

## LESSON 7

# Faith Confronts Futility

### Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 8:16—10:20

### Key Verse

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

### Overview

Solomon taught that life is good, even though it contains puzzles. He urged his readers to live wisely and wholeheartedly. He cautioned, however, that wise living is not always appreciated by unbelievers.

### Topic

Outlook on life

### Theme

The believer should trust God even though the world does not value faith.

### Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine to view life with godly optimism.

### Outline

- I. Instruction (Eccles. 8:16—9:18)
  - A. Problem (8:16—9:6)
    - 1. Frustration (8:16—9:1)
    - 2. Fate (9:2, 3)
    - 3. Focus (9:4–6)
  - B. Advice (9:7–10)
  - C. Warning (9:11–18)
    - 1. Stay in touch with reality (9:11, 12)
    - 2. The world does not always appreciate wisdom (9:13–18)
- II. Illustrations (Eccles. 10)

### Materials

- Transparencies 1 and 10
- Ecclesiastes 9:10 verse card from resource CD
- Lesson 7 case study from resource CD
- Lesson 7 handout from resource CD
- At least three donuts (enough for each learner if desired)

## Getting Started

### Three Approaches to Life

Enlist three adults to help you with a simple skit. Place three doughnuts on a table in the front of the classroom, one before each adult. (Doughnuts do

not have to be identical.) Privately arrange for each adult to eat in a different way: (1) daintily pick at a doughnut, (2) complain about and halfheartedly eat a doughnut, (3) enjoy every bite of a doughnut.

**Discuss:** How does this skit picture different approaches to life? Which person represents how God wants believers to approach life? Why?

As Solomon drew to a close his analysis of the significance of life, he became increasingly optimistic. He acknowledged that life will always have its unanswered questions. However, rather than giving up, the wise, godly person grasps life as God's blessing.

## Searching the Scriptures

### I. Instruction (Eccles. 8:16—9:18)

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 2 to review the class's progress through the structure of Ecclesiastes.

In this section, Solomon summarized what his three previous observations of life had revealed. He restated the crucial problem of life, gave encouraging advice to grasp life, but balanced his challenge with words of caution.

#### A. Problem (8:16—9:6)

##### 1. Frustration (8:16—9:1)

Solomon concluded from his attempt to find meaning in life apart from God that no one can fully understand life. No matter how hard a person might try, no matter how long he might seek, no matter how wise he may be by human standards, he cannot comprehend fully the meaning of life.

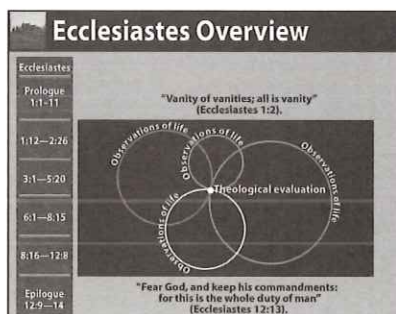
At the last, Solomon realized that only God knows and controls life (Eccles. 9:1). He wrote that life is "in the hand of God." However, people remain frustrated, for God does not always reveal His purposes and methods.

**DISCUSS:** Why do you think God doesn't always reveal His purposes and methods? How should we respond when we are perplexed? (Questions 3, 4)

##### 2. Fate (9:2, 3)

As Solomon viewed life without considering God, it appeared that an impersonal and unjust fate drove all of life. He saw that the one constant was death, for all people die. It does not matter whether a person is righteous or wicked, pure or impure, obedient or disobedient, good or evil, for death claims all.

This view of life might appear to support the idea that people might as well do what they please. However, within the argument presented by the whole book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon moved progressively toward his final conclusion





in chapter 12. Because God has created everything and is controlling life, He also evaluates the quality of each person's life.

Ecclesiastes does not develop in detail this implication of the afterlife. Solomon did, however, make clear that how people live today is vitally connected to their future destiny. Death comes to all; therefore, people must live in such a way that what they do will pass beyond death's door. Possession, thrills, fame, and achievement cannot pass that stern standard. Only a life devoted to God's will pleases God and receives His approval.

### 3. Focus (9:4–6)

In light of the inevitable reality of death, which awaits all people, Solomon focused his attention on life in Ecclesiastes 9:4–6. He used a proverb in verse 4 to make his point.

In the ancient world, dogs were vicious scavengers. People feared and despised them. The lion, on the other hand, symbolized royalty. Solomon said that a living dog is better than a dead lion. In other words, it is better to be alive with all of life's contemptible aspects, than to be the loftiest person who died.

Even though life is full of puzzles and injustices, only life matters. After death there is no further opportunity to build character. At the point of death, the dye has been cast for eternity. We have no second chance to undo what we have done in life or to make up what we have failed to do.

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 9:5 and 6.

**ASK:** According to these verses what are the dead not able to do? (Question 5)

Far from giving up on life, Solomon's search forced him to focus on life in a fresh way. He saw it with a new seriousness. Life is too precious to throw away. It is too short to squander. It is too important to neglect. Life is God's gift to treasure and to invest for eternal dividends.

**DISCUSS:** What activities have eternal value? What kinds of distractions keep believers from investing their lives wisely? (Questions 6, 7)

### B. Advice (9:7–10)

In light of his focus on life's value, Solomon gave his readers a stirring challenge (9:7–10). Death is just around the corner, he advised, so it is urgent to enjoy life now. Far from giving up on life, Solomon exhorted his readers to enjoy life to the fullest.

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 9:7–10. **ASK:** What did Solomon encourage the reader to do even though death was imminent? (Question 8)

In verse 7 Solomon counseled in effect, "Eat, drink, and be merry." However, this counsel does not encourage careless living. Isaiah 22:13 and 14 depict the

In the ancient world white clothes were reserved for festive occasions such as weddings. On those occasions, people also anointed their heads with oil. Compare Psalm 23:5.

people of Jerusalem as condemned because they wasted their lives in partying. Solomon's counsel opposes any philosophy that endorses an irresponsible lifestyle. He taught that people can enjoy life because God has created it to be enjoyed. If people live in such a way that God accepts their works, they can find joy in the structure that He has established.

**DISCUSS:** How can believers embrace life enthusiastically? (Question 9)

Solomon detailed many of life's disappointments and difficulties in Ecclesiastes. Nevertheless, in Ecclesiastes 9:8 he encouraged his readers to enjoy the festive side of life. Life does have its undeniable pains, but those pains should not blind people to its pleasures. The godly, wise person is sensitive to life's hurts, but he is not embittered by them.

Solomon called for a balanced approach to life. He knew all too well how frustrating life can be. He cautioned against squandering life on what is temporal. He focused on the inevitability of death. But he also counseled his readers to lighten up and laugh, to enjoy the good things that God has given.

**DISCUSS:** What kind of impression does an enthusiastic attitude portray to unbelievers? to children? Is that important? Why? (Question 10, 11)

In verse 9 Solomon cited marriage to demonstrate his point. Marriages often start with high ideals, but eventually the relationship can take a backseat to the responsibilities of married life. The pressures of work, finances, children and time can sap a marriage of its strength, vitality and joy.

A commercial announced: "Life is short; play hard." Solomon would have said it differently: "Life is short; live joyfully." Possessions do not last; people do. Riches are temporary, but relationships are an eternal investment. He challenged his reader to live joyfully with his spouse for as long as God keeps them alive.

**DISCUSS:** Which do most people treat as eternal—relationships or riches? Explain. (Question 12)

Writing in more general terms in verse 10, Solomon challenged his readers to "go for it." After death there will be no opportunity to use the resources that God has given now. Each person's character will be formed by then by the choices he has made in life.

Because of that sobering truth, the wise person must use every opportunity to the fullest. Instead of letting the puzzles of life paralyze him from productive action, he needs to make the most of his strength, health, intelligence, time and relationships.

Solomon's honest look at life led him to this stirring affirmation of life. Death is ahead, so each one must make the most of today. The present opportunities must be grasped courageously. Each person must set his or her



mind on what matters—pleasing God—and then set his or her hands to give life all that he or she can.

### C. Warning (9:11–18)

#### 1. Stay in touch with reality (9:11, 12)

Solomon realized that his advice in Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 could lead to unguarded optimism. To protect his readers from being crushed when their best efforts did not bring them what they had hoped for, he balanced his advice with some words of warning. In raising their sights to see life's opportunities, he also cautioned them to keep their feet firmly planted in reality.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 10 with the bottom and right halves covered. The transparency is designed to look like a sealed box. As we open and unpack life, we need to be aware of a couple of warning labels.

In verses 11 and 12, Solomon taught that natural ability does not guarantee success. World-class athletes can lose races, brilliant thinkers can be baffled by hard issues, and highly skilled workers can fail to complete important projects.

Life, said Solomon, is not predictable. There is always an element of uncertainty to it, because God chooses to work with people as individuals. He does not always accomplish His purposes in the same way in everybody's life.

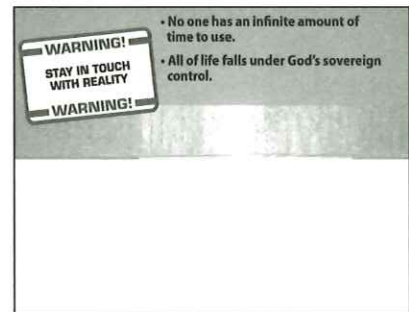
**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 10 with the bottom half covered. Reveal the first two bullet points at the top of the page as you discuss.

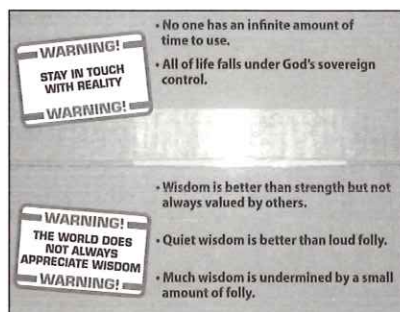
Two things are constants for all people (v. 11). Everyone is subject to time, for we are mortal. All people have a limited quantity of years before they die. They may have different skills, wealth, education, or opportunities, but they all will have to face death. **No one has an infinite amount of time to use.**

In addition, each person is subject to chance. Solomon's use of "chance" here does not mean impersonal fate. Rather, as Solomon discussed in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, all of life falls under God's sovereign control. Some things may appear to be unpredictable, chance happenings, because they take people by surprise. However, in reality God manages all the factors that affect us in His own perfect, but unknowable, way.

In addition to these factors, Solomon stated that calamities often fall suddenly and unexpectedly. Unforeseen events such as natural disasters, economic downturns, sicknesses and death intrude without warning. We cannot predict when such events will strike us. Nor do we have sufficient ability to overcome them. **All of life falls under God's sovereign control**, but He has not chosen to make life completely understandable to us.

**DISCUSS:** What should be a believer's attitude toward unpredictable calamities? What might hap-





pen when we demand that God make sense of our lives? How can we keep an uncertain future from robbing us of a joyful life now? (Questions 13–15)

## 2. The world does not always appreciate wisdom (9:13–18)

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 10 with the bullet points on the bottom half covered. Reveal the bullet points as you discuss them.

The second part of Solomon's warning explains that wisdom is not always appreciated in this world (vv. 13–18). In verses 13–15 Solomon set up a hypothetical situation to make his point. He told of a powerful king who attacked a small village. Although the village was completely out-manned, a poor wise man used his wisdom to deliver the village from defeat. However, the wise man was forgotten by the very people whom he had rescued.

Solomon drew his principles from this story. He concluded in verse 16 that **wisdom is better than strength, but it is not always valued by other people**. The truly wise person may contribute greatly to his society yet be scorned, ignored or forgotten.

**READ:** Have a learner read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.

**ASK:** What did Paul say the world thinks of the wisdom of God? (Question 16)

His second principle is that **quiet wisdom is better than loud folly** (v. 17). Many people clamor to hear a fool's attractive, bold words. Fools often speak what others want to hear rather than what they need to hear. They may draw a large following with that kind of message. In contrast, true wisdom is the narrow way. Though it leads to life, it is rarely congested, for most people prefer the enticements of folly over the stern demands of wisdom.

Solomon's final principle in verse 18 is that **much wisdom is undermined by a small amount of folly**. Just as it takes only a little quantity of poison to pollute a large water supply, so a little folly can overturn a large amount of wisdom. Here Solomon brought together wisdom with good, and folly with sin. As Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 show, wisdom and folly are moral categories, not just intellectual categories. The wise person is skilled in living to please God. The fool rejects God's way and, as a result, brings destruction to himself and to all those around him.

Solomon pointed out that true wisdom is best, but it is often undervalued, overlooked, or rejected. The person who throws himself into life wholeheartedly (Eccles 9:7–10) must not expect applause from the world when he reverences and obeys the Lord.

## II. Illustrations (Eccles. 10)

In chapter 9 Solomon exhorted his readers to live to the fullest extent as wise, God-fearing people, but also to be aware that such wisdom is not read-



ily appreciated in this sinful world. In chapter 10 he reinforced his message with a series of proverbs.

**BIBLE STUDY:** Distribute the handout for lesson 7. Have the learners get into pairs or groups of three. Assign each pair a reference and accompanying truth on the handout (also listed below). Have learners think of modern-life examples of when their assigned truths would apply. (Examples: 10:1 applies to the “safe sex” campaign; 10:2 applies to the popularity of shows, books, and movies that portray witchcraft as entertainment; 10:4 applies to unethical job procedures.)

10:1—In this sinful world, folly is more influential than wisdom, even though it destroys valuable lives.

10:2—The wise man desires what is honorable and just, but the fool desires what is sinister and evil.

10:3—The fool demonstrates his folly in his actions and words.

10:4—Wisdom is sticking to what is right despite pressure.

10:5–7—Foolish men often rise to places of prominence.

10:8, 9—Every meaningful action involves an element of risk.

10:10—Wisdom prepares the wise person for more effective living.

10:11—Wisdom is beneficial only if it is applied before the problem arises.

10:12, 13—Wise speech benefits others, but foolish talking is destructive.

10:14—The fool may talk a lot, but he really does not know the first thing about what will happen.

10:15—The fool cannot understand the simplest things of life.

10:16–19—Foolish leaders harm many by their incompetence, but a wise leader can benefit others.

10:20—The wise person is cautious in his criticism.

When students are ready, ask each pair to read their assigned truth and corresponding proverb from Ecclesiastes 10 and to give its modern-life example. Other pairs may suggest additional examples as well.

Solomon knew from his observations that only godly wisdom can open the door to significant life. Yet, the sinful scorn and reject this kind of wisdom.

## Making It Personal

### Life Challenge

The wise person in any age must trust God enough to live by His standards,

Principles for Life and Love	
1. Recognize the need to have a Christ-centered life.	8.
2. Break out of the circles of life by living for God.	9.
3. Find true enjoyment in life by surrendering to God.	10.
4. Trust God with your life—even the difficult aspects.	11.
5. Recognize the folly of living for money and things.	12.
6. Show wisdom by submitting to God.	13.
7. View life with godly optimism.	

giving himself wholeheartedly to enjoying life as God intended. He may not be applauded by others for his faith, but he must persist in living for God nonetheless.

Direct students' attention to the table used for the doughnut skit. Ask each student to consider which "eater" in the skit represented his approach to life. Challenge students to wholeheartedly enjoy life as God intended.

**Ask:** How hum-drum has your outlook on life been? What kind of an effect does your outlook on life have on those around you? (Questions 18, 19)

### Case Study

Distribute the case study for lesson 7. Have the learners work in pairs to complete it. Allow five minutes for discussion.

### Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: View life with godly optimism.

### Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 9:10 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.