

Ecclesiastes 9:1-18 | 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.

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom 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 and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Ecclesiastes 9 | Death & Chance

In reading Ecclesiastes you'll often find yourself peering around the corner looking for the final statement that puts a bow on the whole matter. But it doesn't come. The ending looms but the fear mounts that there may be no resolution to this exploration. There are, however, clues throughout that hint towards meaning. They show up in judgements of one thing being better than another, or of certain things being good in themselves. But still death and chance seek to erase it all. In Chapter 9 Solomon examines the twin evils of death and chance.

1. Death

Ecclesiastes 9:1 | 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.

Solomon in all his wisdom steps back and examines it all and the first thing he must recognize is that the righteous and the wise and their deeds are all in the hand of God. Solomon has enough wisdom under the sun to conclude what the creation itself plainly reveals.

Psalm 19:1 | The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

A clear examination of it all requires the confession that it is all in the hand of God. There is too much order, even if the order cries out for a higher resolution the order is still there. Things have been made by God. The question is what is God's relation to these things? How can that be known? This is where Solomon recognizes the terrible ambiguity. Does God hate them or love the wise? Either could be concluded from the evidence.

Ecclesiastes 9:2 | 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.

Even among the most meaningful distinctions the same event takes place. Righteous and wicked, good and evil? Of course both meet death, but as Solomon has already shared both experience all of life's calamities and blessings. If it goes the same for both is there a difference between them?

Ecclesiastes 9:3 | 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.

While we can't discern the judgment the fact of the ambiguity is an evil. Solomon recognizes it is bad that we cannot discern a higher justice in the world. But there is something close to an absolute. A recognition that the hearts of mankind are full of evil and madness. Perhaps Solomon is recognizing the fundamental fact of wickedness in all of our hearts requiring the final judgment of death against us all. His insight here is the same as the apostle Paul's in Romans 1. The creation itself shows us that all things are in God's hands. Yet we all deny this fundamental truth in our hearts by evil and madness. Therefore we are all under a judgement of death. This final verdict however does not remove hope.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 | But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

The living have hope. Hope is this distinction between the living and the dead. And the famous proverb has obvious truth to it. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Lions are more glorious than dogs, but the dead lion has no hope. The story is over, and there is no more share for the lion in what takes place under the sun. The living have glory in their ability to hope, that means hope in the face of death. In fact the living have the ability to know they will die. It's an odd mixture Solomon is putting together, hope and knowledge of death. But if you put it together you'll be able to return to that familiar call to enjoyment which rings throughout Ecclesiastes which Solomon states here as a command.

Ecclesiastes 9:7 | Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

All is in God's hands, your ways are evil and end in death, in life there is hope, go eat bread and wine under the approval of God. It is a Christian life that Solomon is espousing. It is an understanding of our approval before God fundamentally lying in the hands of God, something we receive now in hope. What is this joyful eating and drinking of bread and wine but an act of faith that God has already approved what we do. Ecclesiastes could be read as a treatise against justification by works. Because over and over again it shows our inability by our own works to prove or disprove ourselves before the judgement of the eternal. Time and death wipe it away. But how do you have hope unless you have faith? How do you enjoy unless you trust in the approval of God. The Lord's supper is of course the fulfillment of the command.

Ecclesiastes 9:8-10 | 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.

This life is a fleeting portion. You cannot enjoy more than you've been given and it will end in death. So do it with your might. Solomon carves out a space for hope in the face of death. But then he turns his eyes to chance.

2. Chance

Ecclesiastes 9:11 | 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.

In proverbs wisdom is the skill of right living which. Speed, strength, wisdom, intelligence, knowledge these are all better than their opposites. But chance can step in and destroy any one of these skills. There is no final hedge against chance. Just like death is a limit so too is chance. And once again Solomon destroys any wishful thinking of your religious life being a hedge against bad things happening. There is no final safety.

Ecclesiastes 9:12 | 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.

Chance, randomness, the black swan is just around the corner. We call these events apocalyptic because they reveal things we couldn't have possibly known before. But as Solomon pours concrete all over you're hope of escaping the ravages of death and chance he can't help but notice flowers that break through. Concluding this chapter with a story in praise of wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 9:13-15 | I have also seen this example of wisdom 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 and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man.

It's the story of Cincinnatus. The Roman farmer who is called from his plow to be ruler of Rome so that by his wisdom he might defeat a pressing enemy. Cincinnatus accomplished this feat in 16 days and then laid down his crown and returned to the plow. The overlooked wisdom breaks through and becomes liberation for all the people. Yet no one remembered. George Washington did the same.

Ecclesiastes 9:16 | But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

For all the certainty of death, for the instability of chance. Wisdom is better. The wisdom of a poor man can even save the world.

Solomon has shown us death that you can't escape, but then calls us to a life of hope. He has shown us chance which is like a hidden trap that you won't understand until you've fallen into it. But still wisdom is better than might. The judgement, like how life is better than death. These judgements really matter because they show us that death and chance do not have the final word. They are both in the hands of God. So how could we live other than by faith in him? And Jesus Christ has made him known. Even bringing every part of this story into his own story. Death, chance, bread, wine, white robes, oil upon our heads.