

The Fate of All

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone, and if you have your Bibles there with you, it would be great if you could turn back to Ecclesiastes 9, verse 1 to 12. Well, I'm sure all of us have something in life which we avoid and push to the future, even though we know it's unavoidable.

So for many, it's the dreaded tax return, unless you're in line for a healthy refund. If you were here today, I was going to ask you to put up your hands and offer, when the longest you've gone, trying to avoid doing one.

For others, it may be that working with children check email that Tim sends, which you, again, ignore until Tim sends that reminder.

Now, for me personally, it's the annual doctor's or dental checkup. You see, I'm getting to the age where every time I go, they seem to find something wrong.

Well, each of us have our individual top avoidance item, don't we? But I think what's common to all of us is the avoidance of death. None of us want to face it anytime soon, and yet, deep down, we all know it's coming, sooner or later.

[1 : 19] And for some of us, it's probably hit close to home already. We may have battled current or past illnesses, or we may have lost loved ones.

So whereas last Sunday, sin was the cause of life's problem, today, death is. They're related, of course, as the wages of sin is death.

But the latter presents its own set of challenges for life as well. In addition to sin, death casts its own huge shadow over life itself.

So we begin in chapter 9, verse 1, where the teacher reminds us of death as the great equalizer. So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands.

But no one knows whether love or hate awaits them, or share a common destiny. The righteous, the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices as those who don't.

[2 : 25] As it is with the good, so with the sinful. As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun.

The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live. And afterward, they join the dead.

Now we have to actually wait until verse 3 before the teacher refers to death explicitly. But up to that point, it's euphemistically referred to as a common destiny, shared by all.

All, overtaking all. Still, it's the elephant in the room. And his point is, death awaits us all regardless of who we are, good or bad, clean or unclean.

And here I think perhaps he's talking about Jew or Gentile. And regardless of what we do. Nothing makes a difference. We all die. In fact, as we saw last week, the righteous might even die earlier.

[3 : 32] Perhaps, as a result, sin runs amok. If doing good made a difference, perhaps it might incentivize us not to sin. But if that's not the case, then why bother?

Nothing constrains an individual to not be selfish. And therefore, they let their sinful desires of the heart run well. The fear of death ought to have a bearing on life.

But it doesn't. And so here we can imagine the teacher looking out on the world in exasperation and saying, Hey everyone, life is short. We're only here for a while.

So come on, let's use it for good. Let's make the most of it while it lasts. But no. Largely, people are selfish. Living for their own pleasure.

Chasing the desires of their hearts. Not caring much for the harm that they cause others. And yet, even as the teacher laments about life, flawed as it is, he still concludes, verse 4, that it's better

than death.

[4 : 37] Anyone who's among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten.

Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanished. Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Over and over, we're reminded that everything under the sun is meaningless, a vapor.

We've seen that throughout the book. So why try so hard? And yet, even though life under the sun is full of evil, it's still better living than dead.

Better to be a live dog or a poor creature on earth than to be a majestic creature like a lion, but dead. Imagine the poor peasant standing by the side of the road while the funeral procession of a royal monarch, a king, passes by.

Now, would that poor peasant want to trade places with the corpse? Not many would, no matter their circumstances. For where there's life, there's hope, isn't there?

[5 : 50] Things could get better. Fortunes could change. But death brings finality. There's no further reward, no chance for relationship, whether to love or even to hate.

No chance to make a difference, even in this imperfect world. Now, the teacher then offers his solution in verse 7.

But before we turn there, let me cover one other aspect of death, which he covers right at the end in verse 11. So we'll go there to the end and then come back. So here, verse 11, death is also a great disruptor.

Why? Because it can come at any time. So we read, Again, it doesn't matter what you do.

You can plan for death, but in fact, the teacher, someone who believes in God, and hence his sovereignty, he says that, yeah, you can plan for death, and yet it's almost as though it was luck, isn't it?

[7 : 18] The timing of anyone's death. It's a rather surprising admission. He almost says it's a game of chance. No one knows they're ours, even though we all plan against it.

And that's true for us, isn't it? We know that death could come at any hour, and yet, if you look at our society, so many people go into financial or retirement planning, don't they?

All built around the likelihood of not dying young enough. Now, I'm not saying we don't put anything into super or things like that, but the truth is, no one can predict when death will befall us.

In fact, we can't even determine how we die. We like to think we go in a comfortable way, perhaps in our sleep, surrounded by loved ones, but no amount of money or planning can guarantee that, can it?

Now, like most of you, there are still things I like to do before I die, like see my daughters finish school and doing well in life. It would be good, too, to see how the partnership at St. John's progresses.

[8 : 30] And Alyssa and I would probably like to do and see things once we retire from full-time work. Of course, we still have to decide which things we do, whether it's things she likes to do or whether I like to do.

But there are many places that I'd still like to visit in the world. Top of the list would be to have sushi in Tokyo, or to walk the streets of Jerusalem in a Holy Land tour.

But whether any of these wishes will be fulfilled is really out of my control, isn't it? There's times that I would buy my daughters a tub of their favorite ice cream and tell them that they have to make it last for the rest of the month.

Now, there's two types of responses to that. Either they could really savor it slowly, eating one scoop at a time per day, or get as much of it right now before the other sister gets to it first.

But either way, they know that once it's gone, it's gone. And so I think this is what drives the teacher's response in verse 7. Knowing that he's only got one life, and not knowing how long it will last, he thinks the only thing to do is to enjoy it as much as he can while it lasts, and perhaps to do it as quickly as possible.

[9 : 55] So verse 7, Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.

Enjoy life with your wife, with whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun, all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life, and in your toilsome labor under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither work, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom.

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. That seems to be his vibe. This is as good as it gets. Make the most of your life now, because once you enter the realm of the dead, there's neither working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom.

It's a rather hedonistic approach, isn't it? And yet again, you have to say, it makes some sense of logic, doesn't it? If this life is all there is, and there's no escaping death, then yeah, get the most out of your life now.

[11 : 08] Make the most of a bad situation. And in fact, there's even a celebrity preacher that wrote a book about this. It's on the screen. I wouldn't name him.

But in fact, and in fact, even the Apostle Paul seems to say this in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 32. For there we read, If the dead are raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

Except, Paul's actually saying the exact opposite, isn't it? Because notice the if at the start. If the dead are raised, if the dead are not raised, sorry, then let's eat and drink.

And of course, as Christians, that's exactly what we believe, don't we? That death is in the end, that we are raised. Now, we can forgive the teacher for not knowing much about life after death, because the Old Testament doesn't say much about it.

Rather, it's only when Jesus comes that he teaches us clearly about the reality of heaven and hell beyond life, of judgment for all, of gnashing of teeth for many.

[12 : 24] But more importantly, Jesus also offered us clear hope of life back in the garden. Not the original garden of Eden, but new creation, something better.

That's when our best life will be, isn't it? Not now, but then. So in John 10, verse 10, Jesus promised, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

Now, how does Jesus offer this life? Well, he says so in the very next verse. I'm the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And so, just like last week, Jesus' death solves not only the problem with wisdom, but also the problem of our death as well. This life to the full Jesus offers isn't merely a longer life in this broken world, but life beyond death.

It's where there's a perfect world for eternity. Just as we hear in that famous verse of John 3, verse 16, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

[13 : 42] And that changes the equation dramatically, doesn't it? Death is no longer that great equalizer that we think. There is life beyond death.

And we don't even have to work for it, do we? Because the wages of sin has been paid by Jesus.

And yet, that doesn't mean that in this life, then, it's eat, drink, and be merry.

It's not, no worries made, you'll be saved regardless. Rather, it's only through believing in Jesus that we have this eternal life. So what matters then is faith in Jesus.

not good works or achievements, not making the most out of this life, but rather trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, we've had many adult baptisms at our church over the years, and each time is such a great joy, isn't it, to hear their testimony. Now, each individual has a different story, but the common thread through them all is their realization that their sins have been forgiven.

[14 : 55] The huge burden that takes off their shoulders when they know this, as they realize that the sentence of death has been lifted from them. It's a life-changing moment of freedom, isn't it, for the new Christian.

So yes, we will still have to face death, physical death, but death has lost its sting. Our fear of it is taken away. And we know that even as we come before God's throne after we die, there's no fear of judgment at that point either because Jesus has vindicated us.

And so the thing that all humans rightly fear ought not to be death itself, but actually the judgment that comes after. And for us who have put our trust in Jesus, that's no longer something we need to fear either.

As Jesus says in Matthew 10, verse 28, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Well, because of the blood of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of God's judgment, do we? And so amazingly, once this fear of ultimate judgment is gone, then it has a huge impact on how we now face life and death, how we live today.

[16:26] We're able to live sacrificially, not needing to satisfy every desire now. We're able to hold on to things in this world lightly, even the loved ones that we've lost, especially if they're safe in God's hands.

Of course, there will be grief and there will be a great loss when they go. And, you know, we have seen, haven't we, the loss of dear church friends over the recent times. And yet, even as we grieve, we do not lose hope, do we? We are not ones that grieve without hope. And I have to say, it's evident now, even during the pandemic, that those who know how to die well in the Lord don't live with fear in their lives.

I see them, that they're not reckless or anything like that, not oblivious to the risk, and yet, they don't allow the virus to stop them from loving God, to stop them from serving others.

For them, the virus, yeah, it's serious, but it's just like every other, you know, life-threatening thing in the world. But they no longer fear death, and therefore, they don't allow these things to overwhelm them.

[17:42] There's a quiet assurance in how they live their lives in God's hands. So they say to the teacher, no, it's not chance or luck, but God's sovereign will that will decide when we're called home.

And if God should decide it's time, then he's simply calling us to glory anyway, isn't he? Something much better than life on this earth.

And so they get on with serving God, even in the midst of life's struggles and frustrations. And they realize that even though they may be aging, as Paul says in our second reading, wasting away outwardly, yet inwardly, they are being renewed day by day, growing in faith and hope and assurance, as they realize that their momentary troubles are building in them an ever-growing weight of glory that is theirs and will be theirs in full at the coming of Christ Jesus.

Well, let's come back to Ecclesiastes because what then are we to make of the teacher's exhortations in verse 7 to 10? Well, I think as we read them, we're now able to understand it in a different light, in the light of Christ.

So, go eat your food with gladness, drink your wine with a joyful heart for God has already approved what you do. Yeah, sure. It's okay to enjoy what God has given you.

[19:12] Not because food and wine are the things that bring us joy, but because they are indication that God still loves and cares for us. We don't need them to know God loves us. The greatest sign of that is the gift of His Son and His death on the cross.

But, if God has saved us for eternity in Christ, then we shouldn't be surprised if He also cares for us in this life too, should we? Or, verse 9, enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun.

Again, if marriage is something God has assigned to you, then, yeah, love your wife, love your spouse, and enjoy married life. But marriage isn't something you need to find joy in life because our time under the sun would soon pass anyway.

Yes, this life is but a vapor, but as long as God has given it to us, then let's live it fully for His glory by being thankful in everything He gives us, by using it to serve Him, as it says in verse 10, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

For in the realm of the dead where you're going, there is neither working nor planning, knowledge nor wisdom. It may be short and fleeting, but we can make a difference now which will matter for eternity.

[20:36] A life of faith in Jesus makes that difference. A life of witness to His salvation makes a difference. A life serving others so that they know Jesus makes a difference.

This is the way to transcend the faith that confronts all of us. This is the way to conquer death through Christ. This is the right path to eternity.

And so the question I leave you with is, are you on that path? And I hope and pray that you are. And should you have any doubt about it, then please come and talk to me or talk to Andrew.

I would love to put you on that path or show you the path which is given to us in Christ so that you can live life without fearing death. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that in this short and fleeting life you've given to us that we may live it in faith to your Son, Jesus. Help us to see the eternal glory that awaits us.

[21 : 39] Help us not to fear death through which we all walk to enter fully into. Help us to live by faith and not fear. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen.