



LESSON 10 | LIVING LIFE WITH THE END IN MIND (9:1-12)¹

Most of us know that anxiety and despair can eat away at the joy life can give. That is as true today as it was in the time the Teacher wrote Ecclesiastes. In chapters 7 and 8 we've seen how the Teacher struggled with the question of why bad things happen to some good people and good things happen to some bad people. How can a just God allow this to come about?

Chapter 9 brings the Teacher's problem into sharper focus: How do we bridge the gap between the despairing puzzle of life and the sheer goodness of life? In this chapter, it is particularly the mystery of death that perplexes the Teacher. He appears to regard it as the end of life, and this casts a question mark over all that precedes death. As the Teacher continues his journey, we must wait to see if and how he resolves this growing tension.

As Christ-followers, however, we must remember that we read the Teacher's words as those who know "the rest of the story." **In the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we know that much of the Teacher's problem with death is resolved.** We know that death has no sting for the believer but is the stepping stone into the fullness of God's presence. We hope for and await the resurrection of the dead. Nevertheless, on this side of the consummation of the kingdom, death and suffering retain their shadow, as does the problem of evil, so that the Teacher's dilemma remains relevant to us today.

Ecclesiastes doesn't ignore the real pain, sorrow, and confusion that exist in this world; nor does the Teacher seek to remove these things. Instead, Ecclesiastes helps us find enjoyment in the midst of a broken world. We must remember that one of the themes of Ecclesiastes is that we are called to "enjoy" life. **Thus, in view of the certainty of death and the unpredictability of life, the Teacher urges us to enjoy to the fullest the days God gives us!** He recognizes that life is fleeting and that, while we're alive, we still have time to receive and enjoy each day as a gift from God. **We must therefore continue to seize and enjoy the gifts offered to us by God each day — life, light, and hours in which to work and eat and love and rest.** For God invites all of us to join in the ongoing work for caring for creation and all who dwell in it.

The Problem of Death, Revisited (9:1-6)

Summary: Verses 1-6 are an anguished reflection on the finality of death as the destiny of every person.

9:1-2. The point of verse 1 is to emphasize that the righteous and the wise, perhaps against their expectation, will experience in life both "love and hate," which may simply be another way of saying "good and evil." Their experience is in this respect no different from that of the wicked and the foolish—everyone has a mixed experience of life.

The lack of knowledge mentioned then refers either to general ignorance that this is indeed the case (perhaps especially among the wise and righteous themselves) or to specific ignorance as to the precise mixture of "love and hate" that each individual will have to endure. Human beings cannot know in advance how much of each they will encounter.

¹ Lesson notes are excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (300-310)

9:2. In contrast to traditional wisdom and the rest of the Old Testament, the Teacher states unequivocally in v. 2 that everything is the same for everyone because all share the same fate, namely death. His emphatic assertion is elaborated with a long list of those people between whom the OT carefully distinguishes. But for the Teacher, one's ethics (righteous and wicked) and one's worship (clean or unclean, sacrificing or not) make no difference whatsoever—all end up dead. The list of contrasts serves to underscore the Teacher's point—even those who are "good" do not escape the fate of death.

The Teacher feels little comfort in the fact that we are in the "hand of God" (v. 1), because that does not assure anyone, whether godly or evil, of a pain-free life and certainly does not allow one to escape the "fate" that comes to everyone.

9:3. This verse clearly states the Teacher's fundamental complaint: life is difficult, and then comes death. Possibly alluding again to Genesis 6:5, the Teacher despairs not only of the common fate of humankind but of humankind itself; their hearts are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live. His assessment of the human condition is akin here to that of Jeremiah, who out of his own agony discerns that the human heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all else (Jeremiah 17:9). Such a view of life "under the sun" is what leads him to conclude it is "vain" or "meaningless."

9:4-6. The Teacher now explores the possibility that there is some advantage to being alive rather than dead. Verse 4 consists of two proverbs that superficially appear to affirm life over death. If one is part of the living, one has hope, and a living dog is better than a dead lion. However, there is a stinger in the tail of these proverbs. In stark contrast to contemporary Western culture, dogs were among the most despised animals in the ancient Near East, whereas lions were among the most admired creatures. The irony is especially bitter because dogs may have been associated with death and the underworld. Life may be thought to have some advantages over death, but that is like thinking that it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion!

The irony is sustained in v. 5. The "advantage" of living is that you know you will die! But lest this be thought an actual advantage, the Teacher elaborates on his view of death. The dead know nothing; they cease to be conscious beings. They receive no reward if they have lived well. They are not remembered. All the tumultuous emotions driving their lives—love, hate, jealousy—are gone forever. Never again will they share in life. For the Teacher, death is so awful that it completely overshadows any value to life.

Your Best Life Now: Savoring the Present Moment (9:7-12)

Summary: After a despairing reflection on death, the imperatives for life in vv. 7–10 come as a shock. These verses are the fifth of the carpe diem passages in Ecclesiastes. This carpe diem section opens in a particularly strong way. It looks very much like the other carpe diem sayings that we have looked at, but the several imperatives enhance the nature of this advice. This is not the Teacher's answer to the perplexing reality of death; rather, it is an alternative vision of life.

9:7-10. As noted previously, the *carpe diem* passages in Ecclesiastes become stronger as the Teacher's journey proceeds. The most striking feature of this section is the sudden appearance of a series of imperatives bearing on enjoyment. What is new, however, in this section is the move from advice to imperative; it gives the enjoyment theme in this case a more authoritative presentation.

There is no "better-than" element, perhaps because of the sharper, imperative nature of the exhortation. God's approval of eating and drinking is strongly stated in v. 7b. The Teacher does not mean that God will happily sanction anything we determine to do. From the fuller context, it is clear that the Teacher locates enjoyment within God's will; God wills that we enjoy his basic provisions, for he is the one who provides them (cf. 2.24 etc.).

- A new element in this *carpe diem* passage is the specific mention of [wine](#). Wine formed part of the Teacher's failed experiment in 2:3, but here it alerts us to the festive nature of the eating and drinking and is approved by God.
- The reference to [clothing](#) and [oil](#) are also new. Festivity, joy, purity, and hope are the images evoked in v. 8, and one should remember that in the *carpe diem* passages these things are rooted in a vision of the world as God's creation. In the hot climate of Palestine, oil protected against dryness and is clearly associated in the OT with joy and gladness. In Ps. 23:5 the LORD anoints one with oil so that one's cup overflows. In Isa. 61:3 the oil of gladness is contrasted with mourning. Thus v. 8b is another exhortation to joy.
- The reference to the "[woman whom you love](#)" is also a new element in this *carpe diem* passage. Some argue that "woman" may refer to any woman rather than to one's wife, but once we realize that the *carpe diem* vision is rooted in a theology of creation, then the case for this woman being one's wife is compelling. Thus v. 9a is a positive affirmation of marriage that is to be fully enjoyed in all its dimensions.
- Finally, as in the other *carpe diem* passages, [work](#) is affirmed in v. 10a — one should apply oneself to it diligently. It is a reminder once again of how all-embracing the Teacher's vision is; he is recommending all useful and intellectual activity. Yet as the advice to seize the day becomes imperative, so the enigma of life pulls in the opposite direction, and we see here (in v.10b) the imminent explosion of the Teacher's attempt to hold on to both. Once again the exhortation to enjoyment should not just be seen as a simple answer to the problem of the universality of death. The contradiction remains unresolved.

9:11-12. Despite his call to seize the day, the Teacher knows there are no guarantees. From his perspective, the unexpectedness of such occurrences in vv. 11-12 mirrors what he observes among humans: evil suddenly befalls people when they least expect it. He does not comment on the sort of evil he has in mind, but we have a good idea of the range of possibilities from his earlier discussions: poverty, oppression, injustice, corruption, loneliness, and so on. The language in 9:12 is reminiscent of 7:26, but here it is not the sinner who is seized; as he notes in 9:2, "Everything is the same for everyone."

REFLECTION: RECEIVING THE DAY

- ◆ In this passage we witness the deep tension between the outworking of the Teacher's frustrating observations about life and his believing affirmation of the goodness of life. In 9:1-6 the Teacher's pessimism hits rock bottom.
 - It is the common destiny of death that the Teacher finds perplexing; it is the fate of all, both righteous and wicked, and thus what can possibly be the value of wisdom and righteousness? Neither righteousness, nor ritual cleanliness, nor sacrifice, nor avoidance of sin appear to make any difference; the end is the same, namely death. Verse 11 similarly unsettles our expectations for how life should go: swiftness, strength, wisdom, wealth, knowledge — all these make no difference because time and chance come upon us all.
- ◆ In stark contrast stand vv. 7-10a, in which the Teacher affirms life: eating, drinking, attention to one's appearance as a sign of life (v. 8), enjoying married life (v. 9), and working hard (v. 10).
 - This is the prevailing voice of the Teacher, and it affirms the **gift of the ordinary** in line with the rest of the OT. Rather than seeing the present moment as a curse that creates the context in which we can be ensnared by evil (v. 12) and inevitably drags us toward death amid our love, hate, and envy (v. 6), here the present moment of our lives is presupposed as the context for all of life, for life lived to the full.

- In *Seven Essays on Metaphysics*, Jacques Maritain tells of one day finding himself (a renowned seventy-seven-year-old philosopher) skipping across a hilltop in Toulouse and shouting, “I’m alive, I’m alive!” *“Having experienced sudden and utterly surprising rapture at the gift of life, the joy of being invested with existence, the privilege of being rather than not being, Maritain sank to his knees whispering words of praise and thanksgiving.”* The Teacher of Ecclesiastes knows from faith and life of this experience, and he expresses it with particular force in this *carpe diem* passage.
- Such an approach to life implies a practice of **“receiving the day.”** As Dorothy Bass notes, *“At the heart of this practice is praise of the God who created the earth and separated the light from darkness. God is still active in earth and all creatures, including ourselves. Every day, God offers gifts—life, light, and hours in which to work and eat and love and rest—and invites humankind to join in the ongoing work of caring for creation and all who dwell therein.”*

The discipline of **receiving the day** is rooted in a view of the world as God’s “very good” creation, filled with gifts from God to be enjoyed with God (as the Teacher points to in 9:7-10a). Moreover, it requires action and intentionality on our part. To cultivate this discipline in our lives, Bass suggests the following practices:

1. **Honoring the Body, Day by Day.** Humans are embodied creatures, and rhythms of eating, drinking, and washing are an important part of human identity. Intriguingly, in this chapter the Teacher specifically refers to such care of the body in v. 8. The value of white clothes in a hot climate was widely known, and the frequent application of oils to combat the effect of dry heat on skin was widely practiced by those who could afford it. According to Esther 8:15, Mordecai wore a combination of bright clothes and white garments on a festive occasion. Bread and wine represent the everyday needs of life as well as occasions of celebration, and the Teacher encourages us to enter into these daily activities and rhythms with joy. His reference to enjoying life with the woman you love affirms marriage—the companionship as well as the bodily, sexual dimension.
2. **The Offering of Attention.** The Teacher encourages us to enter into life attentively. The opposite of attention is distraction, and in today’s busyness attentiveness suffers. An attentive person doesn’t go through the day on autopilot, disconnected from thoughts and feelings, nor do they seek to control reality or change everything they do not like. The offering of attention positions us to live wholeheartedly in the present moment, alert to God and without judgment. By offering our attention to the present moment we learn to savor the simple pleasures of life, discover a greater capacity for wonder, and worry less about the future.
3. **Attending to God.** This third practice involves making times for God regularly each day. The Christian practice of receiving the day begins with setting aside a part of each day for attention to God. This piece of time leans deliberately into the wind, grounding us to resist the forces that hurry us on to distraction. Putting down an anchor or two amidst the swells of each day is essential if we are to avoid bobbing on its surface or being washed away by its demands. This is a topic that the Teacher addresses in particular in Eccl. 5, where he calls us to approach God to *listen*.
4. **Saying No to Say Yes.** Receiving the day, especially in our frenetic consumer culture, involves choosing what not to do as well as what to do. With smart phones, the Internet, and all the things that constitute our speed-driven culture, the Teacher’s call to embrace the ordinary is much harder nowadays than it was in his day. Recovering the ordinary will mean dispensing with the clutter that fills our lives.
5. **Unmastering the Day.** The final step involves a recognition that there is much about our days that we cannot control, and we need to relinquish control at these points. Saint Francis is reported to have said, *“In baptism we have died the only death that matters.”* It is, finally, in this kind of confidence, this kind of trust, that we are free to receive this day as a gift—and also to receive it as a day that bears gifts, including the gift we become when we commit ourselves to faithful living.

DISCUSSION

1. What are some things on your bucket list?
2. This passage confronts us yet again with the perplexing reality of death. However, one thing we should appreciate about the Teacher is that he speaks honestly about death and why it disturbs him. What are some lessons about death that you've taken away so far from our study of Ecclesiastes?
3. In 9:7-10, the Teacher gives us advice on how to approach life, calling us to seize and savor the gifts and opportunities of life while we can. How would you express in your own words what he says in these verses?
4. Do you know anyone who lives life in a way where they see that everything in life as a gift from God? What characteristics do they portray? How have you seen them respond to difficult situations?
5. As we live with the end in mind, the Teacher counsels us to enjoy the ordinary things of life: food, drink, clothing, relationships, and work. What makes us take these ordinary things for granted? How might these ordinary things be doorways to experiencing joy in life with God and others?
6. (*The practice of Offering Attention*) We become more fully alive when we savor God's beauty around and within us. How do you celebrate the wonder of the world around you? Is it difficult for you to take a moment to exhale and become attentive to the beauty around you? What common, tangible thing brings you pleasure and helps you celebrate the goodness of God (eg., sitting in front of the fire, drinking coffee, going for a walk, etc.)? What experience helps you slow down and savor?
7. (*The practice of Attending to God*): How would you describe your experience of God's presence amidst the routines of your everyday life? What helps you remain aware of God's presence during the day?
8. (*The practice of Saying No to Say Yes*): For at least a few months in 2020, life slowed down immensely for all of us. During this time, what are some ordinary things you learned to embrace and enjoy and perhaps see (for the first time) as a gift? Now that the pace of life has picked up considerably for many of us, what things do you need to appreciate more and slow down to enjoy?
9. (*The practice of Unmastering the Day*) The final step of "receiving the day" involves a recognition that there is much about our days that we cannot control, and we need to relinquish control at these points. How have you learned to relinquish control and trust God with each day? How has this helped you receive what comes each day as a gift?
10. How can you cultivate the discipline of "receiving the day" in the week ahead? Which of these five practices need the most attention in your life?