

“Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:7–9 (NASB)

Jerome (c. AD 342–420) is one of the most famous theologians of the early church. He is known best for his translation of the Bible into Latin from its Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) languages. The translation he produced came to be known as *the Vulgate*, an edition of Scripture which dominated the church for a whole millennium—from the fifth century to the Reformation in the fifteenth century.

Jerome was also instrumental in setting in place a particular way of interpreting the book of Ecclesiastes. First, he chose the Latin term *vanitas* to translate the Hebrew word *הֶבֶל* (*hebel*), a word which means “vapor” or “mist” in its most basic sense, emphasizing *brevity*. Jerome’s inherently negative translation of the term has affected the history of English translation ever since, with most editions following the Latin and translating the term pessimistically as “vanity.” Second, Jerome also produced a significant commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes itself, establishing a way of understanding its contents that dominated until the Reformation.

Jerome’s approach to Ecclesiastes was decidedly *allegorical* in nature. The 16th-century Protestant Reformer John Calvin described Jerome’s method as follows: “Jerome’s writings on the Old Testament have deservedly little recognition among the learned; for he is almost completely sunk in allegories in which he twists Scripture in far too free a manner.” This was certainly true of Jerome’s handling of Ecclesiastes. To justify the need for an allegorical approach, Jerome presupposed that the material things of this world were a snare to the child of God. The comforts of life, marriage, food, and work were to be considered inherently *vain* or *meaningless*.

Thus, Jerome interpreted Ecclesiastes as a treatise against material enjoyment and as an endorsement of asceticism. Even the *carpe diem*—“Seize the day!”—statements of 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19; 9:7–9; and 11:7–10 were taken symbolically to refer to participation in the Eucharist and to Christ’s love for His church. His view quickly became popular, serving to promote celibacy and the monastic life throughout the church.

But Jerome’s dominion came to an end at the Reformation. The Reformers’ return to *literal* interpretation, including a return to the original biblical languages, led to a more positive view of Ecclesiastes’ contents. Endal Kallas writes, “Though a seemingly insignificant event within the history of the Reformation, and centered upon a text far removed from the mainstream of evangelical theology, this decisive break with Jerome that is initiated by the evangelical commentators on Ecclesiastes marks an important and still unrecognized event in Reformation history” (“Ecclesiastes: *Traditum et Fides Evangelical*,” 127).

Consider Jean de Serres (1540–1598), a French refugee to Geneva, Switzerland, where he became a student of the first class in John Calvin’s pastoral training school, *Geneva Academy*. After completing his training and becoming a pastor, de Serres went on to write a commentary on Ecclesiastes (c. 1585). In it de Serres directly referred to the problems of Jerome’s allegorical approach to Ecclesiastes. In a comment on Ecclesiastes 3, de Serres compares his own simple interpretive approach to Ecclesiastes with that of Jerome and his “itch” to handle the text mystically, “according to his mad desire, to turn all things into needless allegories.”

What the de Serres and other Reformer changed with respect to Ecclesiastes has had massive consequences for how believers view vocation, marriage, earthly comforts, and life “under the sun.” Rather than viewing these things as inherently sinful or sin-inducing, the Reformers taught that all these things can be truly enjoyed when done *in the fear of God*—that is, *for His glory*. In fact, the text to which we now turn, Ecclesiastes 9, contains the most powerful *carpe diem* statement of the entire book (vv. 9–11). We can be thankful to the

Reformers for recovering our ability to approach this text in a straight-forward, literal manner. As such, we can *enjoy* the material things of this life—food, friendship, work, and marriage—*without guilt*. To fear God in all of life does *not* mean abstaining from marriage, disdaining menial labor, denouncing earthly comforts, consuming only bread and water, and joining a monastery. Under the fear of God, all these things can be enjoyed. In fact, *they must be enjoyed*. Anything less is an abdication of responsibility. Yet this enjoyment must still be anchored in the understanding of related realities. This is Solomon’s emphasis in Ecclesiastes chapter 9.

I. Rest in the Sovereignty of God (9:1)

Solomon begins with an overarching statement—one that serves to summarize the message of the book of Ecclesiastes “in a nutshell” (David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 107): **“For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God” (9:1a)**. The **“all this”** that Solomon had sought to **“take in”** and **“explain”** (literally, “examine”) refers immediately back to the end of chapter 8, and to vv. 16–17 in particular. There Solomon concluded that man cannot answer all of life’s questions. No matter how hard he might search, he will never be able to come up with all the answers, especially as they relate to adversity. Instead, he must walk *by faith* (see Lesson 13, “Insights for Living”). But **“all this”** also refers to much more—to the whole scope of what is covered in the book of Ecclesiastes.

What Solomon took to his **“heart”** (aka mission control center) was that **“righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God.”** Solomon delivers what can be called “a confessional statement about God’s sovereignty” (Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 299). He specifically identifies one category of humanity: those who are “righteous” and “wise,” which in the vocabulary of Ecclesiastes refers to **those who fear God** (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13). These, Solomon states, can rest in the knowledge that they are **“in the hand of God,”** an idiomatic expression that refers to God’s *comprehensive, sovereign control* of the details of life (Proverbs 21:1). It also describes the place of *blessing* (Ecclesiastes 2:24) and *mercy and grace* (2 Samuel 24:14).

Why is this knowledge so advantageous to the righteous? Solomon answers: **“Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him” (9:1b)**. Once again, Solomon points to the enigmas of life. There are no guarantees in a world that is under the curse (Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 8:20), for the righteous or for the wicked. **“Love or hatred”** figuratively refers to the circumstances of *prosperity or adversity*, the circumstances that are *straight* and predictable or the ones that are *bent* and unexpected (1:15; 7:13). For the unrighteous, life in such a world ought to be terrifying. But for the righteous, knowledge of God’s sovereignty brings peace. It reminds them that there is no such thing as *blind fate*. There is no meaningless circumstance, even in pain. Rather, all of life is orchestrated by the intricately wise providence of a good God.

II. Reflect upon the Certainty of Death (9:2–6)

With the fact of God’s sovereignty established, Solomon now calls upon his reader to contemplate the inevitably of death—a call he has made repeated in Ecclesiastes. Indeed, death is the great equalizer: **“It is the same for all. There is the same fate” (v. 2a)**. No one can escape it. In fact, Solomon proceeds to list five antithetical categories of people whom death is sure to visit: (1) **“for the righteous and for the wicked”**; (2) **“for the good, for the clean and for the unclean”**; (3) **“for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice”**; (4) for **“the good man”** and **“the sinner”**; (5) for **“the swearer [of vows]”** and for **“the one who is afraid to swear” (v. 2b)**. By this list Solomon covers the spectrum. He leaves no one out.

Without exception, all will face death. At face value, this reality appears like **“an evil” (v. 3)**. The righteous man who worships the one true God and the sinner who scorns Him meet in the same graveyard. Indeed, it is a “misery,” something dreadful, but not because God is unfair in His judgments or because He has ceded control to an evil power. Instead, Solomon immediately provides a two-fold explanation: (a) **“the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil”**; and (b) **“insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives” (v. 3)**. In language reminiscent of Genesis 6:5, Solomon here summarizes the doctrine known as *universal depravity*. All without exception are sinful (Romans 3:10–18), and therefore all without exception taste death (Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12; 6:23a).

But Solomon’s point is not merely to state the obvious. Instead, his challenge to the reader is to consider the implications. Because death is certain, it should lead to reflection and transformation for those who fear God: **“For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten” (v. 4).** The *living* have the **“hope”** or **“confidence”** to live life in light of the inevitability of death. They still have the opportunity to reckon with its reality and steward whatever days of life they have **“under the sun”** in the appropriate manner. In fact, Solomon uses the comparison between **“a live dog”** and **“a dead lion”** to illustrate his point. In ancient Israel, the dog was despised; the lion was exalted. But even a despised but living mongrel has more of an advantage *in this life* than an adored monarch of the animal kingdom.

In vv. 5–6 Solomon is not attempting to provide a theology of *the afterlife*, although he has referred to it briefly elsewhere (3:17; 11:9; 12:14). His focus in general in the book is on *life under the sun* and our right stewardship of it. His intention in these verses is to motivate his readers not to shirk responsibility. He wants his readers to realize that the living man has an advantage if he grasps these lessons: (a) sooner or later he will meet God as his judge; (b) he will give an account for how he has lived his life; and (c) he must steward his life well.

III. Rejoice in the Gifts of Life (9:7–10)

Verses 7–9 comprise another *carpe diem* (**“Seize the day!”**) statement in Ecclesiastes. There have been several of these statements already in the book (see 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19), and another one is yet to come (11:7–10). As Solomon develops his argument throughout the book each of these statements grows in intensity. Here we come to the most emphatic one so far.

Rather than offering another **“better-than”** statement, vv. 7–9 include direct commands *to enjoy!* He begins with the exhortation, **“Go, then” (v. 7).** In light of the certainty of death, there is a commission to fulfill. There is no time to waste, and self-pity is not an option. **Seize the day!** As David Gibson writes, **“Preparing to die, and to die well, does not mean drawing the curtains and dressing in black and thinking morbid thoughts. Preparing to die means thinking about how to live”** (*Living Life Backward*, 110). Or as Charles Bridges states, **“Here is God’s bright remedy. Go thy way. Enjoy your mercies while you have them”** (*Ecclesiastes*, 219).

Solomon summarizes this commission as it pertains to the six most basic categories of human experience:

- (1) **“Eat your bread in happiness”** – that is, enjoy the sustenance you need each day to survive.
- (2) **“Drink your wine with a cheerful heart”** – that is, enjoy the refreshment that comes from drink.
- (3) **“God has already approved your works”** – that is, enjoy whatever labor that you are given to perform.
- (4) **“Let your clothes be white all the time”** – that is, enjoy the comforts and celebrations of life.
- (5) **“Let not oil be lacking on your head”** – that is, enjoy gladness and the pleasant things of life.
- (6) **“Enjoy life with the woman whom you love”** – that is, enjoy the one-flesh component of married life.

To *enjoy* life is the necessary response to death’s inevitability. God does not call us to forsake pleasure. Instead, as a good and gracious God He delights in giving it to us. We are to **“rejoice and be glad”** in the day which Yahweh has made (Psalm 118:24). Indeed, *hedonism*—pursuing these things for the sake of pleasure itself—is not an option. Solomon has already concluded that (Ecclesiastes 2:1–17). But neither is *asceticism*—rejecting these things for the sake of discomfort itself—an option. Instead, upon the foundational attitude of *the fear of God*, the things God gives are to be enjoyed *unto His glory* (see Acts 14:17; 1 Timothy 4:1–4). The apostle Paul echoes this: **“Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do to the glory of God”** (1 Corinthians 10:31).

To this *carpe diem* statement of 9:7–9, Solomon adds a similar sounding exhortation before he moves on: **“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (v. 10).** Again, Solomon’s purpose here is not to articulate a theology of the afterlife. His reference to **“Sheol”** is best understood simply as **“the grave.”** When death comes, our life **“under the sun”** is over. All the opportunities for stewarding this life will be over. We will give an account (12:14). Therefore, whatever you do, **“do it with all your might!”** *Live life to the fullest!* Find what is honoring to the Lord, then *run hard* and *enjoy the journey!*

IV. Recognize the Uncertainty of Outcomes (9:11–12)

In vv. 11–12, Solomon returns to some hard lessons related to death and life. In order to enjoy this life and steward its opportunities correctly, one must remember that there will be enigmas. One cannot establish dominating expectations. Live life with an open hand. Anticipate the bent circumstances.

To make his point, Solomon provides five illustrations about life’s unpredictability: (a) **“the race is not to the swift,”** that is, speed doesn’t guarantee a victory; (b) **“the battle is not to the warriors,”** that is, strength doesn’t always win wars; (c) **“neither is bread to the wise,”** that is, wisdom isn’t always successful in this broken world; (d) **“nor wealth to the discerning,”** that is, intelligence isn’t always prosperous; and (e) **“nor favor to men of ability,”** that is, skill isn’t always popular. Why? **“For time and chance overtake them all” (v. 11).** Better understood as “occurrences and happenings,” Solomon again points to *adversity*. In the world outside the Garden of Eden, failure, pain, and groaning will be common. By this Solomon argues for realistic expectations. Life is unpredictable and your efforts are not guaranteed. Recognizing this is a significant part of the pathway to joy.

In fact, he points once again to the thing that can ruin any man’s plans, *death*: **“man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them” (v. 12).** But as he asserted back in v. 1, God remains sovereign in it all.

V. Recall the Parameters of Wisdom (9:13–18)

To close out the section, Solomon turns his focus again to the topic of wisdom, with the terms “wise” or “wisdom” occurring seven times in vv. 13–18. He recalls a particular historical incident, perhaps something that happened during his father’s lifetime (2 Samuel 20:14–22?). From it he draws several lessons about the **advantages and limitations of wisdom**: (a) wisdom is better than strength and authority (9:14–15a, 16a, 17–18a); (b) people often don’t recognize the benefit of the wise (9:15b, 16b); and (c) folly can easily undermine the influence of the wise (9:18b). Indeed, wisdom is **“better,”** but it has its limits. People are fickle (cf. 4:13–18), and wisdom does not have all the answers. It cannot account for life’s ultimate problem nor solve life’s hardest enigma—the need for redemption itself. That comes not through wisdom, but through *fear*—through faith in God’s promise of salvation, which finds its realization generations after Solomon, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Hear the Preacher!

1. Don’t waste your life.
2. Focus on what is important.
3. Enjoy life with all your might.
4. Orient everything around God’s glory.

For Discussion

1. In what ways are you wasting your life today? List the distractions that serve as obstacles to Solomon’s teaching in 9:7–10. Why are these distractions so alluring to you?
2. As you examine your life, what are the important things that God has given you to focus upon right now?
3. What outcomes and expectations are you holding on to in your life (career, family, relationships, etc.), which Solomon’s teaching in 9:11–12 challenges you to surrender? What does this surrender look like?
4. How is the fear of God to determine and inform your enjoyment of the things listed in 9:7–10?
5. Provide a biblical definition of the sovereignty of God. Why is this doctrine so important? How does it bring comfort? How is it applied practically in moments of adversity?
6. Why is wisdom not the ultimate solution or need in life? What then is this ultimate solution?

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: April 10, Fellowship on the Patio @ 6:15pm; Evening of Prayer @ 7:00pm