necessarily rich; those with knowledge do not necessarily possess favor. Why not? As the Preacher explains, it is “because *time and chance*, apparently random occurrences, happen to everyone so that outcomes are often not as expected.”¹⁴ Together or separately, time and chance “both have a way of taking matters suddenly out of our hands.”¹⁵ Time puts a limitation on the span of our lives, while chance throw off even the best laid plans from achieving their intended success.¹⁶

In v. 12, the Preacher zooms in on one aspect of the problem of time: “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” (v. 12). Here again, the Preacher reminds us of the looming prospect of death. We do not know how long our lives will be, but only that our death is coming—perhaps suddenly falling on us like a snare catches birds and fish.¹⁷ With no hope of escape from death, how then should we live?

To answer this concern, the Preacher gives a short story (an “example”; v. 13) to illustrate the value of wisdom in the midst of the brevity and uncertainty of life in vv. 13–16. To set the scene, the Preacher contrasts the “little” city with “few” men” against the “great” king who came and built “great” siege works” against it: “In other words, Qohelet imagines a tremendously lopsided battle. From the perspective of manpower and resources the city does not stand a chance.”¹⁸ Even so, the little city prevails, thanks to a “poor, wise man” who “by his wisdom delivered the city” (v. 15). We do not have the details of how the poor, wise man delivered the city, except that he did so according to his wisdom. Even so, his skill was not celebrated. Instead, “no one remembered that poor man” (v. 15).

¹³ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 147.

¹⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

¹⁵ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 84.

¹⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 148.

¹⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

¹⁸ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 234.

Up to this point, the story sounds like one more statement that nothing we do can transcend the limitations of the vanity of this world. The Preacher, however, gives something of a surprise conclusion to the story: “But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man’s wisdom is despised and his words are not heard” (v. 16). *In spite of* the fact that the poor man was forgotten, his wisdom was better than might in a situation that required it. Indeed, this man’s quiet words were better than the blustering commands of a panicked ruler (v. 17). The Preacher concludes this section by saying, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good” (v. 18). The point in all this is clear, but a bit complex: wisdom has power beyond authority (cf. the blustering ruler) and even the weapons of war to deliver us out of particular difficult situations; however, wisdom can be thwarted by one sinner (a theme that the Preacher will develop in the next chapter), or by time and chance. Furthermore, no one will ultimately remember wisdom, and even the wise must go to their grave. As valuable as wisdom is, it has serious limitations.

Discussion Questions

- 1) If we live according to God’s righteousness and wisdom, and if we worship God rightly, what can we expect in return from God in this world (v. 1)? Why do the same kinds of events happen to the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, and those who worship as well as those who do not (v. 2)? How do we account for the seemingly random results that people who live very different lives receive? Is there any justice in this world or not?
- 2) What is the value of life over death (v. 4–5)? What can the living do that the dead cannot (v. 6)? If this is true, why does the Preacher encourage us to eat and drink and be merry (v. 7)? In what sense has God “already approved what you do” (v. 7)? How can we enjoy white garments, oil-refreshed heads, and companionship in marriages if we are ultimately going to die (v. 9–10)? Why does the Preacher see these ideas as consistent, and not as contradictory?
- 3) Why is it that life so often does not work out how we would expect it to (v. 11)? Why are people not rewarded precisely in line with their skills, efforts, and knowledge? What role does time and chance play in the course of human history and in our own personal lives? In all this, what benefit is wisdom (v. 13–15)? Why does the Preacher insist that wisdom is “better” than so many things, when wisdom is quickly forgotten in this world (v. 16–18)?
- 4) What is most difficult for you to make sense of in the wider world, or in your own life? What do you think the Preacher’s message is? In what ways have you been encouraged or discouraged by the Preacher’s insistence that you do not have control, but that everything is in the hand of God (v. 1)? How does this change your perception of your experiences? How does this lead you to trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding (Prov. 3:5)?