

A Death Well Lived

Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:10 November 6, 2024

In the mid-1700's lived a man who could have written Ecclesiastes if Solomon hadn't already done it. He entered the university at age 12. From there, his life took many adventurous turns. He was a cleric, then a soldier, a gambler, a poet, and a conman alchemist. He once saved the life of a Venetian senator and became a spy in Amsterdam.¹ He was imprisoned by the Inquisition, then became the only person to ever escape the prison.² He reportedly helped to write the libretto for Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* and penned a 12 volume autobiography. He knew wealth and poverty, saw the world, and left a string of scandals and broken hearts in his wake.

Some idolize him. To others he is notorious. You know his name, at least his *last* name: Giacomo Casanova. One author wrote that Casanova's quest was to "*drink as much pleasure from the cup of life as possible.*"³

And yet, while many celebrate his lust for life, his womanizing, and his unrestrained worldliness, the truth is that at the end of his life Casanova knew no joy. At the age of 65, exiled from Venice, worn out, and unhappy, he got a job as a librarian. He was so lonely he considered suicide.

But there was a problem: Casanova was *afraid* of death. He described death as a monster who chases you out of a theater before the play is over. And so he lingered at his librarian job for the last dozen years of his life.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes is the Bible's Casanova - A man who tried everything he could think of to drink in life. But no matter what he did, he couldn't escape the shadow of death. It haunted and frustrated and demoralized him.

In tonight's text he comes to a couple of conclusions. The first is that human beings don't know nearly as much as we *think* we know. The second is that the one thing we *do* know is that we are going to die. And the third conclusion is how we should respond to the first two.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 - ¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the activity that is done on the earth (even though one's eyes do not close in sleep day or night), ¹⁷I observed all the work of God and concluded that a person is unable to discover the work that is done under the sun. Even though a person labors hard to explore it, he cannot find it; even if a wise person claims to know it, he is unable to discover it.

The Teacher speaks as someone who is trying to solve the puzzle of life on his own, using human wisdom, human genius, human philosophy. The problem is: Human philosophy *cannot solve the*

¹ <https://www.walksofitaly.com/blog/art-culture/casanova-the-lover-venice-italy>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/01/arts/learning-to-love-a-lover-is-casanova-s-reputation-as-a-reprobate-a-bum-rap.html>

³ <https://lideamagazine.com/life-is-the-only-treasure-we-possess-and-those-who-do-not-love-it-do-not-deserve-it-reflections-on-the-passion-driven-life-of-giacomo-casanova/>

puzzle. Derek Kidner very aptly points out that every human philosophy comes along and exposes the omissions of its predecessors.⁴ Another scholar writes, “*Human insight, understanding, and reason, like water, cannot rise higher than their source or own level.*”⁵

We are finite beings. We cannot comprehend the infinite unless it is *revealed* to us. The Bible puts it very plainly in Job 28: “Where can wisdom be found? It cannot be found in the land of the living” (meaning under the sun). But God understands the way to wisdom, and He knows its location.⁶

Not only does God reveal His wisdom to us, He also reveals that He is in charge of all things. He is sovereignly accomplishing His will. While we often don’t know *why* things are happening the way they are, we *do* know that God is working. That means we *can* be Christians no matter what happens. In the first 10 verses of chapter 9, the Teacher shows us how it’s possible to live a joy-filled, faithful life even in the midst of *hevel*, of unfairness, and even when facing death.

Ecclesiastes 9:1 - Indeed, I took all this to heart and explained it all: The righteous, the wise, and their works are in God’s hands. People don’t know whether to expect love or hate. Everything lies ahead of them.

We don’t know what’s going to happen. We know *some* things, like that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. But we don’t know a lot of important specifics, like whether we’ll be alive to see it. Will your Thursday be full of delight or disaster? Or will it be a mixture of both? We don’t know.

Here’s what we *do* know: *Your life is in God’s hands*. Not only in the general sense that He reigns over all the universe. Look at what Solomon says here: He specifically carves out the righteous - God’s people. He is our loving Shepherd and we are the sheep of His gentle hand.⁷

Yesterday I saw a video where Ben Shapiro said, “We live in a timeline where God clearly hates us.” I think he was probably being a little sarcastic, but he said it multiple times as he expressed his fear for the election.⁸ I can’t help but note that he speaks and feels as someone who has *rejected* Christ as Messiah. Someone who turns away from God’s revelation.

But God doesn’t hate us. And we can be hopeful because that the righteous are safe in His hands.

That doesn’t mean believers won’t experience problems or suffering. The Teacher is about to make the point that everyone on earth is subject to the same effects of time, death, and chance. But rather than being *frustrated* about the mysteries and disappointments of life, we can remain hopeful and joyful and confident in our lives.

⁴ Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance*

⁵ Walter Kaiser *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*

⁶ Job 28:12-13, 23

⁷ Psalm 95:6-7 (KJV)

⁸ <https://x.com/realDailyWire/status/1853588041178517718>

Ecclesiastes 9:2-3a - ²Everything is the same for everyone: There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As it is for the good, so also it is for the sinner; as it is for the one who takes an oath, so also for the one who fears an oath. ³This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone.

The one fate he's talking about is physical death. That's *always* what the Teacher returns to, because as a self-centered secular humanist, that's the end of the line. And, as usual, he's incredibly upset by the fact that there's no apparent escape from the grave. Whether you're good or bad, clean or unclean, honorable or dishonorable, everyone has a date with death. *All of us are dying right now!*

The Teacher thinks this is unfair. Since God exists, shouldn't making the sacrifices count for something? Shouldn't religious activity get people an exemption from death?

It *does*, but not in the way the Teacher wants. You see, a real relationship with God makes all kinds of difference. But the differences are *internal* and *eternal*. The Teacher wants *external* and *temporal* differences. He wants to keep living *this* life. He wants to find human experiences to fill up the void in his heart. But that fulfillment cannot be found under the sun. It can only be found in eternity.

Faith in Christ is not about getting external, temporal things. It's not about being healthy and wealthy all the time in *this* life. It's about the internal transformation as God bears spiritual fruit in us. It's about the *eternal* value, the *eternal* advantages.

Meanwhile, we live on *this* earth for a time. As we do, "Everything is the same for everyone." That doesn't mean we all experience the same things, but that the same rules apply to everybody. We're in a world that is wrecked by the presence of sin which has brought death to every corner of the cosmos. This universe is spiraling down the drain to destruction. But God reaches down to save, reaches down to sustain, reaches down to make beauty from the ashes. But death still applies to the people of the earth. God *has* defeated death and He *will* cast death and hades into the Lake of Fire one day. But for now, we live in a storm of sin and we are headed to the end of our mortal lives.

Ecclesiastes 9:3b - In addition, the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live; after that they go to the dead.

Death isn't the only problem in this world. We see here that life, too, has been infected by the toxicity of sin. It leads people into lives of "moral wildness."⁹ This is why we shouldn't focus all our efforts on patching world systems. We should focus on healing hearts. If we only work to make systems better - to solve temporal problems with temporal solutions - it will invariably come undone because the underlying condition of human hearts is evil madness.

Instead, we should work in the power of the Gospel that brings people from death to life. Power that transforms mad kings into evangelists. The power that changes the world.

⁹ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

Ecclesiastes 9:4 - ⁴ But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion.

From this verse comes the often quoted maxim, “While there’s life, there’s hope.”

Most people are generally hopeful that things will work out in the end.¹⁰ But what is your hope built on? A lot of people hope in the “I’m a good person” idea. That when they die, there will be a scale and all the good things they did will be on one side and all the bad things on the other, and the good will outweigh the bad. What a *stupid* hope! You’re going to be disappointed.

A lot of people hope that death is just the end, even though their own hearts betray them with the gnawing suspicion that death is *not* the end. Their hope is built on *hevel*. Wisps of smoke.

Our hope, on the other hand, does *not* disappoint. It the anchor for our souls. Our hope is firmly rooted in the justification by faith, in the grace of Almighty God. Fastened to God’s unfailing love that is poured out in our hearts. Our hope is real and secure and adamant.

Ecclesiastes 9:5 - ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead don’t know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten.

The Teacher is *not* denying an afterlife. He believes in a future judgment.¹¹ But the fact of the matter is that these Old Testament believers didn’t have as much revelation as we have. They weren’t exactly sure what to expect after death.¹²

The point Solomon is making is that you have *this* life to earn a reward. The problem is, this life is fleeting. At the same time, it’s incredibly important. Your life is not a mistake. Your life is incredibly valuable. As is the life of your neighbor. We must preserve the value of life in our hearts and we must recognize that how we live has monumental, eternal impact.

So many people live out their lives totally distracted and deceived by the enemy, doing all they can to ignore death or put it out of their minds until it suddenly ambushes them. We need to spread the word that there is an antidote to death. That there is a way to take all its sting and all its victory and it is *only* through faith in Jesus Christ, the King of Life.

Ecclesiastes 9:6 - ⁶ Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun.

We get one life on this earth. There’s no purgatory. There’s no reincarnation. There’s no time machines to do it over. This temporal life is passing quickly, but in it we are locking in eternal

¹⁰ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 12:14

¹² Frank Gaebelien, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

absolutes. Our eternal home. Our eternal rewards. From the Teacher's perspective, death is the most significant moment in life and we're all dying. So what kind of death are we living out? Are we living out a death *in* Christ or a death on the run from Him?

Love and hate here can also refer to passions.¹³ What are we passionate about? What are we filling our days with? Spending our lives on? Casanova had a great passion for women. But his passions were worldly. They led to perversions. Scandals. Disgrace. Looking at our passions - would our memoirs sit on the shelf next to Casanovas or someone like Corrie Ten Boom's?

So, Solomon's first conclusion is that we know much less than we like to think. His second is that what we *do* know is that death is coming. In verses 7 through 10 we have his third conclusion, which is how to live life in light of what he's discovered.

Ecclesiastes 9:7 - ⁷Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works.

That "Go" can be translated, "Come on!"¹⁴ It's an urgent summons to action.¹⁵ The Teacher says we *must* live joyfully. And he'll then point to joy in daily life, in marital life, and in your work life.

Bread and wine refer to life's staples.¹⁶ Regular, day-to-day enjoyment of the gift of life God has given you. Philip Ryken writes, this is not to live a life of *guilty* pleasures, but *Godly* pleasures.¹⁷ That we seek joy where it can be found.¹⁸ The beauty of creation. The gratification of a meal. The cheer brought from a favorite song. God gives all sorts of gifts in ordinary life for our enjoyment.

Some Christians tend to think that the more somber we are, the better. That deprivation equals holiness. But that isn't true. Again, we're not talking about living a Casanova life. But neither should we think an ascetic life is what the Lord wants. James Smith points out that asceticism only intensifies the gloom of this world and all its problems. *"That gloom, however, can be dispelled by resolving to enjoy all the gifts of God."*¹⁹

The Teacher says your works are already accepted by God. The verb he used there often referred to God's divine pleasure at the sacrifices in the Temple.²⁰ That doesn't mean anything you do will please God. But, as we walk with God doing the things He's given us to do, then we please Him.

Ecclesiastes 9:8 - ⁸Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head.

¹³ Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁴ Kaiser

¹⁵ Eaton

¹⁶ Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

¹⁷ Ryken

¹⁸ Iain Provan *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

¹⁹ Smith

²⁰ Roland Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23a: Ecclesiastes*

Is this a “let them eat cake” moment? No. In this time, white robes symbolized celebration and festivity.²¹ It’s about *attitude* more than *attire*. Don’t live your life in sackcloth.²² There are times of mourning or repentance or discouragement, but let those be the exception, not the rule.

In Psalm 45 we read that God anoints us with the oil of joy. In the New Testament the Lord gives His people white robes of righteousness. That’s the reality of our lives. If we don’t live in that reality, it’s a problem. In fact, when writing to the church at Sardis, Jesus said that there were a bunch of people there who had a reputation for being alive, but in reality they were dead. And He said, “But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy. In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.”²³ We’re called to live the life Christ has given us. White robes of righteousness, anointed with the oil of gladness. Conducting ourselves as joyful people.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 - ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun.

Marriage was the first institution and relationship that the Lord established on the earth. The Bible is clear that not everyone needs to get married. If God calls you to singleness, that’s not worse than being married, nor is it better. But the vast majority of us are going to be called into marriage. And marriage is meant to be a *great* blessing to us - a thriving, cooperative relationship based on *love*. Solomon wrote this when most marriages were arranged. Here he says, “What God wants is for you to enjoy life with the wife you *love*.” And we see that God has an opinion about *who* you marry. He has a specific portion, a specific person in mind for you. And He matches you for just the right fit. And when we allow God to lead us in this area of our lives, the result is wonderful. Because he brings us to our helper so we can face the struggles of life together.

Enjoying here isn’t only for you. *“In combination with ‘love,’ it seems to have the connotation of keeping one’s marriage ‘alive and happy,’ not allowing it to become ordinary and routine.”*²⁴

Ecclesiastes 9:10 - ¹⁰ Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength, because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Sheol here refers to the grave, not hell. Again, the Teacher isn’t saying there’s no afterlife or that when we die we go into soul sleep. Jesus echoed this verse in John 9 when He said, “We must do the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.”²⁵

²¹ Ryken

²² Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

²³ Revelation 3:4-5

²⁴ Henry Morris *The Remarkable Wisdom Of Solomon*

²⁵ John 9:4

The message is: This life matters. What you do matters. The work of your hands and the words from your lips. Life is extremely consequential, *but* it's also hevel - fleeting. And we live it out in a frustrating world that is dominated by sin, by suffering, by randomness, and difficulty. Knowing what we know, let's live life on purpose with purpose.

Casanova reportedly worked 13 hours a day trying to complete his 12 volume memoir. A self-important record of his sinful excesses, crimes, and selfishness. What a waste of work. What a waste of the gift of life God gave to him.

You are dying. John Oxenham wrote, "Death begins at life's first breath, [but for the Christian] life begins at the touch of death." In this mortal world, we are living out our death. It's an extremely important life, full of consequence and opportunity and worth.

As we live, let's be a people of lively hope. Listen to what the Teacher has learned. Don't let the mysteries or frustrations of life rob your joy. It doesn't mean we have to walk around with fake smiles on our face. But, as we face each day, we can do so with a special knowledge. Solomon said that the living know that they will die. Well, as Christians, we are the dying who know that we will *live*. We're going to live forever with the Lord, where He will reward us for the lives we lived here under the sun. And we know that He is sovereign and that He has our lives in His hand. We know He gives us innumerable gifts to not only endure life but to *enjoy* life. Because of these things, we can walk through life in hope, approved by God, and entrusted by Him with the Gospel and with so many other gifts. And not only can we enjoy this life He's given us, *He* enjoys it when we receive these gifts from His hand.

It's never too late to take this gift from God and use it the way He intends. I've dumped a lot on Casanova tonight, but let me close with this: At the end of his life, he turned to the Lord. Multiple witnesses record that his last words were, "*I have lived as a philosopher and I die as a Christian.*" The first road he took led only to sorrow and ruin. The high road of heaven leads to life everlasting, life more abundantly.