

The One Second That Determines Everything

Ecclesiastes 8 - 9:6

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After a two-week hiatus we are back in Ecclesiastes. One of the challenges in preaching through this Old Testament book is that the writer is prone to repeating himself. There's nothing wrong with that and the Holy Spirit inspired him to do so. However, he didn't have expository preaching in mind when he did it. He wrote it for the reader more than the verse-by-verse preacher.

Chapter 8 is largely a repetition of what we have already seen. So what we are going to do is quickly survey chapter 8 and focus on 9:1-6. That section is about hope. It sounds like it's about the certainty of death but it gleams with hope for all who are yet living.

A Survey of Ecclesiastes 8

Solomon begins with advice for those who serve the king. As a king himself, he has a unique perspective on what curries royal favor and blessing and what might just cost you your life.

Democracies were unheard of at this time. Everyone lived under an authority which they had no part in establishing, voting for, and for which there was no court of appeal. How should the common person relate to kingly position and authority? Solomon advises that blessings come from honoring the king because he says in verse 3, the king "*does whatever he pleases*" and in verse 4, "*the word of the king is supreme.*"

There's more here but the general principle is repeated in the New Testament in Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13-18. Here it is: all authority is established by God, and therefore we are to submit to authority as an act of worship to the one who established it. Obeying civil government or our boss at work or principal at school is just as much worship as taking the Lord's Supper. A high and holy view of God's sovereign rule over the world trickles down to respect and honor of any designated authority over us. How are you doing with that in your life? Are you honoring all the kings over you?

In verses 10-13 he returns to his injustice theme. He groans that people who did really horrible things somehow end up portrayed as heroes even in the places where they committed their crimes. Somehow corrupt politicians still get parks and streets named after them. Exploitative business people are sometimes held in high regard when they donate to the local charity.

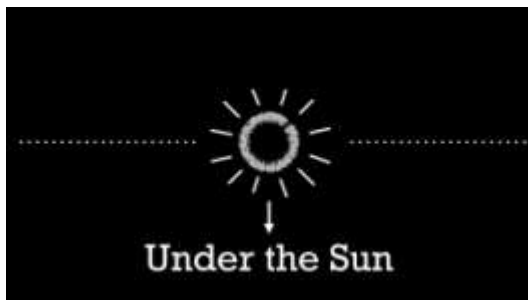
Finally in verse 14, he ponders again the injustice of life, how the righteous often get what the wicked deserve and the wicked often get what the righteous deserve. And he concludes with this same despairing note, "*However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out.*" (Ecclesiastes 8:17 ESV) In other words, take all of the toil and labor and strivings people make toward a thousand different ambitions and goals, but in the end, we don't find in this world what we are looking for. The song mankind keeps singing is U2's, "*I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.*"

"I have climbed the highest mountains/I have run through the fields...I have run, I have crawled/I have scaled these city walls...I have kissed honey lips/Felt the healing in her finger tips...I have spoke with the tongue of angels/I have held the hand of a devil. But I still haven't found/ What I'm looking for."(Writers: U2, music/Bono, lyrics)

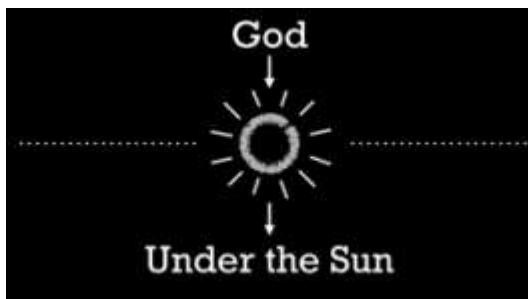
Just when Solomon couldn't be more depressing, guess what he brings up to encourage us? Death. But remember, this is a section in chapter 9 and it's about hope.

"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. 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. 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. 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. 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." (Ecclesiastes 9:1-6)

As we have seen, Solomon vacillates between two perspectives on life. Most of Ecclesiastes is describing man's search for meaning without God. As if there is no God. Man left entirely to himself. The material man. The atheistic man. Man apart from God. This he calls, Life under the sun.



The other perspective is life under God. Human life lived in relationship with God. God is the end and satisfaction of man's search for meaning.



The one means life is absurd and futile. The other means life matters and eternity does too. He describes both in this section.

What Appears Random to us is Controlled by God (Verse 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." (Ecclesiastes 9:1, emphasis added) How often we reassure ourselves in the troubles of life that *God's in control. Life can't be random. There is a purpose in it. We know there is a reason.* These statements assume that this world isn't all there is.

You even here people that deny God or have no time for Christianity borrowing this truth when life hurts. "There is a reason for everything!" Not if there is no God. Not if the evolutionary biologists are right. Even the assumption that there is good behind troubles isn't true unless we are God's children. Romans 8:28 says, *"All things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* God doesn't intend ultimate good for unbelievers. God intends punishment and judgment. Yet mankind in rebellion against God desperately needs a sense of purpose when random evil besets them.

This gets at the second phrase in verse 1, *"Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him."* This can either mean God's future love or hate for them or their personal experience of love or hate. I'm not sure. The point is that man approaches unseen and unknown future experiences without knowledge. We make our plans; we try and peer around the corner of our lives to see what is coming. But in the end, we don't know anything. He will say in a few verses that we are like fish caught in a net or a bird caught in a snare. That fish was just swimming along with no idea that he was about to become dinner. Everything seemed great, and then, swoosh!

We see this nearly every week, particularly with health matters. One Sunday we see brother or sister so and so in church; three days later they are having emergency open heart surgery wondering if they will wake up on earth or in heaven.

Yesterday, I saw the tragic news of singer Christina Grimmie. She was 22 years old. She had been a finalist on *The Voice*. She had a budding singing career. She was in Orlando after a concert signing autographs and selling T-shirts. Some guy just walked up to her at the table and shot her and she died. A friend of mine knows her family. He told me that Christina grew up in a wonderful Christian family and she was a Christian. And two days ago on Friday morning, she may have been sipping coffee, not knowing what was ahead. Just another day. Twenty-two. Full of life. Incredibly talented. And right now, she's in eternity. I watched a video of her beautifully singing "In Christ Alone" saying it's her favorite song. She died in faith but she died unexpectedly Friday night.

Then this morning, someone came up to me after first service and told me that something else happened in Orlando last night. A gunman shot and killed 49 people. For all those people, it was just another day in their life. They had no idea. Like the fish caught in the net, life's over.

Life is fragile and we know so little about what is coming. Loved ones that we assume will always be at the table on Thanksgiving are suddenly gone. Jobs that seem so solid are suddenly gone. Now what? We say, *I didn't see it coming.* Of course not. We are human. We don't see anything coming.

But the glory here is that our futures are not uncertain to God who holds our futures "in his hands." The old song says it, *"He's got the whole world in his hands."* Jesus took it down to an incredibly personal and detailed sovereignty when he said,

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12:6-7)

God sees and controls our future with absolute clarity. Nothing ever happens to us beyond those tender loving hands. He holds our futures in them. That's wonderful news for the Christian. Terrifying news for the unbeliever.

It Doesn't Matter Who You Are, We All Die (Verses 2-6)

"It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked." (Ecclesiastes 9:2) We all share one "event." He repeats this in verse 3, the same "event" happens to all. This is Ecclesiastes code language for death. The righteous die. The unrighteous die. It doesn't matter the moral character of your life. All of us can and will be captured by death. He lists here five categories of people who die.

Who Dies?

Righteous	Wicked
Good	Evil
Religious	Unreligious
Good	Sinner
Oath to God	No oath to God

Most of us are ok when really terrible people die. Or if someone kills a bunch of people and then kills himself. Typically, few show up to the perpetrator's funeral. The wicked die.

The righteous die too, with the same regularity and at times, randomness. Pastor Dan told me this week about the 22-year-old son of dear friends of theirs who was taking a class at Moody Bible Institute. He suddenly had an aneurysm in the class and died shortly after. That doesn't seem right to us. A young man. A young man interested in God's work. A young man in a Bible class.

Are you righteous? *Doesn't matter.* Are you a good person? *Doesn't matter.* Are you religious? *Doesn't matter.* Do you make and fulfill promises to God? *It doesn't matter.* The same car accident that kills the unrighteous kills the righteous. The same tornado that kills the sinner kills the saint. The same cancer that kills the prisoner kills the pastor. No one is exempt. We are all going to die. As the Latin phrase *Memento mori* says, *remember that you must die.*

"But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion." (Verse 4) If you ask most people, *which would you rather be, a dog or a lion?* They would say, *"That's easy, a lion."* But if you ask, *would you rather be a living dog or a dead lion?* Now being a dog becomes desirable. He may be quoting a common proverb of the day but the point is effective. No matter how great or powerful you were (lion), once you are dead than even the sorriest living animal (in that culture, a dog) is preferable to a dead one. Why?

"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. 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." (Verses 5-6)

He lists five qualities of being dead: *no knowledge, no reward, no memory of you, no human passions, and no share in the life on earth.* All that is gone. Death is a hard-stop forever. A person can be full of life and activity and industry and relationships but that car accident or heart attack is a sudden stop to all of it. You don't get to come back from the dead. Once it's over, it's over. Another example from this week, Muhammad Ali will never float like a butterfly or sting like a bee ever again.

I thought you said this was about hope? It is. Verse 4 holds the key. The living have hope because the living have something the dead don't have—**Time**. Time means opportunity. While life is precarious, if I am wise, I can get ready to die. I have time to change. I have time to live for what matters one second after I die.

Our One Second That Determines Everything

This is the stark reality. There is one second coming for each of us that will forever define us. That second is the second we die. In that second we will pass from this world and life to the next. One second, it's earth. Family. Friends. Air. Body. Beauty. Breathing. Heart pumping. The existence we have always known. The next millisecond everything forever changes. We step into the next world. A spiritual world. What is it like? What will we see, experience, feel?

The Bible has a lot to say about that one second.

- *"People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."* (Hebrews 9:27 NIV)
- *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

Here is a fascinating example in history's most poignant moment. Jesus is hanging on the cross between two thieves. They are unrighteous and guilty men. Listen to what happens.

"One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Two men. Both were going to die. They were hours from doing so. One is the famous thief on the cross. While he was almost dead by crucifixion, he was still alive. As long as you are alive, there is still time. Time to repent. Time to believe and receive salvation from Jesus. This is what the thief did. His confession? *"Remember me when you come into your kingdom."* (Verse 42)

It was a simple sentence revealing a genuine faith. I suspect when you are hanging on a cross about to die, there's no time to waste. The real you comes out. What came from this man was personal trust that Jesus was king and Lord. *Jesus, I believe you are an eternal king. Will you remember me when who you really are is displayed for all to see?* Jesus gives the man the greatest assurance of salvation anyone can have. *"Today you will be with me in Paradise."* (Verse 43)

Very soon that man's defining second came. He left this world. He left his body. He left

everything here and entered a new realm and reality. The spiritual and eternal one. Where was he? Jesus said, "*Paradise.*" That's quite a word. But notice not only where he was going but who he would be there with. "*Today you will be with me.*" (Verse 43, emphasis added) Jesus was there to welcome him and give him the grand tour of Paradise.

Better to be a repentant thief on a cross than an unrepentant one. Better to be a thief with faith than a Roman soldier without it. Better to be that thief than the governor Pilate. Better to be that thief crucified than all the early comforts experienced temporarily by Caiaphas, Judas, Annas, or Herod. Better to be that thief on the cross that day than Alexander the Great or Ramses the II or Julius Caesar or Cleopatra or Nebuchadnezzar. They were all dead and their eternal destinies were unalterable, unchangeable, unfathomable, eternal suffering. Better to be a living Chihuahua with faith than a dead lion without it.

Some of us have prepared for our one second like the thief. We have told Jesus, "*remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" (Verse 42) We have believed. We are ready because death comes unexpectedly and none of us knows when our one second will arrive.

Others have not. Are you ready? It's coming. You can't change it. The same event happens to us all. But you can be ready for it. Why? You have an advantage that Alexander the Great and Ramses II no longer have. **Time**. You can be ready by repenting of your sin and trusting in Jesus' death on the cross for your sin. Become a follower of Jesus. Receive the gift of eternal life. Hope forever.

- Better to be an alive, saved-by-grace dog than a dead lion with no hope.
- Better to be alive with time than dead with no hope.
- Better to be alive with opportunity yet for salvation than dead with no hope.
- Better to be alive with faith in Jesus than dead with no hope.

Today you can leverage the advantage you have of time over the billions who have already died. Use it wisely to be ready for the one second that will decide everything for you forever.

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