

# Under the Sun

The Book of Ecclesiastes

## How to Live in a World Where Death is Certain and Life Isn't

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

November 17, 2019

I don't know why the Lord wired me this way, but I have just never been a big fan of country music. However, every now and then, there is a song that is a little more bearable than the others. As I was studying this week's passage, I kept thinking of a Tim McGraw song called, *Live Like You Were Dying*. The song is about a man who receives a cancer diagnosis and, upon learning that his time is now limited, decides to **make the most** of the time that he has left. I mention that song title because it could serve as a great sermon title today for **Ecclesiastes 9:1-12**, where Solomon basically teaches us how to live in a world where death is certain and life is uncertain.

[1] *But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. [2] 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. [3] 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. [4] But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. [5] 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. [6] 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.*

[7] *Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. [8] Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. [9] 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. [10] 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.*

[11] *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. [12] 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. (Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 ESV).* In this text, Solomon is first going to give us two reasons *why* we should live like we were dying and then he is going to tell us *how* to live like we were dying.

## I. **Under the Sun, Death is Certain** (Ecclesiastes 9:2-6)

The first reason we should live like we were dying is simply because, **in some sense, we are**. Verses 2-6 (as well as the whole chapter) are about how “*the same event happens to all*,” whether you are righteous, wicked, good, evil, clean, unclean, religious, irreligious, moral, immoral, etc. The event he is talking about is **death** (3b). Sooner or later, **death comes for all of us**. And while we may not know when we are going to die, we can rest assured that it is going to happen and that we are **closer** to it today than when we started the book of Ecclesiastes!

Notice here that Solomon calls death “*an evil*” that happens under the sun. In other words, **death is not neutral or natural**. Death is *evil*, and the Bible goes on to call death an *enemy* (**1 Corinthians 15:26**). If you are familiar with the Bible, then you know that this evil enemy entered the world as a consequence of our sin and rebellion, which is why David Gibson says that “*death is the limit that God has placed on creatures who want to be gods*.” And not only do we die, but now “*the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live*” (3).

However, even though we basically live in a world full of madness and evil and then die, Solomon says that **it is still better to be alive than to be dead**. He says that a “*living dog*” is better than a “*dead lion*.” Now, what does that mean? There is a *Peanuts* cartoon called, *Theology and the Dog*, where Charlie Brown walks up to find Snoopy sitting on top of his doghouse typing away. Once finished, Snoopy hands his paper to Charlie Brown. It reads, “As it says in the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes, ‘a living dog is better than a dead lion.’” Charlie Brown then asks, “What does it mean?” and Snoopy replies, “I don’t know, but I agree with it.”<sup>2</sup>

Snoopy should have kept reading, because Solomon tells us **why** a living dog is better than a dead lion. It is because those who are still alive “*have hope*” and “*know that they will die*” (4-5). I take this to mean that **people who are alive still have a chance, or an opportunity, to live in a way that matters**. We still have hope to make the most of today. The dead don’t have that opportunity. **When you’re dead, you’re done**. Even if you’re as strong as a lion, you’re done. Again, Ecclesiastes wants us to see that facing our death will actually help us learn how to live.

Something we can all be guilty of in a sermon series like this is **agreeing with Solomon in theory but not in practice**. Like, everybody in the room agrees with me on this point. We all agree that sooner or later we are going to die. Yet, as often as we have made this point in Ecclesiastes, most of

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<sup>1</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 109

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Douglas O’Donnell, *REC: Ecclesiastes*, 174

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us are **still not living like we were dying**. I want you to **let the certainty of your death arrest you this morning**. You are going to die. When my mother was diagnosed with cancer several years ago, they gave her a 50/50 chance over the course of a year. That's not what I'm telling you this morning. What I'm telling you is that you have a **0% chance** of making it out of this life alive. Your death is a **100% certainty**.

So, pretend we are all in **the Doctor's office** this morning. For some of us, we've got less than twenty years to live. Some of us have less than ten years to live. Some of us have only a handful of years left to live. And some of us have even less than that. The clock is ticking for all of us.

## II. **Under the Sun, Life is Uncertain** (Ecclesiastes 9:1,11-12)

A second reason that we should live like we were dying is because, while death is certain under the sun, **life is not**. Life is **uncertain**. But look at how Solomon describes life's uncertainty. He says that, under the sun, *"the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God"* (1). In other words, our entire lives are in God's hands, or under His control. Now, that is a **very good thing**. But the reason Solomon is making this point is to remind us that our lives are **not under our own control**. **Our lives being in God's hands is the very reason that they are so unpredictable and uncertain.**

Why? Because **God does not permit us to see or comprehend all that He is doing**. This is what he says next in verse 1, that *"whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him."* In other words, **we don't know whether our lives, which are in God's hands, will be pleasant or painful**. We don't know what the future holds. We do not know what God has planned for us. Therefore, from our vantage point, life is **uncertain** and **unpredictable**. It's not something we can "Google."

Look also at **verses 11-12**. Sometimes the swift doesn't win the race, sometimes the strong don't win the battle, sometimes the wise go hungry, sometimes the intelligent don't make the most money, and that sometimes those with knowledge aren't favored. In other words, again, life is unpredictable and full of uncertainty. Why? Again, **because all things are in God's hands, not ours**. And because all things are in God's hands, *"time and chance"* appear to happen to all people alike.

Now, again, it only appears to be *"chance"* from our perspective. What Solomon calls *"chance"* here has already been attributed to God's sovereignty in verse 1. In other words, in this text, **God's sovereignty is the reason for life's uncertainty**. So, while life may be unpredictable, it is not random.

Notice again that one example of *"time and chance"* happening to us is how *"man does not know his time"* (12). In other words, **while our death is certain, the timing of our death is uncertain**. When it

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comes, we are like a fish caught in a net or a bird caught in a snare. None of us know how long we have, and when our time comes, most of us won't be expecting it.

For example, have any of you ever heard the name **Urooj Khan**? In the spring of 2012, he scratched off a winning lottery ticket in Illinois and won a million dollars. Wouldn't that be nice? What would you do with a million dollars? Well, we'll never know what Urooj would have done because he was murdered the next day before he was even able to cash his check.<sup>3</sup> Death came like an evil net for him at a time he was not expecting it.

Likewise, we don't know what the future holds either, only that it will be full of things that we are not expecting, that the time we have left is limited, and at some point, sooner or later, we are going to die. **Our life is unpredictable, our time is limited, and our death is certain.** This is **humbling**, isn't it? I want you to see that **Solomon (and God) really want us to understand that we are not God** and that **we should not act like we are.** We don't know it all. We can't do it all. We can't have it all. You can and should make plans, but you don't know if you'll be alive this time next year. You don't know if you'll be employed this time next year. You don't know what your health will be this time next year. **Wisdom is to let truth like this humble us and turn us to God.**

### III. **Under the Sun, We Should Enjoy the Time that God Gives Us** (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

So, what do we do in a world where our lives are full of uncertainty, our time is limited, and our death is certain? Solomon says that **we should make the most of the time that we have** in verses 7-10. We should eat bread *with joy*. We should drink wine *with a merry heart*. We should keep our garments white and we should not lack oil for our head. What does that mean? Well, we often read about people putting on **sackcloth and ashes** in the Bible as a symbol of great mourning and sadness. White garments and oil are **the polar opposite symbol**. Solomon is saying that we should *rejoice and seek to be as happy as possible today*.<sup>4</sup> We should enjoy life with the spouse that we love, and let me just say that if you are too busy to do that, then you are too busy, period. You need to slow down. And finally, whatever our hand finds to do, we should do it **with all of our might**.

**What is Solomon saying?** He is saying what Tim McGraw was saying, that we should live like we were dying. David Gibson shares a helpful quote of what this might look like today: "*Ride a bike, go*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-cyanide-poisoning-death-lottery-winner-met-20170725-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 113

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*to the Grand Canyon, go to the theater, learn to make music, visit the sick, care for the dying, cook a meal, feed the hungry, watch a film, read a book, laugh with some friends until it makes you cry, play football, run a marathon, snorkel in the ocean, listen to Mozart, ring your parents, write a letter, play with your kids, spend your money, learn a language, plant a church, start a school, speak about Christ, travel to somewhere you've never been, adopt a child, give away your fortune and then some, shape someone else's life by laying down your own.”<sup>5</sup>*

We could probably think of a hundred more examples, but you get the point. We should **make the most of the time that we have**. We should **live like we were dying**. And we should do so *all the days of our fleeting life*.

Now, what does it mean when Solomon says that we should do so because “*God has already approved what you do*” (7)? I don’t have the time to fully explain all of these, but there are at least **three good options**. **First**, this could be a reference to God declaring all that He had made “*good*” upon completion of creation (**Genesis 1:31**). **Second**, it could refer to **God’s sovereign plan** for our lives, the way David does in **Psalms 139:16** when he says that all of the days of our lives have been written down in God’s book before they ever come to be. Or, **thirdly**, it is an Old Testament equivalent of *justification by faith*, with Solomon saying to eat and drink because our approval comes from **faith in God**, and not in what we eat or drink.

The bottom line is that **God desires that you find enjoyment in the life that He has given you to live under the sun**. That doesn’t mean there won’t be hard times. God has also designed times of great **sorrow** and **suffering** in our lives. But it does mean that in the course of our lives, there are going to be **countless gifts** that He puts in front of us to enjoy, and **God takes pleasure in our enjoying them** in the same way that a parent takes joy in the joy of their children on Christmas morning.

Doug O’Donnell had a great line in his commentary, that “*True spirituality has ‘honest delight’ in lawful pleasures.*”<sup>6</sup> I love the *balance* in that statement. Solomon is **not encouraging us to indulge in sin**. He is also not encouraging the *worship* of these gifts, which is called idolatry. And He is not encouraging the enjoyment of these gifts **apart from God**. **He is encouraging the worship of God through the enjoyment of His gifts**. “*In the created world, you can only truly enjoy what you do not worship.*”<sup>7</sup> I would add that you also can only truly enjoy what you connect to God, the Giver.

Now, I want to mention a couple of things here as we close. First, did you notice that the imagery Solomon uses is almost reminiscent of a **wedding feast**? There’s eating, drinking wine,

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 114

<sup>6</sup> Douglas O’Donnell, *REC: Ecclesiastes*, 179

<sup>7</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 115

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white garments, oil, a husband and wife enjoying one another, etc. If you are familiar with the Bible at all, you know that **God Himself is preparing a great feast to be enjoyed one day called the marriage supper of the Lamb**. This Messianic banquet is looked forward to with great anticipation in Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments.

The first thing I want to mention to you is that Jesus' blood is not only makes that great feast possible, but also every meal between now and then possible. When the Bible says that every good and perfect gift comes from God, it's true, but understand that without the blood of Christ, all of those gifts would simply be an indictment upon you come judgment day. They would simply help make the case that you and I are deserving of God's wrath because we lived in a world where He showered us with gifts and yet we did not give Him glory. It is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who has purchased the enjoyment of these good gifts.

The second thing is that, in some way, every meal we enjoy is a precursor of this final, great banquet to come. *"We eat and drink as we vanish from the earth like a vapor. But one day we will eat and drink in the city of the King, where death will have vanished from the earth forever. We must never think that on the other side of death, in heaven, we will cast off this cumbersome physical existence to enter a higher plane of merely spiritual life."*<sup>8</sup> We will sit down at a real table and with a new physical body enjoy a real feast.

It's what C.S. Lewis called a "deeper country" in *The Last Battle*. As the story moves from Old Narnia to New Narnia, *"It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling... 'I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it until now. The reason we loved the old Narnia is because it sometimes looked a little like this...'"*<sup>9</sup>

Did you catch that? One way we enjoy this world as an act of worship to God is by letting it point us to the world to come. I don't know how many of you are familiar with the short story, *Babette's Feast*, but it is another great illustration of what we're saying here. To make a short story short (pun intended), Babette a great chef at a renowned café in Paris who is forced to leave France with nothing during a time of political upheaval. She is a refugee. She ends up in Norway and is taken in by and becomes the maid to two sisters who are part of a Christian sect that has renounced all pleasures of this world. They dressed modestly, lived modestly, and even ate modestly, to the point that they instructed Babette to only fix them the plainest food possible. Babette faithfully serves them for the next twelve years.

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<sup>8</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 116

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 117

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However, back home in France, a friend of Babette continues to renew her lottery ticket every year and she eventually wins the French lottery. Upon winning, she convinces the sisters to let her put on one gourmet feast for them and to invite their friends and family. Babette pulls out all the stops. She puts on such a feast that the author describes it as *“one hour of the millennium.”*

After the meal, as they are cleaning up, one of the sisters tells Babette that they will all remember this evening once she returns to Paris. But Babette replies that she is not returning because she has no money. *“No money?”* the sisters reply, shocked because she has just one the lottery. Babette then lets them know that she had spent the entirety of her winnings on the meal that she prepared for them. The story then ends with one of the sisters putting her arm around Babette and saying, *“I feel Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!”* she added, *the tears streaming down her cheeks, “Ah, how you will enchant the angels.”*<sup>10</sup>

This is not the end brothers and sisters. One day we will experience in full what all this is point towards. What I want to encourage you to do is to see your Sunday dinners and your evening meals and your weekly hobbies to a foreshadowing to the world to come. Remark to your children at the dinner table that one day you will all sit at another table because of Christ’s finished work. Live like you were dying, because you are. And live like you were dying, because you will one day live forever.

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<sup>10</sup> This illustration was wonderfully shared by Douglas O’Donnell, *REC: Ecclesiastes*, 167-168