

Book: Ecclesiastes
Series: Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God
Lesson 13: Wisdom about Death
Text: Ecclesiastes 9:1-18
Date: Sunday, April 28, 2013

Colonial Hills
Baptist Church

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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Next Lesson: Ecclesiastes 10:1-20



TEACHING TIP

Read the passage several times. Read it in several different versions—both literal translations and paraphrases.

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: This last week, a picture was circulating on the Internet of a Boston Marathon runner being wheeled away from the bombings. The caption stated that he had been running for charity to help the Newtown, CT elementary school shooting victims, and having suffered tremendous injury to his legs in the bombings, he may never be able to run again. One man, caught in the middle of two terror strikes.

Illustration: Another story was widely read, too. This one was of a man from Texas who had run in the Boston Marathon and witnessed the tragedy of that bombing attack. Upon arriving back in Texas, he was driving through the town of West when he witnessed first hand the massive explosion at the fertilizer plant. One man, two locations, two close calls.

It was perhaps J. R. R. Tolkien that popularized the proverb, “Out of the fire and into the frying pan.” Such stories and maxims highlight a tension on our planet. It is the excruciating friction between life and death. Every single human to walk this planet has dealt with this tyrannical tension, and history “under the sun” is the record of death’s complete victory. There are only corpses, for every great king, soldier, scholar, architect, religious leader, philanthropist, inventor, etc. has been featured in the obituary.

While over 8 billion people are breathing today in weak defiance of death’s reign, it is only a matter of time before death adds to

its toll. In fact, each day the tension between life and death continues as 300,000+ people are born and 155,000+ people die. The statistics erroneously suggest that life is winning, but don't tell that to the funeral home directors and pall bearers. They know that everyone born in the hospital today will pass through their halls another day.

Indeed, we may cheat death today, but will succumb to it tomorrow. And at times death even seems preferable. What an enigmatic problem, then, is this basic tension between life and death.

It is this tension with which Solomon has struggled at times throughout this book and now addresses again in Ecclesiastes 9. As we have come to expect, though, Solomon's comments, grounded on years of observation and meditation, deal with this tension seriously, but also optimistically. In fact, he suggests that much can be learned from life's friction with death. When we apply wisdom to the topic of death, we will, like Solomon discover that death teaches us three lessons: that life is sour, that life is sweet, and that life should be seized. So, **let us think wisely about death** and learn well its lessons.

LIFE IS SOUR (vv. 1-3, 11-18).


Solomon's reflections trace four ingredients that make life sour.

1. *The finiteness of life (vv. 1, 11-12)*

Read verse 1.

Like a good Teacher, Solomon has first played the role of student, for (lit.) "I gave all this to my heart and explain all this..." He has observed life and reflected on it, and his best attempt to explain its enigma¹ follows. This explanation has two countering points, both of which reflect the finiteness of humanity that we are all confronted with—we just don't understand everything, neither what our present circumstances mean nor what our future ones hold.

First, Solomon writes, (lit.) "I...explain all this that the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God." He expresses confidence in the sovereign will of God, even as he writes with a similar phrase in Proverbs 21:1—"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; as the rivers of water, He turneth it whithersoever He will" (cf. Job 12:10; Psalm 31:5).

 **Application:** From the following verses, what aspects of life's circumstances are "in the hand of God," unfolding according to His sovereign will (Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; 19:21; Acts 13:48; 1 Samuel 2:6; Exodus 4:11; Isaiah 53:10; Amos 3:6 [Genesis 50:21; Isaiah 45:7; Job 1:21-22; 2:10]; Daniel 4:35 [Psalm 115:3])? *seemingly random things; authorities; our daily plans; salvation; life and death; disabilities; Jesus' death; evil things; all things*


Second, Solomon explains that regarding all those providentially-directed happenings, (lit.) "Whether love or hatred—man does not know: both are before them." In other words, we aren't able to predict whether we will experience divine favor or disfavor, prosperity or adversity, "love" or "hate" (cf. Malachi 1:2-3).²

Illustration: It was this sentiment that was expressed in a couple recent Facebook posts I read. One person wrote, "Life decided to kick me in the face." Another expressed, "Life is like cheese. I hate cheese."

So, while we can be assured that whatever happens is in "the hand of God," we just don't know what He is doing or what He will do, and we certainly don't know if, from an observational standpoint, we will like it.

Read verses 11-12.

Verses 11-12 further elaborate on this personal encounter with finiteness. Solomon observes what is happening “under the sun,” and sees that the outcome doesn’t always match the input—“speed” and “strength” don’t always guarantee victory (in the race or battle); “wisdom” and “discernment” don’t always assure prosperity (in food or money); and a sharpened knowledge (“skill”) doesn’t always procure favor (v. 11).

 **Application:** What are some biblical examples of these anomalies—e.g., someone who was swift or strong but did not experience the victory, or someone who was wise and discerning but did not find prosperity? *open discussion (Joseph, Daniel, David, etc.); The clearest example is Jesus Christ, for His inherent strength, wisdom, and knowledge had no bearing against God’s eternal will for Him, and for that we are thankful—had His strength prevailed to coerce God against His will, our salvation would have been forfeited. Biblical history consistently records that the anomalies of verse 11 occur within God’s gracious sovereignty (e.g., Joseph—he was “skillful” but didn’t experience favor, for God was planning something better).*

From a mere “under the sun” perspective (v. 11a), Solomon explains why human calculations are frequently upset. Two factors are at play. First, “time” (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1-11) and “chance” (cf. 1 Kings 5:18) can mess with our calculations (v. 11b). Second, we don’t know when “time” will run out or when “chance” may strike (v. 12a), for God has kept that information to Himself (cf. 3:1, 11). Thus, finite humans may find themselves “ensnared at an unfortunate time” (NET; Heb. “evil” here is not referring to moral evil, but is paralleling the “evil” or deadly net) that “falleth suddenly upon them” (v. 12b). How sour life tastes when we are constantly confronted by our own limitations!



Application: Do you need to adjust the way you view your finiteness in view of God’s sovereignty? Consider praying Matthew 6:9-10.

2. *The fact of death (vv. 2-3a)*

Read verses 2-3a.

We could translate the first phrase of verse 2 this way: “all things [happen] just as to all [people].” This transitions from verse 1 into his main emphasis. It’s not just that all things—“love” or “hate”—happen to all people; but “[there is] one fate” to all men, too (cf. 2:14-15; 3:19). It doesn’t matter if you’re “righteous,” “good,” “clean,” and pious (i.e., one who “sacrifices” and “swears” or makes vows) or “wicked,” “sinful,” “unclean,” and impious (i.e., one who doesn’t “sacrifice” and “fears” or shuns making an “oath”)—“death itself comes indiscriminately to all.”³

Solomon echoes the heart cry of many people when he says in verse 3a that there seems to be a kind of inherent “evil” in this “one fate for all men” (NASB) reality that we experience “under the sun.” Indeed, people’s intuition is sometimes wiser than they know, for death is indeed inherently evil (Romans 5:12ff). But as we’ll see in the next two points, they themselves are actually the cause of this bitter problem.⁴

3. *The fullness of sin (v. 3b)*

Read verse 3b.

Death is inexorable because man is totally depraved. This depravity is total in both its universality (“sons of men”) and in its individuality. “Evil” (i.e., the same word used in v. 3a, thus tying the evil of death to the evil of sinful hearts) “fills” people to their core (“the heart”) during their whole life (“while they live”). “Madness,” those behaviors and ideas that lack insight, prudence, and

understanding (1:17; 2:12; 7:25),⁵ also dominates “their heart.” This is all they know during their life; then, Solomon puts it tersely, “after that they go to the dead” and judgment (11:9; 12:5, 7). We cannot escape death, because we cannot escape ourselves. So, mankind not only lives with the sour prospect of death, but they also live with the bitter poison of sin.

4. *The foolishness of our solutions (vv. 13-18)*


When we skip to the last section in the chapter, we discover yet another manifestation of the sourness of life. It is this—just when we find a mitigating factor (Kidner—something that helps alleviate life’s sourness), in this case, wisdom, we forget it or reject it to our own hurt. This is how we solve our problems “under the sun” (v. 13a).


Solomon was greatly impressed (“it seemed great unto me,” v. 13b) by the story of a “little city” with only a “few men” that found itself besieged by a “great king” with “great bulwarks” (v. 14). However, this meager city had a “poor wise man” whose “wisdom” could be a help in this situation. Now, verse 15 can be translated a couple different ways—either (1) the poor man’s wisdom did deliver the city, but he was quickly forgotten and even despised and unheeded (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, NIV); or (2) the poor man’s wisdom could have delivered the city, but no one listened to him (NET, NASB margin; NBC, Eaton). While both are plausible, and the sense isn’t really altered that much, verse 16 seems to argue for the second reading.

Solomon witnessed a possible solution being overlooked by the people; so, he concluded that while “wisdom is better than strength” (i.e., for it could have delivered the city from their strong enemy and its “weapons of war,” v. 18), it does absolutely no good when it is despised and unheard (v. 16). On the one hand, the quiet counsel of wisdom is better than boisterous shouting of foolish rulers

(v. 17); on the other hand, whatever benefit is offered by wisdom, it can be swiftly undone, for just as one fly stinks up the perfume (10:1), so “one sinner destroyeth much good” (v. 18).

Solomon applies that story to life and parallels the modern man who discovers the God-given help of wisdom to navigate life and accept it with joy, but instead embraces foolishness and the destruction of it. Wisdom could be a help to him, but like the city with the poor man, he fails to hear or remember its counsel. **Illustration:** Instead of taking Tylenol to alleviate the sourness of life’s difficulties and death’s certainty, he’s trusted in his own ability to “walk it off.” Man’s foolish solutions to life’s problems enhance its sourness.

 **Application:** What are some foolish solutions that man considers in order to navigate the tension of life and death? How is the foolishness of those solutions manifested? *open discussion (some of those foolish solutions were what Solomon pursued in the first half of the book—pleasure [2:1-11], work [2:18-26], riches [5:8-20]); Another is certainly evolution, which actually serves only to further highlight man’s foolishness—for while man’s conscience and heart yearns⁶ for ultimate meaning and purpose (Ecclesiastes 1:11; Romans 1:19-20), the evolutionist has chosen a starting-point/worldview that can only end in purposelessness and meaninglessness—thus, he’s effectively shot himself in the foot, by foolishly drinking from a stream of “knowledge” that is dry at best and poisonous at worst.*

 According to 2 Corinthians 4:4, why does man reject wisdom in lieu of foolishness? because he is imprisoned in blindness by the “god of this world” and man’s “evil” heart (v. 3b) causes him to spurn wisdom and embrace foolishness, thus causing him to experience the “evil” of death (v. 3a) and miss any answer to the “evil” of life (v. 12b)



In 2 Corinthians 4:4, what remedy is given for their foolishness? *The gospel—only that message deals with all of the above aspects of evil (depravity, misfortune, death).*



Believer, we, too, can stray from the wisdom of God and trust our own foolishness (cf. 1 Corinthians 1-2). What adjustments do you need to make in order to turn from your foolish solutions to the wisdom of God (cf. Colossians 2:3-23)? *open discussion*

Application: Life “under the sun” is sour. We’ve been confronted with two main problems—the *finiteness of life* (vv. 1, 11-12) and the *fact of death* (vv. 2-3a). When mankind tries to solve the first, his *foolishness solutions* blind him to any possible answer (vv. 13-18). When he decries the evil of the second, he merely looks within and discovers that his *fullness of sin* is the reason for the tragedy of death (v. 3b). Indeed, what a sour existence.

If, however, you fear God through faith in Jesus, then the finiteness of life is controlled by an infinite Father, the fear of death has been defeated by a resurrected Savior, the blinding foolishness has been replaced with the wisdom of the gospel, and the root of sinfulness is being purged through its power. Is life still sour to you? Are you living it in “in the fear of God” or merely “under the sun”?

Furthermore, are you burdened about those who still taste its sourness daily and are sickened by its taste? Does your life radiate a “newness of life” (Romans 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17) that provokes them to rethink everything they’ve ever known about life? Are you engaging people with the death-defying, life-giving message of the gospel to combat their foolishness, blindness, sinfulness, and sourness?

Transition: There is much that can be learned from a sober reflection on life and death. Not only do we discover that life is sour, but we also find that life is sweet.

LIFE IS SWEET (vv. 4-6).

Read verses 4-6.

Before our own comments on these verses, let us listen to Kidner:

[After verses 1-3,] is despair all that is left? Surprisingly enough, man in general thinks not, or the race would have perished long ago. And Qoheleth agrees. Life is decidedly worth living. After all, even at its worst, or near it, it is better than nothing, which is what death appears to be. The robust good sense of verse 4, with its popular proverb to clinch the point, paves the way for a spirited refusal in the next two verses to let death browbeat the living before their time. Rather, let life put death to shame!⁷

Those who are a part of the class of “the living” have “hope” (v. 4a). The verb form means “to trust in,” “to have confidence in,” “to find security in.” This word is used in 2 Kings 18:19 and Isaiah 36:4 to refer to a source of “confidence.” The living, then, discover that while death takes, life gives confidence and security. Solomon then illustrates and explains this general truth.

To illustrate, Solomon quotes a proverb—“A living dog is better than a dead lion” (v. 4b). The logic of this proverb is in its contrast. This dog lacks the power of the lion, but he has life; the lion has the power, but lacks life; thus, in reality, the lion has forfeited everything. While in life the lion may have dominated the dog, in death the lion is put below that dog.

Verses 5-6 explain his point more thoroughly as Solomon relates some of what the dead have forfeited. First, they no longer have any *knowledge* (v. 5a)—the contrast here is slightly humorous: on the one hand, the living have to deal with unpopular knowledge of death, but on the other hand at least they have the ability to think, observe, learn, and know at all, in contrast to their deceased counterparts.

Second, the dead have forfeited their *reward* (v. 5b). No longer are they able to reap what they sow, enjoy the benefits of their labor, or pick up their hard-earned paycheck (cf. 4:9). Third, they have no more *relationships* (v. 5c). Not only does death sever the relationships they loved on earth, but also time erases the memory of them. Fourth, those who have died had their *experiences* perish with them (v. 6a). They no longer have the ability to love, hate, or envy, and the experiences of those emotions is gone. Finally, the dead have relinquished all *ownership* of life (v. 6b), for (lit.) “for them, there is no longer any part/share in anything that is done under the sun.”

Truly, then, life is sweet, for it is incalculably better than death!

Application: These verses simply adjust our perspective. How do you view life? Are you always hung up on its problems, its shortcomings? Or, do you have the wisdom that death brings to enjoy a heightened appreciation for the security, confidence, and hope of life? Are you thankful for life?



How have you been reminded of the confidence-giving nature of life? *open discussion*



How does the New Testament build on this point? How does the gospel climax these thoughts? *The gospel message, climaxed in the New Testament, declares that death actually costs more than what is listed in these verses, for to die “under the sun” is to experience the wrath of God (due to the root problem of the fullness of man’s sin). However, just as we discover an eternal and judicial aspect to death in the gospel message, we also learn of an eternal and enriched aspect to life. God, in the Person of Jesus, entered time and space, experienced the effects of time and chance, and encountered the tension between life and death. God was pleased to have Jesus represent the man “under the sun,” face the full weight of death’s consequences, and rise in order to guarantee a solution to this problem. For all those who will cling to Him as Savior, Jesus is applied as the sufficient Substitute, removing the “sting” of death (1 Corinthians 15:55)*

and offering a new kind of life (Romans 6:4)—“eternal life” (John 17:3; Titus 1:2). Thus, there is no fear in death (Hebrews 2:14-15), for “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54) and becomes the doorway to an even better life (2 Corinthians 5:8)! So, temporal life brings temporal confidence; eternal life brings eternal confidence!

Transition: When we consider the daily tension between life and death on our planet, we are reminded that life is both sour and sweet. Therefore, we respond with a fitting response—life should be seized.

LIFE SHOULD BE SEIZED (vv. 7-10).

Read verses 7-10.

In these verses, Solomon again returns to a familiar solution—enjoy life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20)! Since life is sweet and death is sour, maximize the days that God has given you (v. 9b; 5:18). This is God’s will, based on His acceptance of us (v. 7b; 2:26)⁸ and His portion/reward/gift to us (v. 9b; 2:24-25; 3:13, 22; 5:18-19). Of course, contentment and thanksgiving must be maintained throughout (4:6; 5:12; 6:9), but Solomon commands (i.e., “go”) that we enjoy the following aspects of life.

1. **Festivities (v. 7).**

Solomon writes, “Eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart.” This, together with verse 8, suggests that Solomon is commending more than just the enjoyment of a good meal, but all the festivities of a Middle Eastern feast. While modern day partying is inappropriately based on a godless hedonism rather than a God-fearing contentment, the idea is actually endorsed here. In our Christian communities, we typically talk of “fun, food, and fellowship” (with our friends!) and Solomon responds with a hearty “Amen!”

2. *Comforts (v. 8).*

White garments and an anointed head represented the opposite of grief (2 Samuel 12:20) and were simple comforts in the hot (thus, white garments) and dry (thus, ointment) climate of Palestine. The God-fearer experiences God's grace to enjoy "both [God's provision of] the basic necessities of life and some luxuries God bestows as His gifts."⁹

3. *Family (v. 9).*

Solomon exhorts us to enjoy our family (specifically, the spouse—cf. Proverbs 18:22). He directs us to add joy to our love—having a family whom you love, and enjoying the family that you love are two different things, and Solomon advocates the latter.

Solomon's reasons for this are two-fold: (1) life is "fleeting"—he mentions this twice (i.e., "vanity" is best translated "fleeting," cf. 3:19; 6:12; 7:15); (2) it is God's "portion" to you in this "under the sun" existence—the word "portion" is the same as "part" or "share" used in verse 6b and again reminds us why life is better than death.

4. *Work (v. 10).*

Solomon pats us on the back and pushes us back into our workplace, where he encourages us to show energy in ("with thy might") and find satisfaction from our labor. Again, since "there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave," life is better than death, and work can be one of those enriching and enjoyable aspects of life.



Application: What aspects of life are you failing to seize and fully enjoy as God has graciously planned for you?
open discussion



How do we avoid moving beyond enjoying these aspects to idolizing these aspects? What are some practical ways that we can enjoy these things without becoming dependent upon them (i.e., loving the gift over the Giver)? *open discussion (part of the answer is in remembering that even these pleasures are given by God, may be transient, and are governed by the unknowable sovereignty of God—therefore, when He allows, enjoy them; when He doesn't, still worship Him [5:1-7])*



What signs might indicate that we're no longer gratefully enjoying these gifts with contentment, but worshiping or depending upon them? *open discussion*

CONCLUSION

Our own experience unveils a daily tension between life and death. Indeed, death is the great enemy, but for those living in the fear of God, rightly oriented to Him through faith in Jesus, death has been defeated! Now, as we think wisely about death, its powerless existence can be a source of great instruction. It teaches us that life is sour, thus compelling us to rescue people from its bitterness. It teaches us that life is sweet, thus stirring us with the hope of eternal life. It teaches us that life should be seized, thus giving us fresh perspective on how to live each day.

ENDNOTES

¹ “The ‘all this’ that Solomon ‘reflected on’ is human ignorance of the significance of righteousness and wickedness in God’s sovereign disposition of adversity and prosperity (chaps. 7–8)” (Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 998).

² “Whether we take the words *love* or *hate* here to be a biblical way of saying ‘acceptance or rejection,’ or to have their simple, primary sense, we shall have, either way, only an uncertain answer about the Creator’s character from the world we live in, with its mixture of delight and terror, beauty and repulsiveness” (Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976], 80).

³ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 142. Also, Kidner (81):

If the question [about whether we’ll experience “love” or “hate”] were left exactly poised it would still be unsettling... But Qoheleth now makes matters worse for us by pointing to the one fact that seems to tip the scales decisively against us—always supposing that we are reasoning only by what we see.

⁴ That man is the cause of the problem of death is seen in their heart of sinfulness that leads to such death (v. 3b) and in their heart of foolishness that perpetuates such death (vv. 13-18).

⁵ Cf. NET Bible and DBL. Also, “Also linked with *evil* is *madness*, connected elsewhere with glib frivolity (2:2), corruption in society (7:7), folly (10:12f.), self-justifying disobedience (1 Sam. 13:13) and inclinations to violence (1 Sam. 26:21) or pride (2 Sam. 24:10); its usage suggests, therefore, a moral wildness that is impetuous and irrational” (Eaton, 143).

⁶ This is the right word, for Solomon exemplifies that ingrained longing. Throughout this book, he talks about his own quest and uses many terms to describe his diligent search (1:13, 17; 2:1-3, 12; 7:23, 25; 8:16; furthermore, he has “seen all things”).

⁷ Kidner, 82.

⁸ “The basis of contentment is that *God has already approved what you do*. This almost Pauline touch is the nearest the Preacher came to a doctrine of justification by faith. Man has but to receive contentment as God’s gift (cf. 3:13); God will approve of him and his works. The believer is not struggling for acceptance; he is ‘already’ accepted” (Eaton, 144-45).

⁹ Glenn, 999. Notice the phrase, “Let thy head lack no ointment”—the idea is to spare no use of ointment. Solomon is certainly enjoying his God-given luxuries.