

"The Poor Wise Man" Ecclesiastes 9

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Date: 09 November 2025

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- [0 : 0 0] His reading will be Ecclesiastes chapter 9, starting at verse 1. But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.
- Whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.
- As the good one is, so is the sinner. And he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.
- Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live. And after that, they go to the dead.
- But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.
- [1 : 1 0] And they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.
- Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not all be lacking on your head.
- Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life, that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.
- Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in show to which you are going.
- Again, I saw that under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor the bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.
- [2 : 2 0] For man does not know his time. I have also seen this example for wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.
- There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city.
- Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might. Thought, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.
- The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.
- Wisdom is a better weapon of war, but sinners destroy much good. In 2008, on the 100th anniversary of the publication of Anne of Green Gables, the granddaughter of Lucy Maude Montgomery suggested that her grandmother may have taken her own life.

[3 : 48] Montgomery, who had died in the spring of 1942 of what was believed to be a heart condition, suffered from depression. And her depression, in a large part, came from caring for her husband, who was himself a Presbyterian minister, a man named Ewan MacDonald, who became increasingly erratic and paranoid and withdrawn, especially after the Great War, thinking that he, and not just he, but his entire family, was damned to hell.

And there was nothing they could do about it. And he himself was sick and full of fear. And the weight of his sickness and fear caused Lucy to likewise suffer massive bouts of depression as she cared for him.

Now, it's disputed. It's not 100%. But I bring up this story about Lucy Maude Montgomery's death because Ecclesiastes 9 opens up with a question.

It's not really a question, but really, if you read it as a question, it hits at the very heart of our deepest fears.

And the question is this. Is God friend or foe? Is God for me or against me? Does he notice me or am I forgotten to him? You see, for the Reverend Ewan MacDonald, the answer was God is a foe.

[5 : 16] He has forgotten me. I am damned to hell. And that reality completely, completely shipwrecked his life. But for some of us here this morning, that's still a live question.

I mean, we've come to church. We've trusted in the Lord, proclaimed that we are followers of him. But again, the battle rages in our mind. Is God friend or foe? Is he for me or is he against me?

Does he know my name or am I forgotten? The question is found in verse 1, and this is what it says. But all this I laid to heart.

By the way, that all this I laid to heart looks both backwards and forwards. Now, we're not going to get into chapter 8, but feel free to read backwards and consider everything before and after verse 1 of chapter 9.

I'll start again. But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know.

[6 : 26] Both are before him. Does God accept us or reject us? And before you say the Christian pat answer, be real and be honest. Does God accept you or does he reject you?

How do you know? Will we find salvation in him or is this world just littered with so much violence and hatred and evil that the thought of damnation is unavoidable?

Truly, it is one of the most important questions to answer as a mortal person living under the sun. If you are nude or visiting or forgotten this term under the sun, it will come up in our text today.

It is life in this mortal world. It does not look to the world to come at all, but it is what we see and what we feel and what we experience, what we smell, what we taste, what we touch.

So it is an important question and to answer it, the sage will once again explore human nature and the world that we inhabit.

[7 : 31] And he will explore death and dying once again. But then he will move on and take a look at time and chance and how it affects us. And then finally he will look at the volatility and fickleness of human nature and the human heart.

So look with me, verses 1 to 3. We'll read verse 1 again, but we'll continue on to verse 3. But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

Whether it is love or hate, man does not know. Both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.

As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

Also the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live. And after that, they go to the dead. Canada is increasingly a mosaic of beliefs, and increasingly, I would put forward to you that we are becoming even more spiritual people.

[8 : 57] Not necessarily spiritual in the traditional religions, but a spirituality where people believe that there's some kind of higher power, or they'll pray to the universe, or engage in some kind of karmic-like belief system.

They'll look to something more than what they can empirically see or understand. And what unites these beliefs, whether they are traditional religion, or a kind of newer, bespoke religion, is the struggle with life's mysteries.

Especially the certainty of death. And in most faiths, the question isn't so much whether a higher power, or a god exists up there, but whether he's on our side or not.

And even these bespoke or personalized spiritualities, that takes a bit of this and a bit of that, and kind of makes our own version of spirituality. Whatever it may be, the equation remains the same.

If we do better, we gain divine approval, and therefore enjoy a better life. Whatever that version of a better life will be, if we do better, if we are more spiritual, we deserve something greater.

[10 : 24] But this section, verses 1 to 3, it emphasizes that both the righteous and the wicked face the same fate. Namely, death.

And it's not just some of the time, but 100% of the time. In fact, the religious, with their rituals and their sacrifices, you read here the clean and unclean, those that swear an oath, those that don't swear an oath, they're morally upright, they're no more fortunate than those who are irreligious, even wicked.

No amount of appeasing this higher power or God will force him or it to extend our lives by even a single day, let alone escape death completely.

And I'm putting myself into the sage's shoes. Kind of, it's a weird thing for a minister to say, but I'm kind of shelving my Christian belief just for a moment, okay?

I'll get it back, don't worry. I'm just shelving it for a moment. And I think, I'm with the sage, I think this is a raw deal. Okay, I think this, I think he's right when he says this is an evil.

[11 : 38] Isn't the purpose of religious faith and spiritually upright living to gain favor from the divine and transcend the pain of the world?

The sage, again, he is saying that it is an evil. It's an unjust and heinous thing. The sage recognizes this for what it truly is, an injustice on the highest order.

Reflecting on this this week, two names came up. Reflecting on how the evil and the righteous suffer the same fate, two individuals came to mind.

The first is Henry Morgenthau. Some of you may know who he is. He was the architect of the Canadian abortion industry.

He died in Toronto in 2013 at the age of 90. And he was a Holocaust survivor. The second person, also a Holocaust victim.

[12 : 46] This one didn't survive. Her name is Edith Stein. Maybe you've heard of her, maybe not. She was a Jewish woman who came to faith and became a scholar, a philosopher, and a nun.

And she had the chance to escape the Holocaust, but chose to suffer with her people and serve Christ, dying by gassing in 1942. The Roman Catholic Church sees her as a saint.

I'm going to be honest for a moment. Why does one man who dedicates his life, I'm sorry if this is a bit offensive, not to women's rights or women's health, but to industrialized death.

How does he end up in no different of a situation at the end of his life than a woman who would righteously sacrifice her life for the cause of Christ and her fellow Jewish people?

Why? Should her life not deserve a better fate than a mass grave? This was a question we grappled with back in chapter 7.

[13 : 50] It would have been three weeks ago now. Why is there no mortal benefit to living morally good? And like a few weeks back and like this morning, maybe you share with me a sense of outrage.

There's something deeply unjust and unfair about this. Can you resonate with the sage who says this is a great evil? That this earthly life would permit such a reality?

That God would permit such a reality? I'll go back to the first question. Is this proof that God is truly against us? If this is the economy of life that we find ourselves in?

I think we fool ourselves into believing that evil exists only outside and not within.

It is easy to look at someone like Morgenthauer and Edith Stein and be outraged, and I think rightfully so, but evil is so widespread that it doesn't just reside in those that participate in death, but it runs down the human heart.

[15 : 10] And not just some human hearts, but all human hearts. The sage once again asserts that all of humanity is inclined towards evil and selfishness.

Verse 3 highlights this theme of death as such evil manifests itself in madness because we constantly make choices that undermine our well-being. We are expert self-saboteurs.

Sin consistently leads us away from sobriety and wisdom, and it pushes us towards delusion and madness. And I think this delusion and madness really finds its root in thinking that we know what's best, how best to live, how best to achieve righteousness, how to have salvation on our terms, completely apart from God.

And yet, faced with this reality, we are not without hope. We will continue on in verse 4, but I'll just say this. Life is worth living. What comes afterwards, it's so interesting.

You go through a number of different commentaries in your studying, and you realize people can read the same text and have completely different interpretations of it. So, a number of commentaries that I looked at this week actually take the next section as continuing on this descent of darkness, and the sage, he is using a sarcastic voice.

[16 : 39] Something like this, and this is what it says. But he who is joined with all the living has hope. Again, a sarcastic voice. For a living dog is better than a dead lion. And then he goes on, For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they will have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.

Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun. And then, especially this next section, 7 to 10, which we'll read in a moment.

And again, it is read in a sarcastic tone. But I would say this, and I've said this a number of times, that this sage is not a narcissist.

He is a realist. He is sober about the reality of human life. But I think what is said here is the very thing that animates humanity to live another day, to want to live another day.

Which is hope. That life is better than death. If we as a human race lacked hope in a complete way, I think we would cease to be.

[17 : 50] That we would not survive another day, for we would not want to live it. But as fragile and short as this life may be, it is indeed better than death.

You see, life puts death to shame. I mean, it talks about... A living dog being better than a dead lion. We are maybe thinking of pointers and cocker spaniels.

But maybe a more apt way of saying this would be a nasty, mangy rat. Or a decrepit raccoon. The worst bottom feeder that lives, that is alive, is greater than the most regal and noble of dead lions.

Life is precious. No matter the state one is in. Moreover, the sober understanding that death is inevitable, regardless of how pious one lives, it actually helps us to live more piously.

Because it puts things into perspective and reminds us not to take our days for granted. A couple nights ago, movie night, at the Avatar home, we watched a movie called Soul.

[18 : 59] It's a Disney and Pixar movie. It's been out for a few years now. I won't try to give much... I'm fine, by the way, of spoiling movies that are like 10 years old, but maybe you haven't gotten to it, so I'll just try to avoid it.

It's a great movie. It's not a movie, by the way, that you would build kind of your understanding of the afterlife on. But it has a character who...

He has a near-death experience, and by the end of it, he comes back and realizes that every day is indeed a gift and is precious. And I think this is what the sage is getting at.

Whatever your position is in life, whatever situation you find yourself in, being alive is better than being dead. It's better than being dead. So friends, enjoy your life, and this is what I think the sage is getting at.

I don't think this next section is sarcastic at all. I think it is a wonderful, wonderful imperative, and I'll explain briefly why I think that after I read it.

[20 : 06] Verses 7 to 10. Go eat your bread with joy. And drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments always be white.

Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol. That is the grave to which you are going.

Not exactly all sunshine and daisies, but nevertheless, enjoy the life that you have been given.

So really briefly, the sage up to this section has said five very similar expressions about life and the enjoyment of life.

[21 : 10] But in each time, up to our text here in verses 7 to 10, he has expressed it as an observation. So he has used terms like, I've seen it to be good, or I perceived it, or I commend it.

It is only here that the enjoyment of life is given as a command. And in fact, it would seem, especially the second part of verse 7, where it says, for God has already approved what you do, it seems almost that it is a divine command.

There is an emphatic command here that implies God has blessed mankind with good things to enjoy and expects us to do so, to enjoy the things that he's given us.

Even though our life is fleeting and evil and death and wickedness are pervasive, life still has enjoyments. And really, we ought not to look at them with disdain, or, as we've seen in previous weeks, elevate them to ultimate things, but to enjoy them for what they are, as gifts.

Commentators call these sections, and there's seven of them, the Carpe Diem sections, the Seize the Day sections. Although, one commentator, I think, rightly said, rather than Carpe Diem, Seize the Day, it would be better to say, receive the day.

[22 : 45] Receive the day, the blessings and the pleasures that God has given us. But still, let's think about the question, is God for us or against us? Does this commend us to believing God is on our side or not?

I would say we still don't have the answer to that. This imperative is directed to all who are alive, all the children of man who have hearts that are mad and bent towards evil.

So we see here that God grants enjoyment to all. But perhaps it is merely a way to prevent mankind from descending into utter chaos. Maybe it's not an expression of his goodness, but just a means by which we can not become given to all sorts of anarchy.

The sage proceeds next to the section on time and chance. And maybe we will find some improvement and an answer to our question there.

Let us read verse 11 and 12. Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

[24 : 08] For man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare. So the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

This section does not, first off, this section does not deny the practicality of being swift, or strong, or wise, or having knowledge. I think it's really getting at this understanding that these types of things, these good qualities, are not guarantees to success.

Time and chance, cause and effect, are very real forces that are completely outside of our control. How many brilliant, financially secure, financially wise people suffered during the 2008 crash?

Completely out of left field, lost a ton of money. How many athletes trained their entire lives only to suffer a torn meniscus the week before the Olympics?

How does a devastating diagnosis prevent someone from enjoying the life they once expected? Consider, again, Lucy Maud Montgomery's husband, the Reverend Ewan McGregor.

[25 : 34] It was the horrors, the horrors of the great war that left him mentally shattered, causing his entire family to suffer and miss out on what was likely a normal life.

And above all this, death will always come at the most inopportune time. We've talked a bit about maid, we're not going to touch on that, but in general, we don't get to pick the day of our death.

It often comes when we don't want it to come. We don't want to experience the loss and pain and suffering, but it comes when it comes.

Time and chance. This is not a denial of providence, but rather an observation that people, us, are subject to many factors completely outside of our control.

And this, I think more than anything else, really highlights this life under the sun. Even without denying providence, we know instinctively that we are not in control.

[26 : 40] And it is hard not to become cynical and ask, what is the point? Especially if you've suffered loss. Once again, it's hard to see God's goodness towards mankind because our evil corrupts us and time and chance are so unpredictable and often undermine even our best laid plans.

And like it says in verse 12, we are less like captains of the vessel, but we are like fish in the sea. And the net is cast, and no matter how hard we swim, we are captured by it.

We aren't captains, but we are fish. The sage then turns to a story, a parable, whether it is fiction or not, he tells it as if it actually took place, so we will read it as such.

Verse 13, I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it.

But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Pause there, period, the end. Sounds fantastic.

[28 : 00] There's hope. Continues on. Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Look with me again at verse 13. I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. The sage is communicating his amazement at this poor wise man.

He marvels at this situation. This poor wise man who did not use his savvy to muster up an army to oppose this tyrant with his huge forces coming to besiege his city, but rather averted total destruction with wisdom.

It seems that these things happen in fiction, but rarely in real life, because in real life it's actually the strong people that have their own way.

[29 : 20] The wise, poor people, we'll just say the poor people, whether they're wise or not, seldom, if ever, rise above, and whether it be wisdom or sword or whatever it may be, conquer the strong.

However, here we see something very rare. The poor, wise person prevails through wisdom. You see, here we have it. Wisdom prevails.

However, the victory is short-lived because the poor man was not remembered. He was forgotten. And I wonder if, again, thinking about the opening question, does God remember me?

Does God forget me? I wonder if his forgottenness here is a kind of divine forgottenness. For sure it is a forgottenness in the grand scheme of history.

We don't know the poor man's name, but he is forgotten. But maybe there's something more. Maybe he was actually forgotten by God himself. And not only forgotten, but the wisdom he used to prevent disaster became a source of mockery and ultimately, it seems that wisdom did not prevail.

[30 : 34] And all too often, that last word does not go to the wise person or to the wise word, but to the strong man, to the loudest voice, to the sharpest sword. Sometimes wisdom is followed and calamity is avoided.

But more often than not, in our world, in this life under the sun, misunderstandings, offense, and pride rise up and take control. In a world full of noise, it is difficult to hear wise words.

Again, we see the sinner prevailing. So is there a benefit in seeking wisdom and living by it? If the wise man is forgotten and despised, perhaps this is how God, perhaps this reflects how God feels and treats us.

Maybe the answer after this investigation in chapter 9 to the question, is God for us, is a definitive no. And I would say that, actually, that that would be the right answer, if not for the last, if not for this last part.

Because, who does this poor, wise man sound like? Who does he remind us of? So throughout our time in Ecclesiastes, I have used a very short book, not a commentary, it's more like a pamphlet, called The Pundit's Folly by a pastor and theologian named Sinclair Ferguson.

[32 : 08] And near the end of the book, of the poor man, he says the following, quote, God has planted testimonies to his presence throughout life.

There is no safe haven in any part of creation, no exit door through which we can permanently escape from the reality of his creating and sustaining power. The words of chapter 9, verses 13 to 16, read almost like a prophecy.

Whose name most naturally comes to mind when we hear of a poor man full of wisdom who became a savior, but whose life and teaching have been neglected and rejected, end quote.

Of course, it's Jesus. He's the poor man. The sage saw something, saw someone, rather, who was remarkably wise, not just wise in a human sense, but exercised a wisdom that was humble and selfless and ultimately salvific.

My wisdom on my best days expressed to my children or whoever, it might be, there might be some benefit to it, but I have never given wisdom with a purely humble heart that is selfless, that doesn't think, ah, look how wise I am.

[33 : 37] And my wisdom certainly isn't salvific. But here we see just that. A perfect wisdom from a poor, humble, wise man.

The question is, did the sage know that this would be a foreshadowing of Christ? No, maybe, but likely not. But because Ecclesiastes is not some throwaway book in the Old Testament written by a jaded cynic, but rather it is God's word written for us, we can trust that God has, as Sinclair Ferguson has mentioned, sprinkled, sprinkled, just whispers and examples of who he is and what he does throughout the pages, illusions, shadows, trailers, so to speak, of the film to come, of the story to come.

I think, if we ask the question, is God for us or is he against us?

we look at this poor, wise man and we see in him Jesus, God, the Son of God who took upon himself human flesh, lived in this life under the sun, died on our behalf, taking upon himself our death and our sin, defeating the works of Satan, rising again to new life, and we can say definitively that God is for us.

If Jesus is the wise man, the poor, wise man, it means that God in his goodness, he knew our wretched state, he knew that our hearts were evil and our hearts were given to madness and wickedness and he did not scoff but he stooped.

[35 : 36] See, I think our problem, I think my problem is that I think God is the evil, strong tyrant trying to besiege my city, my life.

He is the one that is trying to overthrow the things I want and the plans that I have and the pleasures that I want to enjoy and I'm this poor little wise person.

that maybe has his day in the sun but really and forgotten when the reality is I am not the poor, wise man but it is Christ and the evil and death and all of that the collection of lies and the cynicism of this world, everything that is terrible under the sun, that is what is trying to besiege my life and yours.

And Jesus, what does he do? the wisdom of God, the apostle Paul calls him, has entered into human creation and the wisdom of God who is Christ, Paul says elsewhere, though he was rich became poor so that in his poverty we could become rich.

how does that change our lives if we truly remember that? That God has not forsaken us, that God has not forgotten us, that God loves us so much so that he has numbered the hairs on our head and that every person in here today is precious to him, precious, so much so that he stooped but didn't scoff but stooped so that he could save us.

[37 : 26] How does that change our lives? I think it means that we can take our losses in stride. Not to say that the loss and evil and destructiveness of this life won't hurt but that we know that it can only do so much damage but can never, never, never affect the life to come.

So, I think it also means that we can enjoy this life for what it is and our lives then project to this world that we have put our faith in something greater than the here and the now and I think it's wonderful and I brought this up in a meeting on Thursday that this idea of eating and drinking and enjoying food with the people that we love, this is what the end of the age looks like.

so that as we enjoy the gifts that God gives us, we are also proclaiming that one day we will dine with him and it will be the most lavish dinner and we will have the greatest time.

and that finally we know that although this life is short and full of pain, a greater and more glorious life awaits us and therefore our hope does not have to rest in this life alone.

As we live this way we declare that Christ, the wisdom of God is king and ruler overall. So friends, maybe even this afternoon the lies just will come back like a flood but feast on the reality that God is for you and not against you.

[39 : 13] And when that question comes up, has God forgotten me? The answer to that question in Christ is a resounding no.

You