



Ecclesiastes 9:1-12
 Ecclesiastes: Wisdom for Today
 This Is Your Destiny

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It's been said that you only live once. Ecclesiastes would probably agree with that, but more so, Ecclesiastes reminds us that you only die once. You actually get another chance to live every morning when you wake up. What are you doing with your life before you get to your death? If you boil Ecclesiastes down to a single theme, we would say that Ecclesiastes is really a quest for understanding the meaning and purpose of life. And: **What we see in today's passage is that this question of life's meaning/purpose is utterly vital and important to ask for one big, inescapable reason: Because one day you will die.** This is the destiny of each and every person on the face of the earth; it is inescapable.

In the first three verses, we see that the timing of a person's death is not up to them. The length of our life is not ours to control, nor is how we die; Rather, this is in God's hands. **What this is teaching us here is what many of us perhaps know as the "Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God." This is the idea that God is in control of all things.** This is not to say that you and I don't have free will. Certainly we do. But ultimately, God is in control; God is the one who sustains all things and is ultimately the Director of what happens on the stage of life.

A.W. Tozer once compared it to a cruise ship. Let's say you get on a cruise ship in Seattle that is going up to Alaska and back. The ship's departure time, schedule, and arrival back at Seattle is set. There are activities and outings and meals planned and led by the staff. The captain of the ship guides the ship and make sure it stays on course and gets to all the various destinations along the way and that everything goes according to plan – this is its destiny under the sovereign rule, vision, and direction of the ship captain. But while you're on the ship you have free will to do what you want. Do you want go to the exercise room? Go for it. Do you want to eat all the steak and seafood you can at dinner every night? You can do that. Would you like to just stay in your cabin the entire time? You'd be crazy...but you can do that if you want. But the overarching trajectory of the cruise you cannot control – it's in the control of the captain.

Similarly, God gives us free will, but it is within His sovereignty. We see that here in these first few verses – especially verse 1, where we read, “So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do *are in God’s hands...*” All that people do in our own free will is ultimately in the hands of our sovereign Creator.

And what he finds grievous is that no matter what a person is like: The wise, the foolish, the righteous, the wicked, the clean, then unclean...no matter what a person does, no matter how they live or treat others, no matter whether they listen to good music or bad music, drive a Porsche or a Pinto, rich or poor...**The same destiny ultimately overtakes us all: We all die.** And he finds this a little frustrating – that the good and the wicked both have the same destiny – that death awaits us all. And as we read in verse 12, you never know when your time will come.

The story is told of a Game 7 of a Stanley Cup Final, and a man makes his way to his seat right at center ice. He sits down, noticing that the seat next to him is empty. He leans over and asks his neighbor on the other side of that seat if someone will be sitting there. "No" he says; "The seat is empty." "This is incredible," said the man. "Who in their right mind would have a seat like this for the Stanley Cup and not use it?" The neighbor says, "Well, actually, the seat belongs to me. I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. This is the first Stanley Cup we haven't been to together since we got married." "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. That's terrible... But couldn't you find someone else, a friend or relative, or even a neighbor to take the seat?" The man shakes his head. "No," he says. "They're all at the funeral." We can't control when our death happens...and it's inescapable. It is our destiny.

But this is not the final word: No matter how feeble our life may be, life is still better than death (9:4). Verse 4 makes this clear when we read that it's better to be a live dog than a dead lion. And the point is double made, because in Jewish culture then, dogs were on the lower end of the spectrum of life (perhaps the lowest, in fact), and lions are upheld as magnificent animals. God is described as “the Lion of Judah.” Even in our culture we might use the word “dog” as a derogatory remark or a negative description of

someone's work ethic – if you're "dogging it" then you're not working hard. But the lion we call "king of the jungle."

So to say it's better to be a live dog than a dead lion is really emphasizing the point that it's better to be alive than dead. As a guy in my previous church used to say, "It's always a good day when you wake up and you don't see your name in the obituary section of the paper."

Now, a couple of things about this. **First, as we mentioned last week, we see different conclusions about this matter throughout Ecclesiastes: On other occasions we read that it's better to be dead than alive.** What's going on here? Let me read for you a paragraph out of David Allen Hubbard's commentary on Ecclesiastes where he comments on this passage and the conflicting statements we read in Ecclesiastes on this subject of life and death. He writes:

"What shall we say about the seeming contradiction between 9:1-6 and the other passages [that deal with this topic]? First, for Koheleth there is no great sin in saying contradictory things, especially when each side of the contradiction is appropriate to the point being made. [For instance,] We have heard him both laud and lambast wisdom. Second, exaggeration was a regular component of Hebrew, as of modern American, speech. At times the Preacher [Teacher; Koheleth in the Hebrew] deliberately overstated his point to keep it so sharp that it would penetrate the dull ears and hard hearts of his countrymen. And of course, the proverbial form [proverbs in general] flourishes on overgeneralizations. Third, if we have to make a choice we should read the words on the preference for life as more literal ones and the passages that exalt death as hyperbolic expressions to underscore the grimness of life. Fourth, the context of 9:1-6, follow[ed] [by] 9:7-10, reinforces the view that 9:1-6 is to be read positively and not ironically."¹ So I thought those four points were very helpful in understanding the different things we read in Ecclesiastes about life and death.

Second, the tension we have with verses 5 and 6 (at least, that I initially had with this) is that it seems to be in conflict with the Biblical understanding of eternity. These two verses speak of the dead having no

reward, no knowledge, no love or hate (in other words, no passion for anything). And yet we believe that eternity *is* a reward. We understand that we'll be in heaven in the presence of our Creator and all the saints who've gone before us and come after us, and certainly there will be passions and knowledge there. The Bible tells us that it's sin-free. No more tears, no more sorrows. All our afflictions will be healed. Heaven is *better* than life here on earth! And yet none of us would advocate for suicide as a way of getting to that eternity faster. Why? Because we value life and the lives God gives us, even with the troubles and pain we experience. God has called this earth and our lives "very good" and we seek to honor that and live into that.

And Koholeth is saying the same thing: It's better to live than to die. Not because there's nothing in the afterlife, not because there's no eternity with God, but rather because this is the only life you get here on earth, so live it well. **Ecclesiastes, including this passage, is about the life you have *now*.** It's not as concerned about eternal life. It's concerned about living life here and now. What's the meaning and purpose of life – earthly, here and now – is at the heart of Ecclesiastes, as we've noted previously. So the message here is: live your life well and with joy even with, and in fact *because* of, the knowledge that one day you will breathe your last breath. Take advantage of the days you've got! Let the fact of your eventual death be a motivator for living joyfully and living rightly while you're still living. That's why he says in verse 4 that the living have hope. As long as you're alive, you can get your life on track with how God designed you to live! There's hope for you to make a change and live with joy. Are you making bad decisions, hurting yourself and the people in your life and life is in the pits? Make a change before you breathe your last. You still have hope, you still have a chance to get on the right track and enjoy life as God intended! Enjoy it as much as you can, because it is God's gift to you.

And that's what verses 7-10 are all about. Live life well. Enjoy your food, and your drink, enjoy life like it's one big wedding party as verse 8 describes. By the way, if you weren't here Friday night for the Harvest Party and Chili Cook-off, you missed the opportunity for some great food and fellowship and all around joyful fun. There had to have been 150 people or more. There was some really good chili that people cooked up. The winner went home with

this trophy, **The Golden Ladle**. There were games of all kinds including pumpkin bowling; the prizes at one game were live goldfish – we gave away 80 goldfish! And we had a cakewalk that some of the kids turned into a cake-run. It was awesome and we all enjoyed life Friday night. And these verses are telling us to enjoy life, because life is short.



And: **As verse 12 says, you don't know when your time will come or how it will come about.** So live life knowing that one day you will die. If you go through life pretending it's never going to happen or ignoring the fact that it will, then you're living in fantasyland. Why not acknowledge reality and live life rightly, the way God intended it? "Love God and love your neighbor" is how Jesus puts it when he states what the two greatest commandments are. Life is too short not to live that way. God called Creation, and calls you, "Very good" and intends for us to live as God created us to. When we do that, we will enjoy life as God intends.

This last week I was thinking about this "enjoying of life" as I was looking forward to today, anticipating that we each have brought to church today our Christmas Shoeboxes and our Pledge Cards. If you forgot yours or didn't know, that's ok. The Christmas Shoeboxes can be brought tomorrow as I mentioned earlier, and Pledge Cards can be brought in over the next few weeks if needed. And I had two thoughts in regards to this. First, I know that a lot of people find great joy in giving these Christmas gifts to kids all around the world. I've known people who will fill up 15 or 20 of these boxes because it brings such joy. So I knew we would be enjoying this as we bring them to church today and pray for the kids that receive them, and so forth.

And then I wondered, **"Do we have the same joyful approach as we pray about, fill out, and bring, our pledge cards...as well as our fulfillment of them throughout the year?"** Is our financial support (or support through time and abilities as well) of God's mission for us here at Rose Hill informed by our understanding that one day we will die, and so we want to make the most of what we've got? Do we joyfully give to God's mission through the church? Probably most of us here are aware of the Biblical mandate for a

10% tithe. That's the standard that God sets. And probably most of us, when we think about that, "joyful" is not the response that we have. The people who do have a joyful response to the idea of giving 10% are the people who actually do it. Why? Because those people "get" a passage like this. **People who enjoy life recognize the Sovereignty of God – that He's got them in the palms of His hands – and that life is short. So they are motivated to live for God in all ways, including financially.**

So I hope that as we send off these Christmas gifts that help usher in the gospel message to kids and their families, and as we pledge our financial giving for 2020 that helps usher in the gospel message in our corner of the world...I hope we can enjoy doing both. Acknowledging that one day we will breathe our last helps us see the opportunity God has given us to live here and now; to live rightly and joyfully in relationship with our Sovereign Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. He loves us so much and wants us to enjoy life so badly that He's made it possible to experience joy in eternity through faith in Jesus as well as here and now. And we start to experience that here and now when we realize that life is short, we don't know when our end will come for each of us, and in the meantime, we joyfully make the most of the life we have, all for God's glory. This is your destiny...so let's live into it starting today. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ David Allan Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon*, on 9:1-12.