

Hope PCA Sermon: May 5, 2024

"Life on the Way to the Grave" (Ecclesiastes 9:1-10)

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Well, this morning we're returning again to the book of Ecclesiastes, getting closer and closer to finishing this one. This morning we're up to chapter 9 verses 1 through 10. Kind of a little theme that's been building here in this part of the book. If you're able, and we would appreciate you standing in honor of the reading of God's Word this morning. Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verses 1 through 10. The very living Word of our living God. The preacher continues:

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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

Thus far the reading of God's holy, infallible, and inerrant Word. May he write it upon our hearts this morning. Please be seated. Let me pray for us as we come before the Word.

Oh God, our Father, this is your Word to us. May it be a Word to us here this morning. Speak to us, oh Father, guide our thoughts, guide our hearts, and may this bear fruit in the actions of our lives. We thank you for your Word. Instruct us now, we ask, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Have you ever heard of something called the Philosopher's Stone? Some of you who've read a certain book series have. Twenty years ago, though, it was still a pretty uncommon obscure term in America, well known again to certain avid fans of that certain series of books. The

American editors, when it was published here, didn't know their history, didn't know what the term meant, so they changed the title to "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" instead of "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone". Sorcerer's Stone doesn't make sense historically. The Philosopher's Stone was actually a genuine scientific study for a great period of time in the Middle Ages. None other than the famous Isaac Newton was a student of the Philosopher's Stone, trying to figure out the mystery of it. What was it? Medieval scientists believe that if such a stone could be made through scientific processes, that one could take a simple base metal like lead and turn it into gold. Powerful, if that can be done. Some in the Middle Ages even believed that such a stone created through various chemical and physical processes could bring about such a transformation that it could even produce a special potion or elixir that would give a person eternal life. And so they would experiment with different chemicals, different processes, heat, cold, pressure. How can we make this mysterious, elusive stone?

Christians, various Christian theologians and teachers, some of the standard, typical people you might know (although it tended to be more of the mystic types of Christians and teachers) took this idea of a philosopher's stone that could do these kinds of transformations and made it an allegory of the Christian life and of salvation. Sinful mankind (lead, figuratively speaking) is turned to gold by the work of Christ. By the work of Christ and his church, the metaphorical stone. It made the basis of a lot of literature and poetry and stories that were passed down in an elaborate kind of structure. Now eventually it was discredited by modern science as it deserved to be, forgotten by history until J.K. Rowling revived it in her series about Harry Potter.

It's interesting, at heart, the idea of this stone and the rather obsessive quest for it by otherwise very intelligent men and theologians and scientists represented two fundamental desires of the human heart: I want life and I want wealth. Long life, even eternal life, and I want to be rich. No more death. If I can create this mysterious stone, I can cheat death. I can have no lack of anything. All the money, all the resources, all the funds that I would need. And of course those two desires are just manifestations of an even more basic desire: I want to control my own destiny. I want to determine my own path. I want to have the power to control my life. In effect, to be my own god. So that takes us right back to the Garden, doesn't it? Adam and Eve: you shall be like God.

What the preacher in Ecclesiastes 9 has discovered and shares with us here are a couple realities that just blow up these false desires in our souls, in our hearts, and in our minds. Two fundamental realities that he points to: It's God who has the power, not man, and death comes to everyone. Everybody dies. But he has a response that he gives us as well. If these things are true, enjoy what you have. This follows on what we talked about last time we were in Ecclesiastes, where he said, "I commend joy." Enjoy what you have, he says. Now those aren't new ideas from the preacher here in Ecclesiastes. We've heard these things before. I want to explore those ideas as we work through the text.

A little bit of a review before we get there. How does he come to this point? If we go back to chapter 7 verses 14 through 29, there the preacher was seeking wisdom, but instead he finds the pervasiveness and the sinfulness of sin. Key phrase there was, "men have sought out many schemes." This is the nature of mankind. In chapter 8 verses 1 to 9, he gives us wisdom about authority, power, even human government, and the reality that man has power over man to

his own hurt. The last time we were in chapter 8 verses 10-17, he saw the injustices of life, but still calls upon us to enjoy life: "I commend joy." Be thankful for whatever God has given to us. Those topics lead to now chapter 9 this morning. God is sovereign, death comes to everybody, and yet the response is still joy. Enjoy what has been given to you. Be thankful. Again, themes that have been woven in and out of the text as we've looked at it so far, but now consolidated and brought into a general theme about life. If we can think about it this way, life on the way to death, life on the path to the grave. So two realities and a response.

The first reality is there in verse 1: God is sovereign. All the righteous and the wise, all of their deeds are in the hand of God. We talk about God's providence in our confessions, especially the Shorter Catechism Question 11: "God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions." That's a comprehensive statement. All of his creatures, all of their actions. Nothing is left out. Everything is governed by God's providence. But note the character of God's providence that the divines point out to us: it is holy, it is wise, and it is powerful. God himself is holy and so are his actions. God is wise and so therefore are his actions. God is powerful. He can do anything. So the preacher is saying to us that the righteous, the wise, and their deeds are in that powerful, providential hand of God.

Think about this in relation to Ruth we looked at about a year and a half ago before Christmas, and that passage from chapter 2 verse 3, that if we were hyper-literal we might translate it as, "chance chanced" that she ended up in the field of Boaz. Well, the book is full of irony, Ruth, and that kind of language, "chance, chanced", is the writer's way of telling us it wasn't chance at all. It was God ensuring that Ruth ended up in the field of Boaz through his providence. The preacher here in Ecclesiastes might put it this way: Ruth was in the hand of God. Think about John 10. Jesus speaks about all who are part of his flock cannot be snatched out of his hand. No one can snatch them out of his Father's hand because his Father gave him his people. And he says the Father is greater than all. God is sovereign. God is most powerful. And so no one can snatch my people out of my Father's hand.

Now the preacher here in Ecclesiastes, he doesn't know about Christ, who comes hundreds of years later, but the principle is the same. All people, especially his flock, are in God's hand. And as Christians, this is a good reminder for us. This is for us, a reminder. You're like Ruth, you're like David, you're like Joseph, you're like other heroes of the Bible. You are in God's hand. The same hand that held Ruth holds you. The same hand that guided Joseph guides you. God's preserving of his people, his governing of them. So the preacher starts with this positive reality. For everyone who believes and hopes and trusts in Christ for salvation and for eternal life, you are in God's holy, wise, powerful hand. So take comfort in that truth. Take comfort in that reality. It's a good thing. We can rest in it. We can be comforted by it. We can take courage from it. We can be assured by it. There's not a circumstance, there's not a situation, there's not a person, there's not a thing that can take you out of God's powerful hand. His hand is good for the righteous and the wise.

But look at the rest of the verse: "*Whether it's love or hate, man does not know, both are before him.*" There's a reality there and a warning as well. The reality is: it's not for us mere men to know whom God loves or those whom he hates. And the warning is this: without that knowledge, both possibilities are out there. Both may be true. God's providence is secret to him. He knows it, we don't. Therefore, to be in God's hand is definitely good for the righteous

and the wise, but it's a terrible thing for those who are wicked. As Hebrews 10 verse 31 puts it, "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." So while there's comfort in the first part of the verse, there's warning in the second. Again, all who are God's people, those who are the flock of Christ Jesus, are in His hand for our care and protection. But all those who are not are in his hand for destruction. So to consider this morning: who are you? Which would you rather be? Safety and hope is found in Christ and in Christ alone.

But what the preacher is saying to us is outward circumstances don't necessarily tell us whether a person is loved by God or hated by God. It's a terrible way to measure that truth. But more than that, here's the other reality in verses 2 through 6: everyone comes to the same end anyway. He emphasizes this with contrast. It's true for "*the righteous and the wicked*." It's true for "*the good and the evil*." It's true for "*the clean and the unclean*." It's true for the one "*who sacrifices and the one who doesn't*". It's true for the one who swears an oath to God and the one who refuses to do so. The preacher sees this as an evil. The same event happens to all. It's pretty clear what he means by that same event. It's death. He talks about it later. So we shouldn't see death as some sort of, you know, nice peaceful little transition from one state of being to another. Death is horrible. It may happen peacefully, dying in your sleep, for example. But it also may happen violently by some sort of accident or crime or due to sickness or disease of one kind or another. Death is not a release. Death is evil. It's the consequence of sin.

This is why what he said back in chapter 7 is so important about the sinfulness of sin. Sin is terrible. And the consequence of sin is death. Sin is evident in man having power over man to their hurt. Sin is evident in the injustices that he talked about in chapter 8. Again, "The wages of sin is death," says Paul in Romans 6:23. And so he says it's better to live than to die. "*A living dog*", he says, "*is better than a dead lion*." What a contrast there, especially for people in that part of the world. Lions are honored creatures, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, David's symbol of his reign. Dogs are horrible. Dogs are curs. What does Goliath say to David? "Am I a dog that you would challenge me that way? You're insulting me." So what the preacher seems to be saying is that a tough life is still better than death because we're still alive. And that gives us a chance to think about death. to ponder that reality so that we might become wise, so that we might repent and believe.

Again, is that you? Are you in a position in life where you need to consider your life and your eventual death? Maybe you look at your circumstances and they're very unpleasant and you look around and wonder, Why? Why is this going on? Maybe God's trying to get your attention. Maybe God is calling you to consider or reconsider your priorities in life before death comes, because it's coming for everybody. Of course, we all need to reflect on that to one extent or another. So the preacher is calling us to consider, to re-examine. Are we wise? Are we truly wise? Have we turned from sin to faith in Christ? Because that's the only escape. It's the only solution. You're not going to get there by some sort of cheesy religiosity. Not some sort of religion coded in therapeutic language to heal your emotions or your psyche. Death is the reality. Are you a Christian? And if not now, when? We all need Jesus. We need to embrace that reality or die. In Jesus we have life and the promise of life.

Will these realities lead to the preacher issuing a call to action? It's a command, it's an imperative here. "*Go*," he says. It's not a suggestion, it's not pious advice, it's not a theory, it's a command. "*Go*," he says. "*Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart*,

for God has already approved what you do.” Don’t just wallow in your misery and suffering. Don’t let yourself be overwhelmed by the sinfulness of sin, or the power of man over other men, or the injustices of life, or even the reality of death. You have a life under the sun. Enjoy it. Eat bread with joy. Drink wine with a merry heart. *“Let your garments be white.”* Philip Riken in his commentary calls white garments “the tuxedos of the ancient Near East.” They’re dressing up. Put oil on your heads. *“Enjoy life with your wife”*, with your spouse. *“Whatever you do, do it with might.”* Do it with strength. God approved what you do, or God has already approved what you do.

What does that mean? Well, this isn’t a statement about justification or eternal salvation. It’s more in the vein of an encouragement that if we appreciate the things that God has given us, if we’re grateful for them, if we’re thankful for them, God approves of this. God approves of us thanking him. That kind of makes sense. He not only approves of the attitude of thankfulness, but the actions that result from it. So the winemaker can be thankful and can enjoy the wine that gives him a merry heart, because that’s what wine does.

The preacher puts this into four different categories: contentment, comfort, companionship, and the fourth one doesn’t have a C. It’s just work. Contentment, comfort, companionship, work.

Contentment: that’s again the food, the wine, their enjoyment, are pictures of a person’s content in life, eating with joy, drinking with a merry heart. Enjoy good food. Enjoy the food that you like. It’s a gift from God to have things that taste good to us. Ever thought of that? “Wow, this tastes good! What a gift from God.” Let wine make your heart merry. That’s a gift from God. A grateful heart leads to grateful action. And it’s gratefulness to God. That’s contentment.

He talks about comfort: wearing white garments, having oil on our heads, two components of comfort in a hot, dry land such as that of the Bible. The white clothes keep off the heat of the sun, reflect it away from the body. The oil in the hair keeps one’s hair cleaner, but also cools the head. You’ve been in 90, 100 degree weather, you know how valuable it is to have a cool head. Oil provides that. Be comfortable. And if you have comfort, be thankful to the God who gave it to you. Might say here that asceticism is not godliness. Enjoy the things that God has given to you and the comfort that comes in them.

He talks about companionship, and the most important companion we have in life is our spouse. Other people may come and go, but God’s will and plan for marriage, ideally, is that it is permanent. So enjoy your wife, enjoy your husband. Don’t you get tired of hearing people complain about their spouse? Sometimes I wonder, “Don’t you know the gift that God has given to you?” I know they’re not perfect. We men are a bunch of knuckleheads. But don’t belittle them. Don’t put them down. This is a gift from God. Treasure that gift. Enjoy that gift. God has given him to you. God has given her to you. Be grateful. Enjoy life with them. Again, that’s a good thing that God approves of.

And then work: whatever work God gives you, he says, do it with might. Do it with diligence, do it with strength, with purpose, with dedication. I used to hear from one of my old teachers, Peter Drucker: “It’s better to be conscientious than clever”, he would say. Work with all your might. Don’t pursue clever shortcuts. Or as the preacher said back earlier: people pursue

many schemes. Just be conscientious, be diligent, work hard, because you're not going to have any of these things in Sheol, the place where the dead go. In that place, there's only sorrow, weeping, gnashing teeth. So again, appreciate, be thankful for what God has given you and what he's given you to do. Might be in your job, might be at home, might be here in church, in the community. Whatever it is, wherever it is, do it with strength and do it with diligence. Because that demonstrates a grateful heart. Being slothful is not being thankful. Stumping our nose at God.

Now the preacher's not being idealistic here. Remember, this is the same guy who says, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." There is sorrow, there is persecution, there is injustice. Even in verse 9 he talks about the vain life that you live here under the sun. He probably means by that the short life that we live here under the sun. Food and wine might be in short supply for a period of time. We may be hungry. We may be thirsty. We may not have a lot of creature comforts in this life. Circumstances that we're experiencing may be tremendously difficult. We may not have the best marriage or the best spouse. And in the worst circumstances, that marriage may even break irreparably. You might have a lousy job. You might get laid off. You might even get fired. But nevertheless, the command from God is whatever circumstance you are in, be thankful for the good things that he's given to you. You may not have a lot. You may have a ton of things. And if you're like most of us over the course of life, there are times of up and there are times of down, there are times of plenty, there are times where things are seriously lacking. But wherever you are, whatever you have, enjoy it, because God has given it to you.

This passage begins by noting that we're all in God's hand. It ends with a reference to "*whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might*" there in verse 10. We are in God's hand and he does work to take care of all of his people, but he also puts things in our hands to do. He works through us. So we might ask here, what has God put in your hand to do? What enjoyments has he given to you? Do you enjoy them? What comforts has He given to you? Do you appreciate them? What people has he put into your life? Do you appreciate them, especially your spouse if you're married? Do you enjoy life with them, friends, co-workers, whoever it might be? What work has he given to you to do? Do you do it with all your might? We might even ask this question: what has God put into our hands collectively as a church body to do?

As believers, as Christians, we do what we do not because we're trying to earn God's favor. We can't earn his favor. We do what we do because we're grateful to God for what he has done for us in Christ Jesus and the eternal life that he has promised. We might even stop and think that even our ability to enjoy what God has given to us, to not be complaining, to not be bitter, even that ability to enjoy what God gives us is something to be grateful for, because that itself is a gift from God and a measure of how grateful we are to Him. The same end comes to everyone. We all die. But for the Christian, there's hope, resurrection, life in the new heavens and the new earth with the saints and with our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So we can be. Not only can we be, but we must be. We must be thankful, grateful people. Are you a grateful Christian? And are you grateful especially for the gift of Christ Jesus? And if that's so, then we need to show it, and we need to act like it.

Let me pray for us.

Lord our God, our Father in heaven, all these things that you call us to do in your Word we cannot do in our own power, in our own strength, by our own will to make it happen. We need your help. We need your Spirit to enlighten us and your Spirit to strengthen us for the things that you've called us to do. But do, O Lord, put Christ in front of our eyes, that we might always be a grateful, thankful people, and give you the praise, and give you the honor, and give you the glory, that we might find that contentment and joy in life, and even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances of life. You are a great and good, kind and generous, merciful Father. We thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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