

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10:20

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[0 : 00] Take your seats and do turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 9, passage that Paul read for us, page 557 of the Black Church Bibles. And if you need one of those, there's some at the door.

I attended two funerals this week, two funerals, two crematoriums. You know how it goes. There's a coffin at the front and then there are pews where the people sit.

There's the coffin and there's the mourners. And what struck me this time, in both occasions actually, is that the only thing that separates the two, the person in the coffin, the people sitting in the pews, is the passing of time.

That's it. The gap between the seats and the plinth at the front is like one of those moving walkways at the airport. There's an inevitability about you getting from one to the other.

Everyone who's in a seat will one day be in the coffin. Well, that's the happy note that Solomon starts with this evening in chapter 9.

[1 : 10] He reminds us again, beginning of chapter 9, that we can't discern what God is doing in the lives of men and women. We like to think we can, but we can't.

What looks like prosperity may well be a curse in disguise. What looks like adversity may well be a blessing. We can't tell. But we do know that all people, chapter 9, verse 2, are going to the same destination.

It's 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.

Verse 3, the same event happens to all, that they go to the dead. Well, once again, Solomon is taking his big old hand, putting it on the back of our heads, and forcing our faces into reality.

He's rubbing our noses in what is there. And just as he has forced us to see, as we've gone through this book, that there is no gain for us in wealth, in possessions, in wisdom, in status.

[2 : 23] Everything that we have been told in life, in the West, for centuries, well, decades at least now, everything that we've been told will give us meaning and purpose and significance.

Solomon has been telling us again and again and again, it's just handfuls of fresh air. And now he's forcing us to face up to a new reality, and that one is the inevitability of our death.

Every single one of us is going to die. We don't know when. We saw last time that we can't second guess the providence of God.

He has his reasons for taking some people in their youth and others much later. But in the end, we all get there. And because we are no longer in Victorian England, we don't like to talk about such things.

It used to be said that the Victorians talked endlessly about death, but never about sex. But this generation talks endlessly about sex, but never about death. You can make of the truth of that what you will, but Solomon makes us focus on that, which we feel very uncomfortable with, that is talking about our mortality.

[3 : 30] He's forcing us to think about that this evening. But one thing is very clear. One thing is very clear, he says. Those in the crematorium pews, rather than those that are in the coffin, that is us here this evening, those who are still alive, are at a distinct advantage.

Because we can face this reality, and we can do something about it. Look at verse 4, chapter 9, verse 4. 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, and they have no more reward.

For the memory of them is forgotten. He's saying the one who's in the coffin, their race is run.

Their hand has been played. They can't do anything to alter or improve the course of their lives.

They have no more share in this life. We, however, have the opportunity to change our course.

To do something about the reality. To stare at it and to live now in light of it in a way that is wise. That's the thrust of this book, isn't it?

[4 : 35] We've been seeing it again and again and again. How do we live wisely in God's world? And while we have breath in our bodies. While we're in these seats and not in the coffin.

We can make preparations for that day. Country music singer Tim McGraw has a song called Live Like You Were Dying. And the song is all about the things.

It's a bit of a bucket list song. All the things that you would do if you knew that you were going to die. That kind of thing. Well Solomon is saying. Here's what you would do if you knew you were dying. Here's what a wise life facing the reality of death looks like.

Point number one. He says enjoy living in the pleasure of God. Enjoy living in the pleasure of God. Look at verse 7. Go eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart. For God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white.

[5 : 36] Let not oil be lacking on your head. This push towards joy is the heartbeat of the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a thread that runs all the way through.

Despite all the vapor. Despite you could say all the disappointment. It's like have you noticed from the beginning. One thing after another that we think you know in our heart of hearts.

Certainly the things that our culture tells us. If I had more of this then life would make sense. It would join up. It would give me significance. It would give me a sense of meaning. And we keep getting disappointed.

It keeps going oh you know and another thing. That other thing that you thought you'd hope in. Maybe if you had the status that you really felt that you. You know if you had that status. Then life would make so much more sense.

He comes again. Takes it out. And it's like he keeps taking all of these. Well they're really false visions of the good life. He keeps taking them out from under our feet. And yet there's this thread that runs all the way through.

[6 : 35] Joy. There is joy. This book is despite all the vapor. This is a profoundly hopeful message. Because it keeps telling us that joy and satisfaction are available in this life.

And here we see that that joy starts with verse 7. It starts with us coming into the pleasure of God. You see Solomon uses bread and wine and white garments and oil on the head here in two ways. The first of which alludes to our salvation. These are gospel images that speak of the salvation that God has won for us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Is it not the case? Bread and wine are the elements that Jesus gives us in the Lord's Supper.

Elements that signify his broken body and his shed blood. That is elements that are given to signpost us to the event where our sins are punished in him rather than in us.

Signposts to his death on the cross where he bore the wrath of God that we deserved in our place. A signpost that says through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ we are cleansed from sin and made new.

[7 : 47] That's the significance of the white garment. Do you see that? Let your garments always be white. Why is that? Well this is how God's redeemed are described in the book of Revelation chapter 3 chapter 19.

The white garment represents us being clothed in salvation. When you come to the Lord Jesus in repentance for your sin he clothes you in white.

And he also sets you apart as one of his children. That's the image of the oil. This was how kings and priests were anointed for service in the Old Testament. And here it symbolizes being set apart to belong to God.

Solomon begins by pointing us first to how we get right with God. How we come into his pleasure in the first place. And we need to see this. We need to see that it is all of him.

And the only way that we can get involved is through faith and through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. I know that some of you are not Christians and you have been coming along to church for a while to listen and to think things through.

[8 : 55] That's great. It really is great and you are super welcome. We are delighted that you are here. Here is the heart of the matter for you. Through his broken body and his shed blood.

Jesus Christ has done everything that is required for you to know the pleasure of God. He has done everything that is required for you to live in the approval and the pleasure of God.

All you have to do is put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So that's the invitation to you this evening. Come into the pleasure of God.

Turn from your sin and put your faith in the Savior. But once we have done that, did you see what Solomon slipped in verse 7? Slipped in there.

In verse 7, Go eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart. For God has already approved what you do. Let your garments always be white. And so on. See the other way that Solomon uses these images is in a general sense of food and drink.

[9 : 55] And we are to enjoy them. But we do so. Do you see? We do so because God has already approved of what we do. That is in the Lord Jesus Christ, God has accepted you.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? In the Lord Jesus Christ, God has accepted you. I am talking now to those of us who are Christians. Do you know that God approves of you?

Do you know that you live in the approval of God? You exist in his pleasure. And you are there with all your faults and imperfections. He approves of you as you are.

Not the you that you wish you were, but the you that you are. So what we are supposed to do is do what Solomon says.

Eat your food with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart as children of a generous father. And do it in the way that God intends. There is of course a way that you can eat your food and drink your wine.

[11 : 01] And those are not how God intends. But he is saying no, do it with joy. Do it with a merry heart. Do it according to his design. And he doesn't just apply this to food and drink.

But also to the callings of marriage and work. Verse 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. 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.

Enjoy life.

Christian believer Solomon is saying. He's not saying in a kind of nihilistic way. Life is vapor. Eat and drink for tomorrow we die. He's saying that these are the gifts of God. And that he has given us these gifts so that we would enjoy them.

And we should enjoy them. And we enjoy them whilst not in some way deceiving ourselves. That there is some sort of gain or advantage to be had in the things themselves.

[12 : 02] That has been a message all the way through the book. Enjoy the things for the things sake as gifts from your father. Don't think that by having them or having more of them that you benefit in some way. Enjoy life.

How is your marriage? Do you laugh enough in your marriage? Or do you fuss and bicker and fight?

Or worse, do you grumble about your spouse and wish that you were married to someone else or not married at all? Well, remember chapter 7 and 8. This person is the person God gave you.

This is the person that God decided that you needed. Resentment is a cancer in marriage.

Resentment is a cancer in marriages. And alongside its cousin bitterness gives Satan an easy foothold.

And in Christian marriages, like all cancers, of course, these often spread under the surface because we know we can't just walk away. And what ends up happening is the marriage becomes cold and tense and there's distance.

[13 : 02] And it's just not very enjoyable. Well, Satan absolutely loves this. Satan is laughing when we get ourselves in this sort of situation.

And the only way to drive him out is for you to laugh more. Laugh with your spouse, the wife that God has given you. That's what he's saying.

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun. Laugh at the petty things that would turn into arguments, that would turn into fights.

Stop yourself and just have a laugh at how stupid you're being. How petty. And it's gone. Lean into intimacy together as an act of defiance against the devil and do it all with a smile.

This was Martin Luther's advice to Jerome Weller, whoever he is, in 1530. Quote, laugh your adversary to scorn. By all means flee solitude for the devil watches and lies in wait for you most.

[14 : 05] The devil watches and lies in wait for you most of all when you are alone. The devil is conquered by mocking and despising him, not by resisting and arguing with him. And therefore, Jerome, joke and play games with your wife and others.

In this way you will drive out your diabolical thoughts and take courage. End quote. Let's be honest. We are very good at taking ourselves and taking our lives far too seriously.

God has given you what you have. He has kept back from you what you don't have. Enjoy it. Enjoy it all.

And don't get distracted by what you don't have such that you don't enjoy what you do. When Solomon tells us to enjoy the life that he has given.

Eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. Get stuck in.

[15:08] Now, as far as work is concerned, there may be good reason for seeking a change. But the point he's trying to make here is don't think the other man's grass is greener.

Don't not enjoy what you have because you want something else. Because you think you might just be happier. Why? Because, verse 11.

Apart from anything else, remember the coffin. It could be all over soon. 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. The funeral that I took on Monday was for a man who knew he was dying. He got his affairs in order and said his goodbyes in good time.

That privilege is not one that all of us will get. My father didn't have that chance. He was 52. He was in good health. He was there in the morning. He was gone by lunchtime. None of us know our time.

[16:08] So don't spend what time you do have being grumpy and fussy. We live in the pleasure of God. He gives us an abundance of good things.

Don't waste them by not enjoying them. And especially don't waste your marriage in conflict or cool indifference. Enjoy the gift of God.

Living in the pleasure of God is how you prepare for death. And that is, according to Solomon, the way of wisdom. Of course, following this wise path is not always easy.

It's not always instinctive. So Solomon moves now to warn us. We heard last time about the universal nature of sin. All of us have hearts that have a fault in the circuitry. So 9 verse 18.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war. But one sinner destroys much good. 10 verse 1. Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench.

[17:10] So a little folly, a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. The first thing he tells us is to enjoy living in the pleasure of God.

The second point this evening is this. Take care living with the pitfalls of folly. Take care living with the pitfalls of folly.

Folly is really, really destructive and a little goes a long way. Solomon tells us. In the same way a decomposing fly ruins the whole bottle of perfume. So a little folly can have significant consequences.

A tiny slip because of folly can undo untold amounts of wisdom and honour, he's saying. Like a blob of ketchup on a clean white shirt.

It stands out as well. Do you see? Verse 3. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense. And he says to everyone that he's a fool. You can tell when someone is a fool because as with wisdom, it is seen in how they live.

[18:18] Our problem today is that we live in a day when folly is called wisdom and wisdom is called folly. And many of us think we're wise because we're simply doing what everyone else is doing. We think to ourselves, well, all these people can't be wrong.

It was in the media. Must be right. But to live according to true wisdom means that we need to avoid the pitfalls of folly biblically defined.

And the rest of chapter 10 has Solomon shine a light on where pitfalls may lie and where we may not necessarily obviously see them. And I want to highlight three areas where folly is obvious, but the status quo means we might not see it.

The first is this. Diversity hires.

It's also called affirmative action or quotas or positive discrimination. But look at verse 5. This folly proceeds from the top.

[19:33] So it is manufactured by those in power and it dictates that a certain kind of equality is a universal good. Because we don't have enough slaves on horses these days, and being on horse is an image of honor, of leadership.

Because we don't have enough of that, we should do something to put that right. Solomon says this is a great evil. Now this is not a statement about the relative value of people from different backgrounds.

Nor is it a denial of the fundamental equality every human being is made in the divine image. We all possess dignity, value, and worth wherever we come from, whoever we are.

But it is to say that some people have been given superior gifts, intelligence, abilities, and talents. And the best person for the job should get it on the basis of their ability to do the job, not because we need to meet DEI quotas.

This is an area where folly is obvious, but because of the status quo we might not see it. Wise men and wise women don't always rule, we know that.

[20 : 50] But wisdom ought to be sought in leaders regardless of their background. That's the first area. The second is thoughtless endeavor.

Verses 8 to 10. He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. If the iron is blunt and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength.

But wisdom helps one to succeed. What he's describing here is someone who throws himself into some kind of endeavor without due thought to the task or the goal.

I'm going to go and dig a pit. What about a safe structure to stand on while you're digging it? What's that? I can't hear you from down here. Kind of thing. Parents, how often have you discovered a child in some kind of calamity, and you ask what happened, and they say, Well, I didn't realize that dot, dot, dot, dot.

We expect that from children. Folly is bound up in their hearts, but we shouldn't be like that when we grow up. Oh, do you know what? I'm just going to start digging. Oh, I'm just going to start swinging the axe.

[21 : 56] Solomon is urging us to work smarter and to think ahead, to anticipate pitfalls. He's saying, Poor planning guarantees pitiful performance. But he is also talking about how tasks that we rush into can be derailed by small things.

An entire project can fail because of a momentary lapse or oversight of something important. Even well-intended effort that lacks care and forethought is folly.

Verse 10, Wisdom doesn't follow that path. Swinging a blunt iron all day just because you don't think you need to stop and sharpen the edge.

The person who keeps going at the task that isn't making any progress, he's saying that's foolish. Thoughtless endeavor. The last pitfall that might trip us up.

There are others he highlights, obviously. Laziness. And just being, in general, idle.

[23 : 10] Sloth, the roof sinks in. Through indolence, the house leaks. He talks about that as well. But verses 12 to 20, really the big theme there. Is words. Words. And it's a big theme in Solomon in general.

Especially in his Proverbs. So at a time. When actually. Words getting around the place. Just carelessly fired off in social media.

An email quickly blasted off. A message quickly blasted off. Solomon says, Be aware. Words, words, words. If the serpent bites before it's charmed. Verse 11. There's no advantage to the charmer.

The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor. But the lips of a fool consume him. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness. And the end of his talk is evil madness. A fool multiplies words.

Though no man knows what is to be. And who can tell him what will be after him. Verse 20. Even in your thoughts. Do not curse the king. Nor in your bedroom curse the rich. For a bird of the air will carry your voice.

[24 : 08] Or some winged creature tell the matter. Verse 11 is a parable. This reference to the serpent and the charmer.

It's a parable that illustrates what follows. He's saying if the snake charmer can't tame the snake. Before he starts using it. It brings him no advantage. The serpent is the tongue.

Psalms 140 verse 3. And if we let the tongue loose. Without the controls of wisdom. It will do all kinds of damage. Look at verse 12. We'll be consumed. We'll end up in evil madness.

Verse 13. Even privately spoken foolish words. Will find their way out. Verse 20. It is no exaggeration.

To say that the surest way to tell a fool. Is to listen to their words. And as I said. In a day where our words can circle the globe.

[25 : 05] Before breakfast. This pitfall is particularly obvious. And particularly dangerous. While the opposite is also true.

Wise words stand out. They win favor. Verse 12. Solomon's big point here concerns. The pitfalls of folly. Just as one small blob of ketchup.

Ruins the shirt. So one dead fly can stink out the perfume. One small bird. Verse 20. Can be the undoing of a man. By his careless and foolish speech.

That is the lesson. That the wise person learns. We are vulnerable to folly. So we tread carefully in life.

That is what a wise person understands. A wise person. When he is truly wise. Doesn't say. Well I am the wisest person around here. He says. Folly is always very close at hand.

[26 : 03] We are always susceptible. To folly. So. Wisdom means we don't. Play along with the cultural inequalities. We take care and plan ahead.

In what we do. And we pursue wisdom. So that our words are a blessing. To others. And that they benefit us. That is. Verses 11 to 20. So.

This evening. Solomon has told us. That death is inevitable. We don't know. When it will come to us. Some of us here this evening. Might not be here next Sunday. We don't know. But what we do know.

Is how to live. Knowing. That that day is coming. Enjoy life. In the pleasure of God. You live in the pleasure of God.

Enjoy it. Enjoy the gifts. That he has given you. Say thank you. As you take them from his hand. And enjoy them. For however long he gives them to you.

[27 : 04] But watch out for pitfalls. That might lead you astray. We are vulnerable. We are vulnerable to folly. And a little folly. Goes a long way. So take care.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Thank you.