

The living and the dead

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[0 : 00] We are in Ecclesiastes chapter 9. We're reading the first 12 verses. Ecclesiastes 9, the first 12 verses. Next week we have a visiting preacher. He's not preaching on Ecclesiastes, but the preacher after that, the one who's shown an interest in applying for the position here, he was quite happy to take 13 onwards.

And then when I looked at it, I thought, it's a nightmare. So I've already preached on it, but he's quite happy to give it a go. So we'll sit with the clapometer in a couple of weeks' time, and we'll encourage our brother as he works through, because 13 onwards is difficult to get the theme and what the theme is. This evening's one's a wee bit easier, but not much easier.

So we'll look at verses 1 to 12, Ecclesiastes 9. The preacher says this, whether he's Solomon or not, we don't know for certain. 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. All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. 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 afterwards they join the dead. Anyone who is 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. 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 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 your toilsome labor under the sun.

[2 : 32] 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 working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom.

I have seen something else under the sun. The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favor to the learned. But time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come. As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. We'll end our reading at verse 12. Let's stand and we'll sing.

Your ministry is much appreciated. Turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 9. As we look at this together, we are picking up, obviously, the verses, trying to understand what's happening in this book. As we are beginning to draw close to this, after this, there's only another couple of chapters, and we'll be doing something else. But I've enjoyed this series. I don't know if you have or not. It can be a bit negative, but it's, anyway, it'll become clear as we look at this, why we're studying this. Let's just pray. Our loving Father, we come to your Word now. Lord, we come to a difficult portion of your Word. In many ways, Lord, it's very negative, or it appears negative to us, but it causes us, Lord, to think of life above the sun and not just life on this earth. So, Father, we pray that if we are Christians this evening, that we will rejoice that we're saved. We will rejoice in the knowledge that we have, but we will be able to appreciate, perhaps, the thinking of those who do not know you, where we're able to help them and to appreciate their thinking and to bring the gospel message to them. So, Father, lead us and guide us, we pray. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Right, have passed. Right, we'll do this. My favorite comedian. My favorite comedian. I don't know if you have a favorite comedian. It's hard to have a favorite comedian if you're a Christian.

[4 : 38] There's not many comedians you can actually listen to nowadays in the jokes that they can, but my favorite comedian by far is Bill Bailey. I like Bill Bailey. I think he's a very gifted musician and so forth. But years ago, about 20-odd years ago, this was my favorite comedian, Woody Allen. I really liked Woody Allen. For me, a good night before I was a Christian was finishing on a Friday. There was a cinema that showed a lot of Woody Allen films, and I would go and watch them. What I liked about Woody Allen before I became a Christian, he often looked at life. He would comment on life. He would talk about death quite a lot as well. Here are three of his quotes. They say that if you can laugh at life, it helps you cope. And I think that was his view on life and his view on death, if you could see the funny side of it. And you know one of his quotes, certainly, it's not that I'm afraid to die, he said. I just don't want to be there when it happens. Which I like that quote. Here's another quote. I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather on his deathbed sold me this watch. Which I quite like. And then he says,

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying. Which I thought was very good. And he's not interested in whether he's working behind, he just doesn't want to die. That is the subject of what we are looking at again tonight. Very much the subject of life and the subject of death. And in the book of Ecclesiastes, this passage we read is probably one of the clearer sections on those two topics, on life and death. In chapter 9, the preacher is looking at death and what happens after death. And based on what he thinks, he now encourages us to make the best of this life. So, he's looking at this life and how we can best make the best of this life and his thoughts about the life that lies ahead. And you know that basically, the preacher, he's looking at life, he's tried everything in life, tried to make sense of life, and he comes to conclusions all the way through. I actually enjoy the book of Ecclesiastes. It lets you know how people think, who perhaps have a viewpoint where there is no God. He seems to almost look at life under the belief of God. There is a God, and this is how life is. And if there's no God, this is what life would be like. It's almost like speaking to somebody in the pub or whatever, and just listening to their view about life. Life is like this, what's the point? Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Many people, though they might come to funerals, many people think, well, is there really a heaven? Is there a God? Don't really know. Not really bothered. All I'm interested in is this life. The preacher brings all these things to the fore. It's almost like you're hearing the mind of a non-Christian, thinking, what does he think of life? So, it's good in that way. And we've looked at many things. I won't go back over some of the main things about pleasure and enjoyment and wine and so forth. We've looked at many things, life situations, two are better than one. We've covered many, many topics. But what I want to look at this evening is to remind myself that the book of Ecclesiastes is one book among 66 books. The preacher doesn't try to explain everything. He doesn't have an answer for everything. He's highlighting the problems, and it's left to us to look at the other 65 books, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and we have a fuller revelation than he had, and we can make sense of the problems that he had in life.

I see this, but what is the point? And because we have the rest of God's Word, we can say, let me explain to you what this says in the Old Testament, but especially the New, when we see Jesus. Without Jesus, life makes no sense. What is the point of it all if this is all there is? The coming of Jesus explains life, explains this life, explains the life to come. He is the only one who can make sense of all of this. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and we need to remember this, that without Jesus, none of these things make sense. So, I want to then, first of all, look at three main sections in this passage that we read. So, first of all, the first one is to do with righteousness and wickedness.

We see this from the first three verses, verses 1 through to 3. And in chapter 9, he returns to a common complaint that he has, and it's the common destiny of the righteous and the wicked. What's the point of being righteous? What's the point of wickedness? You just have the same destiny. This is what he says.

But he begins in this chapter, in verse 9, by concluding, you notice in verse 17, the last verse of chapter 8, he said this, In other words, in verse 17, the last verse of chapter 8, he says, God is at work. God does things.

[10 : 01] It's hard to understand what he is doing. And he continues that same theme into verse 1 of chapter 9. He concludes that everything is decided by God. So, I reflected verse 1 on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands. He has a high view of the sovereignty of God, and God is in control. And although there are many things that Solomon

or the preacher didn't understand, doesn't understand throughout the whole of this book, he doesn't give up his faith in that God is in charge. This stays with him throughout the whole time. But there are many things, and you know this as well, you have a strong faith in God, but there are things that are confusing. Why is this? Why is that? Why is God dealing with me in this way? Why doesn't God do this? And he uses the wee phrase here about God's hands. They're in God's hands. Whenever it's a word that's used that attributes a human attribute to God, and it talks about God's eyes, God's ears,

God's hands. And whenever it talks about God's hands, it's talking about his sovereignty. He's in control. He does things. He works things. His love, his power, his supervision, and so forth. It's a metaphor to express God's sovereignty. God really does have the whole world in his hands as we sing.

He is a God who has this small planet in his hands. And the faithful believer knows this. We know more now than Solomon or the preacher knows this. We know that the hand of God is a hand of love. And we already know that judgment does await everyone, and the outcome is not always the same. We know that God has reconciled us in Jesus, that he loves us. The hands of God have been working for your favor and for me. John, Jesus prayed in that great high priestly prayer in John 17, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. John 14, do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will return. I will come back for you and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am. Paul says in Thessalonians, we who are still alive and left will be caught up together with them, the dead in

Christ that is, to meet the Lord in the air, in the clouds, so we will be with the Lord forever. If you're a Christian, that's what awaits you, as made righteous in Christ, trusting in him.

That is, we don't have to wonder about the righteous and the wicked. Do they have the same fate? That is the fate that we know we have. We have the other books of the Bible to make that plain. He did, Solomon, never heard the words of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the teaching of Paul. We have this. We know that this is not the case. He doesn't see this. He doesn't get it. And he's uncertain.

[13 : 30] Look at verse 1, the last part. No one knows whether love or hate awaits them. We know. We know what happens to the righteous and the unrighteous, but he doesn't. And that's why he says in his blindness in verse 2, there's a common destiny. He doesn't know. So, there's a common destiny. As it is with the good, so it will be with the sinful, verse 2. Verse 3, the same destiny overtakes all. Afterwards, they join the dead. He's dealing here with the real issues before God. Oh, that more people would ask this question, would wonder, what happens when you die? At least he's asking the big questions, the big questions about life. Is there life after death? What happens to the righteous and the unrighteous, to the wicked? He never loses sight of this. There is a God, and there is something that happens afterwards. But we know, we know that God's hand is towards us. We are the sheep of His hand.

But it's also a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, Hebrews 10. It's a fearful thing. We will fall into the hands of the Lord. When we meet Him, He will embrace us. We will see the nail prints in His hands. He loves us. But for others, they will fall into the hands of the living God, who have rejected God. That is a different thing. And it's not enough to know that we're in God's hands, everybody in God's hands. We need to know if God's for us or whether He is against us. Is He our friend or is He our foe? The rest of the Bible explains this and how this works. The Bible tells us about the life to come. It tells us about Jesus, the Son of God, who's gone ahead into glory already. He came, He gave up His life. He died on the cross for our sins. He was buried in the ground, and on the third day He rose, He rose to immortality, He brings eternal life to those who are trusting in Him.

And now the promise of every believer is that if we die, we too shall live. That is the most amazing thing. Our belief is in Christ, and we trust in Him. Our life is not a mindless existence.

We won't suffer endless loss, but we are told that blessed are those who die in the Lord. Happy are those. We looked at this in an earlier sermon. That's why you're better to, when you live, you're born to die. When you die, you are now reborn to live. The day of your death in that way is better than the day of your birth, as the preacher mentioned earlier. But we are born again into a living hope.

We rest from our labors. We enter into the presence of God, the fullness of joy. Our bodies will rise, never to die again, never a tablet to be seen in sight. And it's only the beginning. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him.

[16:40] This is what awaits us. We rejoice in this. But the preacher's asking the right question, and he's confused. We know the fuller picture, and oh, that people would ask this. The Bible's very clear, even if the teacher isn't clear. We do not meet the same fate. There is either love, or there is wrath. The Bible is clear. That's why the world needs to hear the words of another preacher who began his ministry by saying, the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news. That's the first sermon, the first message of Jesus recorded in Matthew and Mark.

Repent and believe the good news. The time has come. The kingdom of God is nearer here than it was in Solomon's days. And in many ways, the preacher is right. Remember, he'd said that we have no righteousness. There is no one righteous. He mentioned this in chapter 7. There is no righteousness.

Our righteousness is as filthy rags. And then in verse 3, the hearts of the people, moreover, are full of evil. There is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead.

That is true. Left to ourself, we have not, we cannot gain heaven. We need Jesus to save us and to bring us safely there. So, that is righteousness and wickedness, his thoughts and what the Bible says.

Secondly, he deals with life and death, verses 4 through to 10. The dead, he begins to focus on. He's confronted with his own mortality. He's quick to, most people today don't really talk about death.

[18:26] It's just not something they do. I think it's great if you can get people talking about death. Everybody knows that they will die, even that the hardened, most hard, they know they'll die, but they never talk about it. Woody Allen would talk about it. The preacher talks about it all the time.

He talks about death all the time, mentions this all the time. And what he says in this next section is there is more hope for the living than the dead. Despite the fact that life is hard, you are still better to be alive, he says. And he uses this memorable proverb or a saying in verse 4, anyone who is among the living has hope. Even a live dog is better than a dead lion. It's very graphic.

One thing we notice is coming back to Musselboro is the amount of dogs there is. It must have been COVID that changed things. I used to walk my dog when we first lived here about 13 years ago.

And I only remember one dog, this guy with a dog, and I bump into him with my dog. Everybody's got dogs now. There's so many dogs in Musselboro, at the beach running up and down. They're happy. They're wagging their tails. But in this culture, dogs were looked down upon. I don't know what they thought of cats, but dogs were just. So it's a saying, you're better to have a live dog than a dead lion.

You might not like the dog, but at least alive. What good is your dead lion? It's that. It's a saying as if it's meant to shake you by the lapels. I suppose, yeah, then this lion's dead. We like the lion, but it's dead. What good can it do? And basically what he's saying is as simple as that.

[20:05] You're better to be alive than dead. But he mentions the problems of death here, and he mentions earthly existence dies. Look at verse 5. The living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything. The dead, even their name is forgotten. So they know nothing.

There's no further reward that they won't do. Their times come to an end, and even their name will be forgotten. It'll be carved on a gravestone, and that is all. Look at, he says in verse 6, it's not just a body that dies. It's you who die. It's your whole character. It's everything about.

It says their love, their hate, their jealousy have long since vanished. In other words, it's not just your body that dies. You're not just a flower. You die. John Lowry dies. Everything that John Lowry was, his laughter, his whatever, his achievements, all of that comes to an end. They know nothing. And it says in verse 6, never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. I was thinking of that this afternoon as I was going back over my notes with Alex Salmon.

Saturday morning, still thinking of independence for Scotland, being a part of that, hoping things will happen. The afternoon, nothing. Absolutely. He's not aware of anything. When you think of that, I sometimes think, I'm still seeing things that my mother don't see, mobile phones, things happening.

[21:35] She died a good number of years ago, about 20-odd years ago, maybe 30-odd years ago. All of the things that's happened, she's never seen any of that. World happenings. You don't get, you don't know these things. News, what's happening in the news. Sport. That's not a bad thing, though. You don't really suffer Scotland getting beaten. Steve Clarke still being the manager.

There's a lot can be said for death. We've still got to put up with this. Watching these football scores are determined not even to watch it. Not even know, don't want to know the score. Not interested. I'll watch the England match. Anyway, sorry, I've opened up a salt in the wound there. Anyway, but music, we'll not know what Taylor Swift's going to come up to. We've died. Alex Salmon knows nothing of these things now. His life has stopped. Everything that's happening today, tomorrow, he knows nothing of this. You know everything on Saturday morning, Saturday night, nothing. It's as real as that. It's as sobering as that. And that's why he says the conclusion, at least where there's life, there's hope. When you die, there is no hope, if you have lost, if you have rejected the Lord. And then he talks about the living. The living, he says, he saw that life was very complex, and he wants us to see it too. It's very easy for him to see him just as a gloom and doom merchant, but he's optimistic as well as pessimistic. And you'll have seen this throughout the book. He says all is vanity, but he also talks about joy in life. And he's mentioned quite a few times, enjoy the life that you have. Enjoy this life. Life is bitter, and it is sweet. And he says, and if you fail to perceive that that is the case, you won't make the best out of life. If you go through life thinking life is always to be sweet, when the wind changes direction, and the nights come in, and it's dark, and you aches and pains, you can't cope. But if you realize that it is bitter, and it is sweet, then you can sometimes cope. This is a winter that we're going through, but spring will come. Summer will come. Life might be hard, but there is life beyond the grave should our life begin to ebb away. So what he does now, he looks at a positive attitude to life. We'll go through them very quickly. What kind of pleasures has God given us to enjoy? Food and drink. Now, he's not necessarily, when he's mentioning these things, talking about that we are to enjoy food and drink. We are to enjoy God. We are to enjoy what God gives us. It's this heartfelt joy. Look at verse 7. Go, eat your food with gladness, drink your wine with a joyful heart. When you eat your dinner tonight, I don't know what that is, is it? Toast and cheese. That's an ideal supper for me on a Sunday night.

[24 : 24] Anyway, toast and cheese, Tabasco sauce. Eat that with joy. That's toast, burnt toast. Just love it. Love it to bits. Anyway, has to be burnt. None of this can flash a torch on it. There's your toast.

Something that's been blowtorched. That's enjoyable. There's something nice. Enjoy that. Enjoy your food. Enjoy what the Lord gives. Philip Ryken in his commentary says, As we share table fellowship with one another, as we break fresh bread, sip fine wine, taste all the other good food and drink that God provides, we are charged to receive each pleasure with God-centered joy in our heart, to be grateful what God has given us. Therefore, go and do this. Secondly, appearance. Always be clothed in white. Well, I've failed the test tonight. Clothed in white. White garments were the dress-up clothes in the ancient Near East. Festive occasions you dressed in white. War heroes had victory parades and white slaves on the day they're released would have worn white as well. Priests on the high holy days would have worn white. Ryken says this again, basically, the preacher is telling us to put on tuxedos and evening gowns as we dance the night away. I quite like that. It was quite good. In other words, don't just thank the Lord or eat or whatever, but your appearance as well. Enjoy what God has given you. Eat well, drink well, and dress well with joy. Not only that, smell good. Verse 8, anoint your head with oil. To anoint someone's head with oil was usually to pour some richly scented thing over, you know, Psalm 23, you anoint my head with oil. It was a good thing.

Oil of gladness. In other words, don't just look good, but smell good. And one of the commentators says, these verses are basically telling us, party, party. Make the best of this life while you have it.

[26 : 32] Also, companionship. Enjoy life with your wife whom you love. Let me read to you another quote from Ryken. And he was helpful in this section. Every husband is called to enjoy his wife. This meaning spending time together as friends and all the busy demands of life set aside time to do things together that you both enjoy. It means prizing one another as lovers. Speak terms of affection and get away, just the two of you, to fuel the fires of romantic love. Enjoy one's wife also means valuing her as a person. Listen carefully to what she says without immediately pointing out where she's wrong or trying to solve problems that she's not even asking you to solve until she has been understood.

These are the only, these are only a few of the many things that husbands are called to do to enjoy their wives. Enjoy your wives. Do it intentionally. I think a lot of husbands need to hear that. That's a great challenging quote, isn't it? But it could apply to all friendships. If you're not married, is there,

do you have a close friend, a companion, somebody, enjoy them. Listen to them. Build them up as they build you up. But he's also living in the real world. He says in verse 9 about you enjoying your wife. All the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun. One of the commentators says it's hard to imagine that kind of statement being written on a woman's anniversary card. There you are, happy anniversary in this miserable life of ours as we go through this life together. But he lives in the real world. It needs to be worked at. Relationships need to be worked at and to make them a joy. And the last pleasure is work. Devote yourself. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. You were created to work. Not just because of the fall that we are to work by the sweat of our brow. But God is a working God. He created these. And on the seventh day he rested. We are created to work. It demeans somebody when they're unemployed. They're created in the image of God. He works. They should work. Work is good. And he tells us what we are to do. Whatever our right hand finds to do. That's a great verse for guidance. When somebody says, whatever to do, the Lord will lead you. Whatever your hand finds. Maybe that's what the Lord has given you. Philip Reich can quote C.H. Spurgeon here. He says, in his sermon on this verse, C.H. Spurgeon, quoting the preached on this verse, describes a young man who dreamed of standing under a banyan tree and preaching eloquent sermons to the people of India. My dear fellow, says Spurgeon, why don't you try the streets of us to see if you are eloquent there? And I quite like that. I've had to say that to a few folk.

Now, Pastor Hank, the Lord's calling me to Papua New Guinea. Well, maybe just try these streets here first. Let's just try something in the church first to see if you're actually good at that. So whatever, sometimes we imagine doing something the Lord doesn't want us to do or something that somebody else is doing. Whatever your hand finds to do, maybe that's what the Lord wants you to do.

And he tells us how to do it. Do it with all your might, not half-hearted. That's a challenge, isn't it? Whatever ministry, whatever God's got you in life, it might be looking after a loved one, somebody who's poorly. Are we doing that with all our might? That's what the preacher says. Whatever your right hand finds to do, whatever God has placed just there, right next to you, it's the job you have to do. Do it with all your might. Don't drag your feet. Don't wish for something more.

[30 : 16] Do what the Lord has given. So that is the pleasures. Lastly, time and chance. Time and chance come to all. Once again, frustrations. Frustrations. And what he's basically saying here is, if bad things don't always happen to bad people and good things to good people, verse 11 takes that same principle and applies it to people's talents. And he says that it's not always the fastest, the strongest, the smartest, who make to do well in life. The race is not to the swift. The battle is not to the strong. Food does not come to the wise or the wealth, to brilliant, favored, or less. He mentions basically five kinds of people here. People who are quick, who are strong, who are wise, who are brilliant, who are learned. Smart cookies. He mentions the first two as physical abilities. He says the fastest person doesn't always win, the tortoise and the hare. The strongest doesn't always succeed, David and Goliath. The Olympic slogan, swifter, higher, stronger, isn't always the case in life. And this is what happens. And it's the same with intellectual abilities. The wise, the brilliant. If you saw somebody that's got a superior mind, very clever, smart cookie, you would expect them naturally to think they'll do well in life, they'll get a good job, they'll make a good salary, they'll have a big flashy car, they'll have loads of kids or whatever.

And he says it's not always the way that the fastest, the strongest, the most gifted naturally do not always succeed. In other words, human ability is no guarantee of success in this life. Because he says time and chance happen to all. Time, there's a time for everything. No one knows, verse 12, when the hour will come. He gives an illustration of a fish and of a bird that can be caught, both of them can be caught, unexpected. There are things in life where we may do, well, naturally. At some point, we can fail. Time will eventually catch up with us, we'll get old, our mind won't be as good, or happen to us. We can get caught by life's circumstances. And he's very real in this. And if time, now it's not to say denying the sovereignty of God, God's in control of all things, but things, guys, we weren't expecting this. I shared news of a friend of mine who was doing well, next thing, diagnosed with a better, by the way. But things happen to members of my family, sister, my brother, both of them, different hospitals at the same time. They've never been in hospital their whole life. You never know. Things happen to us unexpectedly. If you have a theology for that, you can cope. You do not know what will happen. Time, chance, happen to us all. The battle is not necessarily to the strong, nor the race to the swift, and the smart whatever. It is no guarantee that we are in

control of everything. So, he says in verse 12, the race is not to the swift. The battle is not to the strong. It is God who's in control. He brings us right back to verse one. The Lord, everything that the righteous and the wise do are in God's hands. That is where we are this evening. Righteousness and wickedness, they do not have the same destination. The righteous are welcomed into glory. The wicked are separated from God. There is life and death. If, like Andy Dufresne, do you know the film, the Shawshank Redemption, he basically says, you can get busy living or you can get busy dying. And that's what the preacher says under life and death. Get busy living. Get, live this life in joy with the Lord. Walk with Him. Praise Him. Thank Him for all He gives you. But recognize things will come upon us. Time and chance happen to all. We'll get older. Things will change. Things can change unexpectedly. But keep this in mind. The whole of these 12 verses is whatever happens, God is in control. We are, our lives are in His hands. And that's exactly where we want them to be.

Let's stand and sing a closing song. By faith we see that...