

The Fate of All

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm sure we all have something in life which we avoid and which we try to push to the future, even though we know it's unavoidable. For many, that's the dreaded tax return, unless, of course, you're in line for a healthy refund.

I wonder what's the longest you've gone trying to go without doing one. For others, it may be that email, that working with children email that Tim sends from time to time and which we all ignore because we think, you know, when we really need to do it, Tim will send us another reminder.

Now, for me personally, it's that annual doctor's or dental checkup. You see, I'm getting to that age where every time I go, they seem to always find something wrong with me.

Well, we each have our own top avoidance item, but I think what's common to all of us is the avoidance of death, and that's probably one of the answers you gave in that fellowship discussion break.

None of us want to face it anytime soon, and yet deep down we know it's coming, sooner or later. And for some of us, it's probably hit close to home already.

[1 : 1 7] Either we're battling current or past illnesses, or with lost loved ones. So whereas last Sunday, sin was the cause of life's problem, today, death is.

Now, they're related, of course, as the wages of sin is death, but the latter, death, presents its own set of challenges for life as well. In addition to sin, death casts its own huge shadow over life itself.

So in chapter 9, the teacher reminds us, firstly, as we look in the first verse, of death as the great equalizer. Now, you may have a slightly different version, but I've got the NIV today, which will be on the screen if you want to follow.

Either that, or you can just keep going with your own Bibles. So verse 1, we hear the teacher say, So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands.

But no one knows whether love or hate awaits them, or share in a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

[2 : 3 0] As it is with the good, so it is with the sinful. So it is with those who take oath, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun.

The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward, they join the dead. Now, we have to wait until verse 3 before the teacher refers explicitly to death.

Up to that point, it's euphemistically referred to as a common destiny, shared by and overtaking all. Still, it's the elephant in the room.

And his point is, death awaits us all, regardless of who we are, good or bad, clean or unclean, which I think perhaps refers to Jew or Gentile, all in what we do.

Nothing makes a difference. We all die. In fact, we saw last week, didn't we, that the righteous might even die early. And so, as a result, perhaps sin runs amok in the world.

[3 : 35] If doing good made a difference, perhaps it might be an incentive not to sin. But if that's not the case, then why bother? Nothing constrains an individual to be selfish, to let the sinful desires of their hearts run wild.

The fear of death ought to have a bearing on life, but it doesn't. And so here we can imagine the teacher looking out on the world and saying with exasperation, hey, everyone, life is short.

We're only here for a little while, so let's use it for good. Let's make the most of it while we can. But no, people are largely selfish, living for their own pleasure, not caring much for the harm that they cause others.

And yet, even as the teacher laments about life, flawed as it is, he still concludes in verse 4 that it's better than death. Anyone who is among the living has hope.

Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate, and their jealousy have long since vanquished.

[4 : 46] Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. Over and over, we're reminded that everything under the sun is meaningless, a vapor.

That's been the theme throughout Ecclesiastes. So the question is, why try so hard? And yet, even though life under the sun is full of evil, it's still better than death.

Better to be a living dog that is a poor creature on this earth than a majestic creature like a lion, but dead. Imagine, for example, a poor peasant standing by the side of the road watching the funeral procession of a royal monarch, a king.

Would the poor peasant at that time be thinking about trading places with the corpse? Not many would think that way, would they? No matter their life circumstance.

For where there's life, there's hope. Things could get better. Fortunes could change. But death brings finality. There's no further reward, no chance for relationship, to love, or even to hate.

[6 : 00] No chance to make a difference, even in this imperfect world. Now, the teacher then goes on to offer his solution in verse 7. But before we turn to those verses, let me cover one other aspect, which is right at the end in verse 11, and then we'll come back.

And here in verse 11, death is also a great disruptor. Why? Because it can happen any time. And so we read, I've seen something else under the sun.

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come, as fish are caught in a cruel net or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Again, it doesn't matter what you do. You can plan for death. And in fact, here we have the teacher who is someone who believes in God and hence his sovereignty, and yet, he almost makes a rather surprising admission, doesn't he?

[7 : 07] He appears to attribute the timing of anyone's death down to a matter of luck. It's a game of chance, he says. No one knows their hour, even though we all plan against it.

And we see it, don't we? We look around and we have entire industries built around financial or retirement planning, even though we know that we can't choose the timing of our death.

Now, I'm not saying we don't put anything away in super or things like that, but the truth is we can plan all we like, but we can't predict when death will be for us.

In fact, we can't even determine how we will die. If you think about it, we'd probably love to go in a comfortable way, probably in our sleep with loved ones surrounding us, but no amount of planning or money can guarantee that.

Now, like most of you, I probably still have quite a few things I would like to do before I die. I'd love to see my daughters finish school and start life doing well. I would like to see, for example, the St. John's Partnership progressing.

[8 : 22] And Alyssa and I probably have a list of things we'd love to do once we retire from full-time work. She probably has a different list to mine and we have to work out which list to go for.

But, you know, there are many places I'd still like to visit in the world, top of which would be to enjoy sushi in Tokyo, to walk the streets of Jerusalem in a Holy Land tour.

But whether any of my wishes will be fulfilled is really out of my control. I can't really, I can plan, I can dream, but there's no guarantee it would happen. There are times, quite often, that I'll buy my daughters a tub of their favorite ice cream and then tell them that they have to make it last for the rest of the month.

Now, there are typically two responses that they could have with it, can't they? really savor it one scoop per evening, slowly, for the rest of the month, or get through it as quickly as they can before the other sister gets to it.

But either way, they know that when it's gone, it's gone, isn't it? And so that's what drives the teacher's response, I think, in verse 7. Knowing that he's only got one life and not knowing how long it will last, he thinks the only thing to do is to enjoy it as much as he can and possibly as quickly as he can because he doesn't know when his time is up.

[9 : 52] So verse 7, he says, Go eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil, in celebration, that is.

Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun. All your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and your toys and labor under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning, knowledge nor wisdom. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

That seems to be his vibe. This is as good as it gets. Make the most out of life now because once you enter the realm of the dead, there is neither working nor planning, knowledge nor wisdom.

It's a rather hedonistic approach, isn't it? And you know, if you first think about it, you know, that sort of makes sense. If this life is all there is and there's no escaping death, then yeah, get the most out of life now.

[11 : 02] Make the most of a bad situation. In fact, there's even a celebrity preacher that's written a whole book about it. It's on the slide. I wouldn't name who he is, but you can see his title.

Your Best Life Now. And you know what? Even the Apostle Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 32. He said, If the dead are not raised, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

Except, if you look closely, that's Paul's exact opposite point, isn't it? Notice the if at the start. If the dead are not raised, then let's eat and drink.

But of course, as Christians, we don't believe that at all, do we? That the dead are not raised, that death isn't the end. We do believe that there is life after death.

Now, you can forgive the teacher for not knowing much about life after death because the Old Testament says rather little about it. Rather, it's only when Jesus comes that he teaches clearly that there is the reality of heaven and hell.

[12 : 18] The reality of judgment for all and the gnashing of teeth for many. But more importantly, Jesus also taught clearly and gave us clear hope of life back in the garden.

And not the original garden of Eden, but something better, the new creation. That's when our best life will be, is what Jesus says. Jesus promised in John 10.10, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

Now, how does Jesus offer this life? Well, he says so in the very next verse. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so, just like last week, Jesus' death solves not just the problem with wisdom, but also the problem with our death as well.

And this life to the full that Jesus offers isn't merely a longer life in a broken world, but life beyond death, a perfect world for eternity.

Just as we hear in that famous verse of John 3.16, And when we look at a promise like that, that changes the equation dramatically, doesn't it?

[13 : 52] Death isn't that great equalizer or leveler that we think it is. There is life beyond death. And what's more, we don't even have to work for it because the wages of sin has been paid for by Jesus.

And yet, it's not eat, drink, and be merry. It's not no worries made. You'll be saved regardless. For what does John 3.16 say?

Rather, it's only through believing in Jesus that we have eternal life. What matters then is faith in Jesus, not good works, not having all the pleasures now in this life, but trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, many of us here at church have witnessed many adult baptisms over the years, haven't we? And each time, I find such joy in hearing the testimonies of these new Christians.

each individual has a different story, but there's a common thread through them all. And that is the realizations of their sins forgiven.

[15 : 03] And as they share it, there is such a great sense of a huge burden being lifted off their shoulders. They realize that the sentence of death is now lifted from them.

And for them, that's a life-changing moment of freedom. So yes, we still will die physically, but death has lost its sting.

Our fear is taken away. But what's more, we know that even as we die and then we come before God's throne, there is no longer a fear of judgment because Jesus has vindicated us.

And so the thing that all humans should rightly fear is not death itself, but actually the judgment afterwards. Jesus says in Matthew 10, verse 28, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. And for us who believe in Jesus, who are Christians, we do not have to be afraid of that anymore because of the blood of Jesus.

[16 : 13] And so amazingly, once this fear of ultimate judgment is gone, then it has a huge impact on how we live this life now, how we face death, physical death, that is.

Because now we are able to live sacrificially. There is no need to satisfy every desire now. We are able to hold on to the things of this world lightly because we know we have eternity.

Even the lives of dear ones that we have lost, sad though it is, we do not grieve without hope, particularly as they are safe in God's hand.

And for me, I look at many of us as Christians even during this pandemic and I see many who know how to die well in the Lord, particularly the older ones in our church and you might know some of them.

We keep thinking that they are the vulnerable ones but actually when they live their lives, I don't see the fear in their lives. They are not reckless, of course, or oblivious to the risks, but they haven't allowed the virus to stop them from loving God and serving others.

[17 : 28] They have this quiet assurance that their lives are really in God's hands. And so they say to the teacher, no, it is not chance or luck. But rather, it's God's sovereign will that will decide when we are called home.

And they know that if God should say that it's time, then he's simply calling them to glory anyway, a much better place than they are in right now.

And so with that, they continue to serve God thankfully, joyfully, even in spite of life's struggles and frustrations. They realize that even though they may be aging, as Paul says in our second reading from 2 Corinthians, wasting away outwardly, yet inwardly, they are renewed day by day, growing in faith, hope, and assurance.

As they realize that their momentary troubles are building in them an ever-growing weight of glory that will be theirs in full at the coming of Christ Jesus. So what do we make then of these exhortations that the teacher has for us in verse 7 to 10?

Well, I think it helps us to understand them in a different light, in the light of Christ. So go back to verse 7, for instance, go eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart for God has already approved what you do.

[19 : 00] Yeah, sure, it's okay to enjoy what God gives us. Not because food and wine are the things that we need to bring us joy, but because we see those as indication of God's love for us.

Now, we don't need them to know that God loves us. The ultimate sign of that is the gift of His Son on the cross. But if God has already saved us for eternity in Christ, then we shouldn't be surprised that even in this life, He still continues to care for us, giving us these good things.

Or verse 9, enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun. Well, if marriage is something that God has given to you, then yes, love your spouse and enjoy married life.

But again, married life isn't something you need to find joy in life because our time under the sun would soon pass anyway.

So life is but a vapor, yes, but as long as God has given it to us, then we can use it to live it to His glory by being thankful in everything that He gives us, by using it to serve Him as it says in verse 10, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

[20 : 17] For in the realm of the dead where you're going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. Life may be short and fleeting, but in Christ we can make a difference now which will matter for eternity.

A life of faith in Jesus will make a difference for eternity. A life of witness to His salvation will make a difference. A life serving others so they might know Him will make a difference.

This is the way to transcend the fate that awaits us all. This is the way to conquer death through living for Christ. This is the right path that all of us should be on if we're headed to eternity.

And the question I guess I want to end with is are you on that path? And I hope and pray that you are. But if there should be any doubt about it then please speak to me, speak to Andrew or Vijay and let us help you, show you from God's Word how to get on this path through faith in Jesus.

And so knowing this certainty of life beyond death you have the chance, you have the wherewithal to live for Him in this life. Let's pray.

[21 : 39] Father, we pray that in this short and fleeting life that you've given to us that we may live it in faith to your Son Jesus.

Help us to see the eternal glory that awaits us. Help us not to fear death through which we need to walk in order to enter fully into that glory.

Help us to live by faith and not in fear. in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.