

# The Difference an End Makes: Ecclesiastes

Thomas Robinson, January 8, 2017

Ecclesiastes 9:1-18

## **All are in God's hand, but does he love or hate us?**

9:1 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, the human does not know;  
all are before them.

## **We can't tell since the same happens to all.**

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> This is an evil in all that is done under the sun,  
that the same event happens to all.

## **The heart is full of evil and then the person dies.**

Also, the hearts of the children of humanity are full of evil,  
and madness is in their hearts while they live,  
and after that they go to the dead.

## **But only life has hope. Death ends everything.**

<sup>4</sup> But he who is joined with all the living has hope,  
for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

## **Enjoy the life that God gives while it is here.**

<sup>7</sup> Go, eat your bread with joy,  
and drink your wine with a merry heart,  
for God has already accepted your deeds.

<sup>8</sup> Let your garments be always white.  
Let not oil be lacking on your head.

<sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love,  
all the days of your vapor 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.

## **Live vigorously now. In death you are powerless.**

<sup>10</sup> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might,  
for there is no work or scheme or knowledge or wisdom  
in Sheol, to which you are going.

## **But this life is unpredictable and subject to chance.**

<sup>11</sup> Again I saw that under the sun  
the race is not to the swift,  
nor the battle to the strong,  
nor bread to the wise,  
nor riches to the intelligent,  
nor favor to those with knowledge,  
but time and chance happen to them all.

## **Life is often ruined by unforeseen troubles.**

<sup>12</sup> For the human 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 humanity are snared at an evil time,  
when it suddenly falls upon them.

## **Parable: Wisdom is powerful but is not valued.**

<sup>13</sup> I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun,  
and it seemed great to me.

<sup>14</sup> There was a little city with few men in it,  
and a great king came against it and besieged it,  
building great siegeworks against it.

<sup>15</sup> But there was found in it a poor, wise man,  
and he by his wisdom delivered the city.  
Yet no person remembered that poor man.

## **Still, wisdom is better than sheer power.**

<sup>16</sup> But I say that wisdom is better than might,  
though the poor man's wisdom is despised  
and his words are not heard.

<sup>17</sup> The words of the wise heard in quiet  
are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

<sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war,  
but one sinner destroys much good.

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14 (Cf. James 4:14)

<sup>2</sup>“Vapor of vapors,” says Qoheleth, “Vapor of vapors! Everything is vapor!” ...

<sup>14</sup> “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and look, everything is vapor and chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-9

<sup>4</sup> I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made myself pools of water among the trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought slaves, and more slaves were born in my house. I developed great herds and flocks... <sup>8</sup> I also stored up silver and gold, the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and had many sexual partners, a great delight. <sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 15:19-20

<sup>19</sup> If it's only for this present life that we have put our hope in the Messiah, we are the most pitiable members of the human race. <sup>20</sup> But in fact the Messiah has been raised from the dead, as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

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## A Surprising Voice in Scripture – Ecclesiastes / Qoheleth

*Last week we focused on Jesus urging us not to be anxious about our lives. This week we hear from one who is deeply anxious about life's circumstances and meaning. A Teacher (Qoheleth), he speaks sometimes in the character of Solomon, an ideal of wisdom, wealth, and power – and says “Vapor!” His image is not so much that everything is meaningless or absurd but that it is passing. There's nothing substantial, lasting: Life goes round without clear pattern or reason and then you die.*

*At times Qoh. felt despair, but he knows God is over all and gives us this life. But not so that we can make sense of it. A season for everything. Eternity in our hearts. But also frustrating confusion.*

*Qoh. is part of the Bible as a great debate with diverse voices, esp. in the OT: An unfolding drama of alienation, broken understanding, cries, grace, renewal, new visions. Deut., Job, Isaiah, Daniel.*

*Qoh. tries to speak truth about life. He refuses easy answers and theological clichés. He is refreshing, and disconcerting. He breaks apart ideas of reward in a way that opens minds for new ideas.*

## What is Qoheleth's Problem?

*Qoh. casts a vision of a great life (not unlike the subtext of modern aspiration and advertising): A powerful, wealthy man with big accomplishments and pleasures, very smart/wise, and no suffering. It's an almost exact reversal of the picture of Jesus, or of the early apostles, like Paul.*

*Think of Qoh. beside Paul's letters to Corinth: Core ideas are the foolish/scandalous crucifixion, the life of the Spirit, the meaning of resurrection, the weakness of the Apostle. Very different from Qoh.!*

*But Qoh. looks as his idea of a great life and says, “Vapor.” Paul knows joy, peace, love, union of God & us. Qoh.'s vision ends in death (Sheol), period. He senses that death makes vapor of everything.*

## What's at Stake in the Surprise of Jesus?

*Qoh. clarifies how strange Jesus appears. He is a different definition of “great” – though Jesus' own disciples struggled to learn it. Crucifixion broke all old hopes. Resurrection transformed the vision of an end. The end of all things breaks in now: Life through death empowered by the Spirit, God's life.*

*The puzzles of life are true, as Qoh. said. But God has love, grace, and life bigger than human dreams.*