

XIII. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

From Vanity to Vitality

“Wisdom for the Ages”

Ecclesiastes 9

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In this study we will finish up with Ecclesiastes 9 and we are in a section on wisdom and folly. There are these wonderful tid bits or treasure troves of wisdom that if you listen to people who are older than you, particularly those who know the Lord, who not only have common grace but redeeming grace, there is so much you can pick up on in life. You have to dismiss the arrogance of modernity that dismisses people that are older but at the same time you have to realize God has not finished maturing people so He is continuing to give forth wisdom in the next generation as well. Give your parents and grandparents both physically and spiritually a voice in your life and it is amazing what you can take advantage of in that.

One of the places we're going to is the wisdom that we find in Solomon. I do believe Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes even though it's not the primary position of many evangelicals. When we get to Ecclesiastes 10 I'll be able to give you another reason why I think Solomon is the author of this book. I also believe by this Spirit of God this book belongs in his trilogy of Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

There is the proverbial wisdom of Solomon when he had enough sense to pray for it which is shown in Proverbs. Then the heart of Solomon that is displayed that becomes a picture of the heart that Christ has for His bride we see in the glorious love song of the Song of Solomon. Then there is the repentance of Ecclesiastes with Solomon saying 'here was my folly, the vanity of emptiness and striving and of living life under the sun instead of under the eye of God who made the sun, the earth, me and all that is within it.' It is also how God has brought Solomon back to the pursuit of the wisdom he once prayed for and that he once embraced. I believe that's the flow of Ecclesiastes and why it's so valuable in developing a world and life view.

This next section we will look at is not easily outlined at all because it's moving from narrative to poetry, from poetry to narrative, from parallelism to antithetical parallelism and then it moves back to narrative. You really have to develop Ecclesiastes as it unfolds verse by verse for it's a book that begs for expositional treatment like this. When we're talking about wisdom we are not necessarily talking about IQ. We're talking about having a knowledge of God's Word and by the power of the Spirit for understanding that issues forth with a right assessments and decisions as to how you live life which is wisdom. Wisdom is displayed by her fruits which are the decisions of life and the way life is lived.

Another aspect that becomes abundantly clear in this section is what folly is. Psalm 14 and Romans 1 tell us what folly is. Folly can be committed by highly intelligent people and just as some who don't have a high IQ can have wisdom. In fact, many times those with a high IQ are particularly susceptible to folly. Psalm 14:1a says [1a] *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."* Paul takes it a step further when he says in Romans 1:22–23, [22] *Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

In other words, for many folly is actually the sophisticated journey into imbecility whereby we look at the glories of the creation, we grasp the facts but miss the majesty of God

which leads us into a life of folly, just as wisdom will be displayed in the lifestyle of those who have Biblical knowledge and spiritual understanding. Folly will be displayed in the lives of those who have denied Biblical knowledge or absent and vacated of spiritual understanding and make decisions that are actually embracing vanity, striving after the wind. So let's begin by looking in Ecclesiastes 9.

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 says [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.*

It is my conviction that in these verses he is speaking of those of wisdom and not of folly. This is because of the part of verse 7 that live approved of God. These are those who have a right relationship with God and we know because of Scripture that you don't get this relationship because you merit it or earn but because of God's grace. Because of God's grace they have a relationship that is approved of God i.e. right with God and justified, and we know that happens, not by our works but by faith in the Christ who has made us right with God.

He is telling them that what is observed as the life here on earth is something that those right with God live by celebration. Certainly there is a place for mourning for Jesus taught us about mourning over our sin but we do not walk through life in depression even though it is a sin-cursed world. We are called to live life rejoicing in the Lord. Specifically in this text he is pointing you to celebrate a life of contentment in the Lord, the comfort of the Lord and the comforts of life that the Lord gives to you and celebrating the companionship of life through fellowship with others and marriage. We are to enjoy the life God has given us in Him.

Yes, we will suffer for Christ so we are to fix our eyes on the Lord for He can use that suffering and yes we are in a sin-cursed world which wisdom would have you know about this world but he is telling us to let people see the joy of the Lord as we live life. We do this when we're eating, drinking, having friendships, fellowships and in your marriage. We don't go through life with a dower expression.

Sometimes when I'm preaching at other churches I will say to the congregation 'do you have the joy of the Lord' and the responses I get sure don't manifest what they affirm. Whitfield said when he stopped to preach in Charleston, South Carolina 'I was convinced I had made a mistake and was preaching in a cemetery instead of an assembly of God's people.' To him it seemed like he preaching at the place of the dead instead of the living. I remember the song I learned as a kid that said 'Are you happy and you know it, clap your hands' and perhaps we should sing that more often. In other words, as we embrace the privileges, joys, activities and comforts of life he is telling us how to approach this in life, with celebration. This shows that the Lord is enough and that's why we can enjoy these things.

When people live for food they can never enjoy food because it never does its job as a god but when you have the God of glory then you can know how to enjoy food to the glory of God so that you don't live to eat but you eat to live for the Lord. You then can enjoy the taste buds He has given you because you're not using it as the god of comfort in your life. You have the God of comfort in your life who is the God of glory. Now you are using it in life and this goes for drink, exercise, work etc. All of those are gifts from the Lord that can be embraced and

used for the Lord when they are not in the place of the Lord. Therefore we can celebrate them with contentment, comfort and joy.

We can also enjoy them with companionship. It's amazing what you can enjoy with your wife when you're not looking to your wife to be your Savior. The same goes for the wife who doesn't look to her husband as her Savior. Even parenting can be a joyful enterprise even in the challenges of it, when you don't look to your children for your significance and security in life because you already have that in the Lord. Now you see these as gifts, activities and opportunities for and from the Lord. Let's look at how Solomon individually handles this list he gives us.

He tells us to go and eat our bread with joy. He goes to the basic element of life if you lived in the Biblical times, which was bread. Drink your wine with a merry heart. Obviously drunkenness is forbidden in the Word of God. You have an approved relationship with God and now you can do these things that are lawfully given to you. That does not mean all of the activities of life I enter into without thinking. For instance, when he says you can drink the wine with a merry heart I don't think the Lord is displeased with me that I don't ever take the first drink because in my past I had a problem stopping at the third one so I enjoy other beverages in its place. You may have some foods that you have to avoid for various reasons, medical, spiritual or other, so we use discernment. This is just a general statement he is making.

God has given us an appetite to eat and drink. Now you have a relationship with God and now that you don't look to the food or drink as your god and you say 'no' to gluttony and obesity because they are not the gods in your life, you can now enjoy them because you use them for God and you can do as I Corinthians 10:31 says; *[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* Therefore it can be a celebration in your life. All things are lawful but not all things are profitable (I Corinthians 10:23) so we make discernments with the exceptions in our life as we seek to walk with wisdom but the predominant factor in life when we no longer in idolatry pervert the appetites of life, they can be enjoyed to the glory of God when we embrace them with the law of the Lord guiding our conduct because the grace of the Lord has made us right with God and before God.

Solomon is giving us this celebration as a command for it's given in the imperative. He is commanding us to embrace and celebrate the blessings of God with a God-centered joy, not an item-centered joy. He goes so far to say to even do this with what you wear when he says 'let your garments be always white and let not your oil be lacking on your head.' To understand this better we need to take a trip back into that day. Who wore white garments? White garments were worn at special occasions. Those who were recognized with achievements wore white garments or at ceremonies of achievements.

It would be more like what we would call the 'Sunday best.' The 'Sunday best' did not have to do with how much that item cost to show off at church but it was the occasion to dress for the type of ceremony. To use this from a man's perspective, men had a 'go-to' suit. It was used to go to church, to get married in and to get buried in. It was a sign for respect of the ceremony and the engagement of what you were about to do. It was an item that made a statement of respect for the moment. That is what this white garment would be that Solomon is referring to.

Generals who would return in victory were brought in on chariots. Their uniform was taken off and they were clothed in a white garment. They were victorious and to be honored as victorious. This white garment was also always worn in the public ceremony of those who were

government officials, such as kings and princes. So what is Solomon telling us, those who are approved of God, who have been redeemed by Christ?

He is telling you are joint heirs with Christ the King. He is not telling you to go and spend stupid amounts of money on labels of clothing. He is saying to dress the way that God has made you. Praise God that the dress that is glorious is the righteousness of Christ but praise God we can dress in a way that manifests, not the despair of the world but the joy of His righteousness. Some may not like what I'm about to say but I think some of the dress today that is casual is not necessarily for comfort but I think it represents a loss of hope, a loss of decorum in life. It shows up not only in dress but in a lack of manners and many other ways but believers don't have to go with the flow. That doesn't mean we dress like those in another era, that's not what I'm talking about.

There is something about us that we don't call attention to either side of the spectrum of haberdashery. We're not opulent nor are we thoughtless and slothful. Modesty and decorum are seen in the way we dress. Let it be the white garments. Let it be the declaration to the world that you are clothed with the righteousness of Christ therefore you dress as if you have a hope in Christ. You dress not with a despair and the loss of hope but with the fullness of hope. I'm not going to give you a dress code but I will give you principles which are dress with modesty, respect and decorum so that your dress only draws attention to your hope in Christ – it doesn't call attention to you, either in its opulence or in its thoughtlessness and slothfulness.

Man looks at the outside, God looks at the inside, the heart (I Samuel 16:7). The fact that God looks at the inside doesn't mean I'm thoughtless about the outside because men are taking a judgment of my inside which they can't see so my outside will tell them one way or the other. I don't want to put obstacles up to sharing with them the hope that is found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ by either opulence or slothfulness.

Let's look further for this is the one I really like when he tells us to anoint our head with oil in Ecclesiastes 9:8b. Oil up! I know some of you have allergies but Solomon is talking about perfume here. So perhaps find some non-allergic perfume you can use or just wash really good, but we ought to smell good and I'm not talking about covering up bad smell with ointments. So men may I encourage you to go buy British Sterling for I have been using it for 50 plus years (smile). We are to prepare ourselves not only for the special occasion but for the believer life is a special occasion. The anointment we want ultimately is the sweetness savor of the Holy Spirit who is poured out upon us. Solomon is looking at these basic statements of wisdom of life and living life with celebration.

I would suggest that there is a carefulness that Solomon is looking at about our eating, drinking, what we wear, and our preparations in dressing. This can be a special time for you are getting ready to walk out of your house and meet the day. Now when you are getting ready ask yourself a question – not what you need to wear, put on and do where people will say something to you about you – but what can I wear that will honor Christ? How can I honor Christ before I leave this house, let me so prepare myself. Then we move on to the next few verses.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 says [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.*

Your life under the sun is considered vanity but you come to this with a different view. In your view it also shows up in relationships. Interestingly, he tells us to enjoy life with the wife whom you love which is a statement of repentance for Solomon for here he comes back to monogamy, of understanding a lifelong monogamous covenant relationship which is what

marriage is to be. You love your wife and you enjoy your life with your wife by love for they are inseparable. You will not enjoy life with your wife if you don't pursue the privileges of loving her well. As long as her love to you is where you are getting your joy, then you will have a dead end because she will never be able to love you enough for only Christ can do that. When the love of Christ compels you now you're free to love your wife and it's when you love your wife that you can enjoy life with your wife.

Obviously, ladies while Solomon is aiming at the men, there is a reciprocation that takes place in your life. That's why it says in Titus 2 that the older women are to teach the younger women how to love their husbands well. The joy awaits the intentional, sacrificial, thoughtful love that we bring into each other's life and then comes the joy we have with one another. This is a lifelong relationship. It is a monogamous, covenantal relationship with the pursuit of demonstrable, sacrificial, servant-hearted love into one another's life.

In this relationship it is not only an eros love but a phileo and a storge love. I love those three of the six words that point to love in the Greek. Eros is the romantic love between a husband and a wife. Phileo is the friendship love of a husband and a wife. Storge is the family love that comes from that kind of marital love that begins with a husband and a wife. Then Solomon stops in this celebration that is based upon contentment and comfort for those who are approved of God and then moves in another direction. Most Bibles have the division after verse 10 but I believe the division comes before it. Now he moves to this matter of work.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 says *[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.*

Solomon is telling us there is thought work in life, physical work in life, mental work in life and all kinds of work in life under the sun. So as he moves from our personal life and it's dynamic in life to whatever work you are doing that you are to do it with your might. You bring everything to the task at hand – you focus with your mind, your energy, your hand and your labor. You are to bring thought, wisdom and knowledge to bear upon your work. When I was growing up this was known as 'TCB' where you learned to Take Care of Business no matter what you were responsible for. I had this impressed upon me by my grandfather, my father and my mother who really believed in this with all of her heart. I would be told 'just get it done and do it right.' My mom would say 'if it's worth doing then it's worth doing right.'

One of the most meaningful times of this was when I was married and I was working at several jobs with one of being selling insurance. My uncle called me to come over and make a presentation on insurance, wanting to help me out. I fumbled all through my presentation and when it was over my uncle reached over and closed my notebook and said 'Son, you know I love you and all those in the family but don't you ever come back here again without having your business straight. You need to take care of business for I called you here for an appointment and you need to be ready for it.' That was a life changing moment for me. If God calls you to do it, then do it right.

The way you do your work is a profession of your faith. This is where we get the word professional from, is profession. Professional does not just look at a category of jobs. Professional was the word that came from the Reformation when men like Luther, Calvin and Knox said 'we ought to have ordination services in a sense for those who are salesmen, brick masons and all because if God called you to it people are getting ideas about God by how you do it and the way you do your work is a worship statement.' Colossians 3:23–24 says *[23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the*

Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.
Therefore your work is a profession of your faith, thus the birth of the word professional.

Then Solomon gives us another reason for there is coming a time that this work is done. Working for God's glory in a sin-cursed world has a shelf life. When God takes us to the new heavens and the new earth I believe we're going to work because I don't believe work is a temporary calling especially since God works. I believe work is eternal for it is a creation mandate. Work is not a result of the fall. No, thorns and thistles in your work is a result of the fall. Sweat of the brow and frustration are the result of the fall but work is a mandate and a gift from God and that's what we're called to do. There is coming a time according to Jesus when our work here is done (John 9:4).

There is coming a time when you will no longer be able to evangelize anyone. There is coming a time when you will no longer worship in spirit and truth because you are going to see Him face to face and worship Him there. There is coming a time when you don't have to put off sin. There is coming a time when the work you're doing spiritually and the work we're doing here will totally be done away with in a new heavens and a new earth. The work we do there will be with the absence of the curse of sin and it will be wrapped in the worship and praise of God. I look forward to that day, but I also want to take advantage of this day. I have many less sermons to preach than when I began.

Sheol in Ecclesiastes 9:10 is not referring to the lake of fire, it is referring to the grave. When you get to the grave, what you have been called to do here you won't be able to do anymore. Therefore embrace what you have to do here now and embrace it with all of your might, in all of your thought and with all of your heart to engage in it. When you get to Sheol, the place of the dead you won't be doing it, there where you're going. Now that you have this opportunity here embrace it in all of the fullness, knowing that which is coming.

You see how Solomon is helping us bring the testimony of God's grace in heaven to bear under the sun, where the curse of sin is, as our life demonstrates something totally different before the world. People are not going to come to Christ because we live like them in the world but that we live in the world for Christ and there is something different in us and the way we do things. I'm not talking about self-righteousness or Pharisaicalism, it's just something different where we actually love to work because we do our work in worship to the Lord. Those things mark us out as different. Then people say 'what makes you different?' You say 'It's not me but it's Him and what I have He gave and He'll give it to you but you have to turn to Him.'

When people see you, not in the idolatry to the things of this world, out of self worship, but in the worship of God using the things of this world, giving praise to God and honoring Him in what you do and how you do it, including our work, is the opportunity Jesus gives us in this sin-cursed world to point the world to Him. This does have a termination point and that is either Christ's coming or our death. So cease this moment, not for yourself, but for Christ. Eat and drink to His glory. Enjoy the wife of your youth.

My wife was so crazy to marry me. That was probably the dumbest thing she ever did. She was a part of the National Honor Society and she married me. I cannot believe that but I had a good line. So we got married – praise the Lord. Then all of sudden I realized I was married and this was for life. The first year of our marriage I would wake up in the middle of the night and look and there was Cindy, my wife and think 'this is for life, this wasn't just a big date.' I have often wondered when she woke up in the middle of the night and looked at me, what did she think? I never have asked her and I don't really want to know what she thought.

Given my age now I actually wake up more in the middle of the night. I look over and see my wife and what I think now is not ‘this is the rest of my life’ but I think ‘how little of my life I have yet to live with her here.’ We have a great calling here and I know our hope is what is to come and I praise God for it but don’t miss this moment celebrating your rightness with God and how you live in this age for your God without the spirit of the age but with the Spirit of God, directed by the Word of God. Let’s go to this last part now in Ecclesiastes 9.

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 says *[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.*

It’s interesting how we think we’re going along in life and it’s all lined up, and then everything changes in a moment. In this world, where we live, God is sovereign and we’re not. As time unfolds we’re to live always ready for the interruptions of the brokenness of sin in this world for man knows not his time. You don’t know when the Lord is going to call you home or when He is going to call a loved one home. For many of us we’ll go to meet Jesus having gotten up one morning, fully expecting we were going to come back to that bed that night. I have lists of illustrations of famous people and those who are not famous.

Doug Peterson, not famous, on November 11, 1992 he went out and bought a lottery ticket. That lottery ticket won him 11 million dollars but he died that day of a heart attack before he knew that was a winning ticket. Always live your life ready to meet the Lord for man knows not his time. Always live that life to the glory of that Lord throughout that life. Don’t put your confidence in your plans. Man plans his way and we ought to but God directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

We are made in the image of God and God exists and does things on purpose where man, made in His image, ought to plan and purpose and then we ought to take our plan and purpose and put it in the hands of God. Then watch God mess around with it, change it and then you be content with what He does with it. That is why we end our prayers ‘not my will be done but Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ So we see this awareness of life that suddenly falls upon them. Now I want to ask you, are you ready if tomorrow is your last day here? Are you ready for eternity? You know not your time. If you’re ready it will show up in the way you live tomorrow. It is not the way you live that will earn your place in eternity but it will manifest where you’re headed in eternity.

There are three moments in my life that I remember well. One was when I was 10 years old lying in my backyard. One was when I was in my bed and then one when I was at college. I’m not sure why they were so significant but the one where I was laying in the backyard, I remember seeing all these stars in the sky and I saw the glories of the heavens. Infinity had brought to my mind eternity and thank God I had a preacher that kept telling me to get ready for it. I didn’t get ready at that time but it deeply laid hold of my heart – this here is not forever Harry, but there is One who can bring you to forever.

The moment I was in my bed I had been listening to the radio and it went dead. I was lying on my side and I could feel my heart beat. For some reason, at that moment God impressed me that there was coming a day that my heart was not going to beat – are you ready? Then in college when I was in the midst of rebellion and ungodliness, He visited me again in a deep dark place in my sins against the Lord. I knew I was not ready for eternity. Those things began to move upon me and I would pray they have moved upon you.

We don't know our time but there will be a time for God has appointed it. Then there are only two destinations – with Him in a new heavens and a new earth or apart from Him isolated in the torment of the lake of fire with God's righteous judgment upon you. This is the day, the time of salvation. Lay hold of Him. Now I'd like to close with the last part of Ecclesiastes 9.

Ecclesiastes 9:13–18 says *[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.

Here is the last picture Solomon is giving us in chapter 9 and this is true in history where great military powers come in a moment and then the providence of God through a nobody delivers it. We saw this in our own country when our commander and chief George Washington was at the brink of destruction at Valley Forge, yet with everyone telling him to surrender he said 'no.' Then the providence of God began to unfold in deliverance.

We have seen it in the Bible through people like Hezekiah and others but the one I believe Solomon is anticipating unknowingly by the Spirit of God is the One who became poor for you and with all of His enemies arrayed against Him, He went to the cross and delivered us from our sins. Those people are usually not remembered but we remember. This is our Savior who at the cross, the King saved us from all of the principalities of darkness that were arrayed against us so that we can have eternal life.

The world may forget their deliverers because they aren't celebrity status but we will remember our Deliverer and we will tell the world here is the Savior who brings the city of God, redeemed and delivered, into a new heavens and a new earth and will bring you to it, if you come to Him who came for you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word for it's so glorious and we never do it justice but we thank You that we can come to it asking You to do justice to it for our sake by bringing grace to us from it. Help us to live lives that are thoughtful. In the world life is lived either with the adoration of idolatry or with slothfulness and thoughtlessness. We would not be idolatrous of our food, drink, fellowship, companions, marriage but neither would we be dismissive. We ask that You would help us live all of life under the sun for the glory of the Son of God who became poor for us, laid aside His privileges to die on the cross that we could have everlasting life. The world is delivered so many times from the hand of the powerful, by those whom no one thinks have the ability but we are delivered from those who would claim power from the One who laid aside His privileges to go to a cross to bring His mighty hand of redemption to save us. So God we won't forget Him for He is our Savior. We will live life for Him, eating, drinking, marriage, companionship, work and every area of life. We will do it unevenly and imperfectly but we will do it intentionally as we celebrate our Redeemer, even in a fallen world and we will not forget Him, not only in life, but we will not forget Him with our lips as we tell the world Christ is our Savior and Lord and we proclaim to the world the Gospel of our King, in Jesus' Name, Amen.