

Pepperdine Bible Lectures

Ecclesiastes: The Difference an End Makes

Thomas Robinson, May 4, 2017

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

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.

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.

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.

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.

Enjoy the life that God gives while it is here.

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

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 vapor life
that God 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.

10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

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

² Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, "vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity! (King James version)

² "Vapor of vapors," says Qoheleth, "Vapor of vapors! Everything is vapor!"

Ecclesiastes 1:14

¹⁴ "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and look, everything is vapor and chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-9

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools of water among the trees. ⁷ I bought slaves, and more slaves were born in my house. I developed great herds and flocks... ⁸ 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. ⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

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

A Surprising Voice in Scripture – Ecclesiastes / Qoheleth

In *Ecclesiastes*, a wisdom teacher (Qoheleth) speaks sometimes in the character of Solomon, an ideal of wisdom, wealth, and power. He looks at practical human life 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.

Death Turns Everything into Vapor

Ecc 9:1-12 is a surprising and disconcerting text. Is this really in the Bible? Yes! What does it mean?

Qoh. is part of the Bible as a great debate with diverse voices, esp. in the OT: God wants us to hear different voices, as in the debate of Job and his friends, and to think deeply about life.

Qoh. tries to speak truth about life. He refuses easy answers and theological clichés. He is refreshing, and disconcerting. He stands in contrast to the NT and Paul. The question: What has happened?

Qoh. casts a vision of a great life (not unlike modern aspiration and advertising): A powerful, wealthy person 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.

But Qoh. looks at his idea of a great life and says, “Vapor.” But Qoh. has nowhere to go. Jesus teaches a very different view of greatness, but his disciple, like us, hope for a return to reality. If life is going to work, it must make sense now, and it doesn’t! Life’s not fair; people are caught. Qoh.’s vision ends in death (Sheol) and vapor. Even our joys and fear of God become vapor. Qoh. has calculated all the ways through human life and it always comes out zero.

What’s at Stake in Ecclesiastes and in Jesus?

The strange thing is that Jesus agrees with Qoh. God agrees! Things couldn’t remain as they were. Something had to be done, not just explained. God had to do it and God did!

God broke into our world in Jesus, crossing the boundary between creator and created. He took on human suffering, brokenness and sin. He was crucified. He drank the cup and then he died.

But God did something more! New! He took the end of all things toward which he was moving them – Resurrection and brought the end into our world in Jesus’ resurrection. The world and life can never be the same. Qoh. saw how we needed this. He embodied the difference and end makes.