

"The Time is Now"
Ecclesiastes 9:1-10
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A few years ago, a fellow stopped by the church. He was a self-styled evangelist, walking across the country telling people about Jesus. He didn't have a job or a family; he didn't own a house or a car. His focus was simply telling folks they needed to turn to the Lord. He said he was trusting God to take care of him, though he wondered if I could give him some money to buy a couple of meals and spend a night in a motel. I do think he was doing what he sincerely believed the Lord had called him to do.

Now, when I meet someone like that, I can get a little uncomfortable, maybe even feel a little guilty. After all, I have a nice house and a very reliable car. I have a loving wife and family and a job where I am paid quite well. Maybe I am spiritually inferior to someone whose whole life seems to be about serving the Lord.

Friends, if you have ever felt that way I think you would find some encouragement, as I do, in our text today. Our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes brings us to 9:1-10. Here we find that Solomon, one of the wisest individuals to ever live, a man being inspired by the Holy Spirit as he writes, reaches this conclusion:

It's good to enjoy the gifts which the Lord has given to us. Folks, I believe Solomon's words provide important encouragement to us in what is often a dark and discouraging world. Let's pause and pray that as God speaks to us today, we would hear His Word and that it would refresh and strengthen our souls.

Solomon begins this chapter on kind of a dark note, as he reflects on how life seems to work. Keep in mind, that Solomon is writing from what he calls an "under the sun" perspective. He is speaking from a secular, earthly viewpoint, and not looking at things from God's perspective. **Ecclesiastes 9:1 So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.**

In other words, yes, God is sovereign. Our lives are in His hands, but we have no way of knowing

whether we will walk a hard or easy path. None of us know, for example, what next year will bring. It could be a time of great joy or of great sorrow, or some mixture in between. We don't know. We do know, however, **Ecclesiastes 9:2 that All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.**

No matter who we are, no matter what we are like, no matter how religious we are or are not, the same fate awaits each of us. Life comes to an end. We die. Solomon sees this as a cold, hard truth.

Ecclesiastes 9:3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. Or as the NLT reads **There is nothing ahead but death anyway.** Solomon anticipates the dark, depressing thoughts of some folks in the 21st century. What's the use? What difference does anything make, because in the long run, we are all dead? Life lacks both meaning and hope.

But then Solomon remembers. We are not dead yet. At least if you are reading his words, you are still alive. And that is a reason for hope. **Ecclesiastes 9:4 Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!**

Solomon was a cat lover. Really big cats. He thought lions were a lot cooler than dogs. But he would take a live dog over a dead lion any day. Being alive is better than being dead. **Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6 For the living know that they die, (that does cast a shadow over life) but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.**

Friends, I am afraid there is a lot of truth in what Solomon says. Oh, at funerals we sometimes talk

about how we will always remember the person who has died. Yet, in reality, life goes on. After a few years we tend to only occasionally think about those who have died, even about folks we were very close to.

So, even though we are all going to die, we're not dead yet. And as long as we are alive, we have reason to live. So, Solomon says, do it! Live! He has three suggestions.

#1 Start by enjoying the simple, physical pleasures of life. **Ecclesiastes 9:7, 8** **Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.** The NLT reads **Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne!**

#2 Make sure you are enjoying the precious relationships with others God has given you, especially marriage. **Ecclesiastes 9:9** **Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.**

And **#3** Solomon says, devote yourself to your work, your studies or whatever you are doing. **Ecclesiastes 9:10** **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all you might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.**

Solomon says that even though death casts its shadow over all of us, this doesn't mean we cannot find joy while we live. Alive... Physical pleasure, marriage and work are three gifts from the Lord that make life worthwhile, meaningful and enjoyable even from a very earthly perspective.

Of course, those of us who are Christians, who are believers in Jesus Christ, should look at things a little differently. Through His resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus has triumphed over death. As Hebrews 2:15 says we are no longer held as slaves to a fear of dying. We believe those marvelous words Jesus spoke to His friend Martha after her brother Lazarus had died. **John 11:25** **I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;**

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

That doesn't mean we are totally comfortable with the reality of death. It is, remember, a conquered *enemy*, not a friend. But knowing by God's grace we have been given eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ gives us a new perspective on the life we are living. The dark discouragement Solomon felt as the thought about the fate of every human being really doesn't have a place in a Christian's life.

Yet, what about Solomon's other conclusions? Do simple physical pleasures, human relationships, and work have any importance to us now that we are promised far greater blessings in heaven? Some Christians answer, "No." They claim the things of earth have now grown *strangely dim* in the light of Jesus' glory and grace. They try to focus "on things above," not on earthly things, which is indeed what Colossians 3:2 says we should do. Thus, these folks say finding pleasure in food, drink or fine clothes is wrong. Jesus should be our only source of joy. Our relationship with God is far more important than the relationship with our spouse or any other human being. And the only type of work that matters, the only type to which we should devote time and energy is the work of the kingdom, which translates into being involved in some type of Christian ministry.

Friends, Solomon's reflections on life reveal he suffers from what theologians would call an "under realized eschatology." He's not thinking about heaven. He is looking at things from merely an earthly perspective. He is not keeping in mind the marvelous promise God has given about the future of His children. His faith is kind of half-baked.

On the other hand, those Christians I described a few moments ago suffer from what would be called an "over realized eschatology." They are forgetting that we are not in heaven yet. We still live here on earth. Food, human relationships, and work are things that need to be a part of our lives, and it is foolish not to think about them.

There is an over-baked faith which forgets that our goal is to do the will of our heavenly Father here on earth, and to bring Him glory not just

through spiritual activities, but also through all the common, mundane aspects of life.

Now, sometimes God does call people to do things which seem extreme and foolish in the eyes of the world. And if that is what He calls us to do, we need to do that. And so, friend, if the Lord calls you to quit your job and go be a missionary in Africa, you better do that. If He calls you to give away almost everything you have and live in an old tar-paper shack, you better do that... no matter how much your kids complain.

But, if He calls us to live what would be considered an ordinary life in an extraordinary way, to live a normal life for the glory of God, that is what we need to do. And we should not pay attention to people who suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, that we are an inferior Christian because we are not focused exclusively on spiritual things like they are.

Now, don't misunderstand me. One of the problems many of us have is that we are too concerned about our own security. I know I need to trust God more and trust myself less. When God calls me to take risks, I need to be willing to take them. But there is no reason to take risks He doesn't call me to take.

Yes, I believe God calls some people to devote their time and energy to ministry and to simply trust Him to provide the finances necessary to live. But there are many who the Lord calls to get a job, so they work and make money to support themselves, their families, and those who don't have jobs. The person who puts in 40-50 hours a week at the office, or at the mine, or at school, is not necessarily less spiritual than someone walking across the country telling people about Jesus.

I find it interesting that the Apostle Paul, certainly a very Godly and Christ-like man, did not devote all of his time and energy to his ministry. He spent many hours making and mending tents. In 2 **Thessalonians 3:8,9** he writes, **We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.**

Paul realized he was not in heaven yet. He trusted God would meet his financial needs. Yet, he knew that the way those needs would be met would likely be either through his own labor or from the gifts of other Christians. He was convinced the Lord wanted him to earn money, rather than rely solely on the support of others.

Friends, I hope I am not losing you here, because I think this is important. Rather than negating what Solomon has said in our text, I believe the fact I am a Christian means I should find even more joy in the gifts I receive from the Lord than Solomon did.

Yes, we constantly need to be on guard so that we don't start worshipping the gifts, rather than the Giver. The root of our joy should be in the Lord Jesus, our sovereign savior, not in anything else. But... that doesn't mean we should hold back from enjoying the blessings God has given us.

Let's go back to the points that Solomon made, because they are true for us as well.

#1 As God's people, we should enjoy the physical pleasures He gives. **Ecclesiastes 9:7,8 NTL So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this! Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne!** Over the centuries some Christians have advocated what is called an ascetic lifestyle. They say things like, "A Christian should not eat any rich food, must drink only water, and wear only plain clothing."

Now there is nothing wrong with choosing that type of lifestyle, if you believe God has called you to do that. For example, I choose to abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages, and I think that is a good choice. But I should never pretend the Lord requires that type of lifestyle or that everyone needs to make the same choices I do.

In **Colossians 2:16a** Paul says, **Let no one judge you by what you eat or drink.** Because as Jesus said, **Matthew 15:11 "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth."** In 1 **Timothy 4** God warns, through Paul that false teachers will **4:3 Forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who**

believe and know the truth. Our goal as Christians is summed up in **1 Corinthians 10:31** **So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.** That means keeping our focus on the Giver rather than the gifts, doing what we do with joyful gratitude, and making sure what we are doing is not harming a brother or sister in Christ.

Now, keep in mind that nothing I have just said, cancels other teaching found in the Bible. Though we should eat food with joy, gluttony is clearly a sin. Though drinking wine is not wrong, getting drunk or abusing alcohol is clearly a sin. Though there is nothing wrong with wearing fine clothes and cologne, it is wrong to spend money on these things that should be used for something else, like taking care of you family, supporting the work of the church, and helping people who are in need.

When these or any other physical pleasures cause you to be grateful to God, they are good things. When they become things that draw your attention away from the Lord, they become dangerous enemies of your soul.

#2 As God's people we should enjoy marriage and other relationships He gives us. **Ecclesiastes 9:9 NLT Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun.** The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly toil. Now, this is not the most eloquent passage in the Bible on the joy of marriage. Yet it fits in with the Bible's teaching, that because it is not good for man to be alone, God has ordained marriage between a husband and wife. It also affirms that the sexual relationship between a husband and wife is not something dirty, but a beautiful gift from God.

However, as we just read, 1 Timothy 4:3 there are false teachers that "forbid people to marry." In some circles, celibacy is promoted as the more spiritual alternative to marriage. Some folks say that as a Christian, the only thing that is important is our relationship with the Lord, and we don't need to be married, or have any close relationships with other people. *Wrong!*

Oh, your spouse or friend should never be the object of your worship. Your ultimate loyalty should be to God alone, never to another person.

But with gratitude, we should enjoy our relationship with our spouse and with other people.

#3 God's people should find satisfaction in the work He calls us to do. **Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.**

There are folks who claim that the really valuable work is done within the church. They say those involved in Christian ministry have a higher calling than those who work in secular jobs. I remember one pastor saying, "Being president of our denomination is a more important job than being president of the United States." An important Biblical teaching, one which is often forgotten, is that God has a calling, a vocation for each of us.

The important thing is not what job you may have, but whether or not you are doing what the Lord has called you to do at that particular time. If for now, God is calling you to work in a law office, or at a mine, or in a grocery store, or to be a stay-at-home mom, or be a volunteer for Meals on Wheels, that is just as important of a job as I have as the pastor of this church, or as Donald Trump has as president of the United States. And if for now God is calling you to be a grocery store clerk, it is important that you don't try to be a missionary to Africa.

Solomon's thoughts on work are echoed by the Apostle Paul in **Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.** Oh, yes, we need to make sure our job doesn't become more important to us than it should be. Ray Krocs, founder of McDonald's used to say, "God, family, and McDonalds's are the three most important things in my life, and when I get to the office, that order is reversed." Friends, God should always be more important to us than our work. Our job should not come before the welfare of our family. Yet, when God gives you something to do, you need to do it.

Friends, as I have said before, our goal when we come together to worship on Sunday should not be to forget about everything else in life and think only about the Lord, heaven, and other spiritual

things. Rather, our goal should be to think about all of the things in our lives in light of the Lord, heaven, and all the things He teaches us in His Word.

Thus, we are not supposed to ignore things like physical pleasure, human relationships, and work, but we are to view them in light of all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ. May the Lord help us to enjoy all of the gifts that He gives us but may the focus of our affections never be these gifts, but always the Giver. And by God's grace may we not only enjoy all that God gives us, but may we use it for His glory.