

Introduction

If Christians have to live with an eye towards the future, knowing that the goal is to live in eternity with Christ, is there any possibility that some good can be experienced during **this** life? We have a long list of the things we're supposed to avoid – where's the authorized list of "acceptable" things? Surprisingly, the Bible does not teach that the best solution is to remove one's self and live in complete isolation, but to live "wisely". That is, to learn and discern what are the things of God to which we should be devoted versus the things of this world intended to distract and cause us to fall. The writer of Ecclesiastes has made a lengthy assessment of these things in the preceding chapters and is now presenting a sort of summary of his findings.

¹For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will* be love or hatred; anything awaits him.

Read verse 1

Q: What does the writer mean by "all this"? And why might it be significant that he mentions he has taken it "to my heart"?

A: "All this" is a summary of his findings expounded in the previous chapters, the difference between living according to God's ways versus man's own ways. Mostly he stated that his search was the result of applying his mind to the issues. It's therefore significant that now he provides the results in the context of the heart, the one place from which spiritual change and wisdom truly emanate. So his answer is not purely intellectual, but spiritually based.

Q: Why is it comforting that the deeds of righteous men "are in the hand of God"?

A: The writer has previously (and exhaustively) explained the futility of earthly activities and accomplishments by those giving no personal regard to God. Whereas they ultimately fail to produce anything for them, the earthly activities of the righteous – because they're directed by God – accomplish much for them in this life and the one to come.

On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

1 Timothy 4:7b-8

Q: Does the last part of v.1 mean that God will hate some followers and love others?

A: No, this is the writer's way of stating that God is sovereign over all the deeds and events that will occur in a righteous person's life, such events covering the entire spectrum of love to hate, hardship to blessing, positive to negative.

Point: For the person truly trusting that they're in God's hands and protected regardless of the circumstances, this should be a comfort. There's a big difference between not knowing what life will bring without trust in God and not knowing what life will bring yet trusting in Him.

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

John 10:27-29

Application: There's a big difference between not knowing what life will bring without **trust** in God and not knowing what life will bring yet **trusting** in Him.

- As a Believer, do you have the same trust in being in God's hand during times of difficulty as in times of peace?
- Why is it wrong to measure spiritual integrity simply against whether or not circumstances are favorable or not?

Read verses 2-6

Q: What is the "reality check" the writer is trying to induce regarding this present life?

A: Everyone, whether they are ultimately judged to be righteous or wicked, will die – what he states as "one fate". Just as there is no amount of wickedness that can change this fact, so there is no amount of righteousness that can change it either.

Q: In v.3, why does the writer express this as "an evil"?

A: This is actually a second, continuing thought based on v.1-2. It's a fact that "there is one fate for all men", but the evil is when **MEN** apply this truth to mean, "We're all going to die, so why bother to live righteously? What does it matter if I choose to live wickedly?" They don't live as if they'll be responsible for their actions in this life nor as if there actually is an eternal life to follow.

Point: The writer continues in v.3 to explain that this kind of reasoning is actually "insanity...in their hearts throughout their lives" because it doesn't change the truth of what will happen to them upon their death. To choose to ignore the consequences of life after death is neither rational nor productive.

Q: In v.5-6, is the writer actually saying there is no life after death?

A: This is his way of stating that the only chance one has to make things right for the next life is by living according to God's will and ways in **THIS** life. Once they pass from this life to the next, the opportunity to change the outcome has vanished. (Some religions and philosophies think otherwise, that there will be a "second chance".)

²It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. ³This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead. ⁴For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. ⁶Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.

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Q: So what is the only advantage of activities performed “under the sun” because of the things we accomplish in this present life?

A: They only have an advantage as long as they are in concert with God’s will and ways, providing assurance that because we acted solely within His guiding hand so that we will enjoy the rewards of the next life.

Application: The only advantage the pursuits of **this** life can bring is if they are rendered in **concert** with God’s **will** and **ways** leading to the rewards of the **next** life.

Read verses 7-10

⁷Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. ⁸Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.

¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Q: Does it make a difference that every item listed is qualified with “your”, such as “your bread”, “your wine”, “your works”, etc.?

A: This is the biblical term that means you’ve obtained something legally and within the limits of God’s Law, as opposed to ill-gotten gains through theft, fraud, deception, etc. This is especially strong in that white clothes represent purity from sin and righteousness, and oil for spiritual anointing.

Q: So what is the reward for this life?

A: To enjoy in moderation the basic things provided through the course of our successful efforts to maintain a right relationship with God.

Q: In v.10, is the writer stating that the only thing after this life is nothingness or some kind of vacuum?

A: No. This is a figure of speech meant to convey that we need to do everything possible to carry out God’s commands in this life, knowing that in doing so He will take care of all our concerns for the next as well.

Application: The rewards for this life are to enjoy in **moderation** what is attained in the course of our successful efforts to maintain a right **relationship** with God.

- Do you know someone that doesn’t want to “get involved too much” because they’re worried about damaging their future?
- How well do you recognize that your future is determined by how you live according to God’s will in the present?

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¹¹I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. ¹²Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.

¹³Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. ¹⁴There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. ¹⁵But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. ¹⁷The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Read verses 11-12

Q: How might an unbeliever interpret these verses?

A: They might say something to the effect that nothing is guaranteed and that bad luck or "fate" can prevent even the best from attaining their objective.

Q: How might a Believer interpret these verses?

A: Nothing occurs as the result of man's personal strength or will because "time and chance" are controlled by God to produce **HIS** desired outcome.

Q: How is the "Believer's interpretation" reinforced by v.12?

A: What in this life unbelievers call "bad luck" or "chance" or "fate" will ultimately be revealed to have been God's trap ("net" or "snare") to hold them accountable for their choices.

Application: *Nothing occurs as the result of our personal **strength** or **will** because "time and chance" are controlled by **God** to produce **His** desired outcome.*

- *Why don't we believe this as strongly when it comes to our own life?*
- *Is our trust and faith undeterred by circumstances, or do we avoid facing the fact that God is working by blaming other "coincidental" factors?*

Read verses 13-18

Q: What are possible meanings and applications of this story? [Encourage group discussion; suggestions provided below for facilitating that discussion.]

1. We are expected to do the right thing in this life with what we've been given without the expectation that we will receive a reward for it in this life.
2. For some it matters who gets the credit, but for us it's enough for us that God knows. He will reward in eternity what was overseen on earth.
3. Just because someone listens to us once in awhile does not mean that they will begin to listen to us all the time.
4. Under times of extreme duress people may listen to a righteous man only because it's the only way to survive, but almost never during times of peace.
5. Others?

Observation: *Is it possible that there have been/are/will be times that the "small city" refers to the church/Christians, the "great king" to Satan, and the "poor wise man" as a type of Christ? In other words, that there is great attentiveness to Christ in times of extreme stress or spiritual persecution, but a tendency to*

wander from His Word during relative times of peace and blessing? (It sort of mirrors the historical cycle of revival.)

Q: What is the dramatic contrast between the small city in v.13-17 and the “one sinner” in v.18?

A: Just as it only took a single wise man to overcome the crisis by God’s wisdom, it only takes acceptance of a single instance of sin to overcome something good.

Point: A single righteous man overcoming overwhelming evil is found in the examples of Noah, David and Goliath, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego, and David. A single sinner destroying much is found in the example of Achan (Joshua 7:16-26), Micah making his own idol and anointing his own priest (Judges 17-18), Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews (Esther), Absalom’s revolt against his father David, etc.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

James 2:10

Q: What is the even greater contrast between these last verses and the rest of chapter 9?

A: Until this point, the examples used in the discussion might be called “great people”, people who by their great, personal strength and will were attempting to establish works in their own name. At the very end is a discussion of “little people”, those who will never be recognized or remembered for anything in the course of this life. It’s an extension of the “one fate awaits all” statement, showing that whether one is great or small, known or obscure, esteemed or loathed, the **ONLY** thing that is going to matter in the very end is the degree to which you lived according to God’s will and ways.

Application: Often there is great attentiveness to God in times of extreme **stress** or **persecution**, but a tendency to wander away during times of relative **peace** and **blessing**.

Consider the application to this discussion of this parable of Christ:

While they were listening to these things, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. So He said, “A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, ‘Do business with this until I come back.

“But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’

“When he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done. The first appeared, saying, ‘Master, your mina has made ten minas more.’

“And he said to him, ‘Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.’

“The second came, saying, ‘Your mina, master, has made five minas.’

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“And he said to him also, ‘And you are to be over five cities.’

“Another came, saying, ‘Master, here is your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.’

“He said to him, ‘By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?’

“Then he said to the bystanders, ‘Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.’

“And they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten minas already.’

“I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.”

Luke 19:11-27

Application of the Parable:

1. It's not **“how much”** we've been given, but what **we do** with whatever we've been given.
2. Not doing anything is a form of **rebellion**.
3. What each individual does is their own **choice**, but they will be held **accountable** both in this life and the one to come.

Overall Application

- Do you ever think someone else has an advantage over you because they appear to have more than you, whether materially or spiritually? In turn, is there anyone over whom you feel superior or better off than? What is wrong with both of these points of view?
- How are you presently doing with what you've been given? Are you trusting that God is in control of the times and circumstances while you use it, or are you hindered for some reason?
- Is there anything you might possibly be “over-pursuing” so that you're neglecting even the smallest things of God? How well do you feel that those priorities will continue to be justified?

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