

## **Ecclesiastes 9:1–12**

### **The full and fleeting life**

#### **Main Point**

The wise response to life being *hebel* is to enjoy the present, for this is God's gift, will and purpose.

#### **Application**

Enjoy life before God, as he has given to you. This is NOT asceticism, NOT hedonism, and NOT prosperity doctrine.

#### **Purpose**

1. Persuade people of the importance of contentment in the present
2. Give some concrete advice about enjoying life
3. Help people see the world the way it really is, rather than buying the cultural lie that we control our own destiny

### **Introduction: Questionnaire**

It seems to me that we have a national obsession with living the good life. Our television guides bristle with so-called 'lifestyle programmes', that somehow they seem to squeeze in between advertisements that are seeking to improve your life.

We have one of the world's highest per-capita consumption rates for magazines. Most of them are 'lifestyle' magazines or at least contain lifestyle components. Many are in fact spin-offs or tie-ins with the television programmes.

And lying behind this lifestyle industry are some assumptions about what the good life looks like: what's life all about?

To begin today, I've devised a quick questionnaire — 20 questions that should help you know whether you're getting the most out of life that you possibly can. I plan to offer it to several magazines next week.

It will get you thinking about the kinds of things you value, and the way you proceed in the world. The very fact that I've mentioned a questionnaire will make some of you excited, and some of you anxious.

Pay attention to how you feel as you answer the questions, and it might help expose some of your assumptions about the purpose of life.

Once you've filled it out, no one's going to see it. In fact, you can fold it over afterwards and take it home with you, so try to be as honest as possible.

If by a happy chance you've managed to avoid psychometric testing in the past, you may not know that SA is 'strongly agree', A is 'agree', N is 'neutral', D is disagree and SD is 'strongly disagree'.

[DO QUESTIONNAIRE]

I trust that choosing which letters to circle will have started to raise some questions for you about how you spend your time and money, what sort of things motivate you.

Before you turn your questionnaire over, I just want to ask you one final question, which I think is the question Ecclesiastes would like us to have on the bottom: would your attitude to any of the issues raised by those questions be different if you knew you were going to die tonight?

[PAUSE]

Last week, we met Qoheleth [PPT], the shadowy figure who speaks to us through the book of Ecclesiastes.

And we finished with Qoheleth's unsettling observation that [PPT] all is *hebel* — vapour, fleeting, insubstantial, elusive, unpredictable, uncontrollable, futile.

For all our busyness in life, we can gain nothing of lasting value.

And for Qoheleth, death is really the creation's megaphone to proclaim loudly and clearly, "Your life is *hebel*."

Last week, we raised the problem; this week, we will hear Qoheleth's solution: if life really is like a vapour — fleeting, unable to be understood — how should we live? How can we lead a good life, according to Ecclesiastes?

[PPT — BLANK]

Will you pray with me as we begin?

Our almighty creator and loving heavenly father, we thank you for your word to us in Ecclesiastes. As we reflect on your word now, please help us by your Spirit to listen to you, to understand what you say, and to be willing to change. Amen.

[READ PASSAGE]

It will be very handy as we go through the talk if you keep your Bible open at Ecclesiastes 9, and if you use the outline on the other side of your questionnaire.

## **1 Life is uncertain vv 11–12**

Our passage for today is the one that for me lies at the heart of how to lead a good life in Ecclesiastes. And Qoheleth, true to form, doesn't sugar-coat life at all.

Life is uncertain.

### **a no simple rules**

There are no simple rules to the way life operates. As verse 11 says:

11 I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift [PPT] or the battle to the strong, [PPT] nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned [PPT]; but time and circumstance happen to them all.

[PPT — BLANK]

Sure, there may be general principles we can follow to minimize pain, but there are no hard and fast rules.

Perhaps you felt that as you were filling out the questionnaire. You didn't feel like circling one answer without explaining. Life isn't neat. It doesn't fall easily into categories.

Even if you follow the wisest principles, the nature of the world means that something will go drastically wrong for you sooner or later.

### **b evil events come unexpectedly**

12 Moreover, [verse 12] no man knows when his time will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Life is uncertain: there are no fixed rules by which to play, and you can never tell when a bad thing is going to be sprung on you.

## **2 Under God, all share life's same shifting fortunes v 1**

And for Qoheleth, unhappy circumstance doesn't single people out. Under God, all of us share the same shifting fortunes of life.

See it there in verse 1. I'll put up the ESV for you, since the NIV seems to have missed the point a little:

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.

Once more here, we see Qoheleth's high view of God's sovereignty: God is in control of the world, but you just can't work out what he's doing.

If you take any single one of your deeds, you cannot know whether it will result in love or hatred — good or bad. In life, you are destined to experience both.

Even the wise and righteous cannot avoid calamity.

You are not entirely in control of the outcome of your actions; God is.

[PPT — BLANK]

### **3 All share the same fate of death vv 2–6**

Whatever your experience in life, you are bound to face death. Point 3 on your outlines: all share the same fate of death.

Verse 2:

2 All share 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.

As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.

Death is the great leveller. Whether you are morally upright or a disgraceful reprobate; whether you are religious or irreligious; whether you are honest or so crooked that you can't lie straight in bed, death will overtake you.

It's one of the most obvious observations about life, isn't it, that inevitably there's an end for everyone.

It's the theme of one of Shakespeare's more famous speeches, where Hamlet comes upon the grave of the former court jester, Yorick. Taking up his skull, he says: [PPT]

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy...

And so Hamlet advises Yorick's skull,

Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that.

The nobility of the queen will not save her. She may slather on the make-up to cover her wrinkles, but one day she will die, and her wrinkly skin will disappear.

The Caesars of the past, even Alexander the Great, are now but dust. And Hamlet says that a peasant might take such dust, turn it into mud, and patch up a hole in the wall of his house.

[PPT — BLANK]

Of course, in our more prosaic age, we are content to say that the two sure things in life are death and taxes. But even Prince Rainier and Kerry Packer died.

Yes, death is the great leveller. It draws a line under all life's achievements, and casts them in a thoroughly different light.

### **b life is full of trouble, then you die v 3**

For Qoheleth, the fact that all alike die is a great evil, verse 3. He feels keenly the injustice of this situation. And so he comes to this bitter conclusion:

The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead.

Life is full of trouble, then you die.

### **c and face God's judgment 3:17; 11:9; 8:12–13**

Despite the injustices of this life, Qoheleth acknowledges that God will bring all into judgment.

The reality that humanity will face God's judgment after death permeates Ecclesiastes.

[PPT] 3:17 I thought in my heart,  
God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.

[PPT] 12:14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

And in judgment, it seems that justice is restored.

[PPT] 8:12 Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God.

13 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

For Qoheleth, the good person, the wise person, is the one who fears God. That is, there is a right reverence for the one who has created everything, who is in control of everything, and who will bring everything into judgment.

Qoheleth knows that when God judges, it will go better with God-fearing persons, who are reverent before God.

[PPT — BLANK]

### **d life is better than death vv 4–6**

If death is the great leveller, it's also the one thing that truly divides humanity in two.

That is, whether you're rich or poor, a prince or a jester, One Nation or Greens, you will be united in death. What divides people is not their social status, but whether they are alive or dead.

So is it better to be alive or dead?

In verses 4–6, Qoheleth engages in the kind of dark, gallows humour that would make Hamlet proud:

4 Anyone who is among the living has hope — even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

There is great irony here. When you're looking for the most disgusting animal in the Hebrew zoo, you're really tossing up between the dog and the pig.

But even a filthy, mangy dog should be favoured above a dead lion.

But what advantage do the living have? The NIV's 'hope' is a bit misleading here. The Hebrew word (יִתְקַן) really means 'confidence', that is, certain knowledge.

What is this certain knowledge that gives the living an advantage?

Verse 5:

5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.

I love it. It's better to be alive than dead, because at least when you're alive you know you'll die, which is more than you can say for the dead.

Their experience of life under the sun is over.

It's worth noting, here, that Qoheleth isn't thinking about the horror of losing loved ones. The Bible has much to say about that more broadly, but here Qoheleth is taking a detached, philosophical view of death. He wants to challenge us to think about what effect our **own** death should have on our life, rather than the death of others.

Over the last couple of months, as I've been thinking about Ecclesiastes and talking to people about it, I've been surprised how often people have said to me how depressing they find it as a book.

As I've pressed them to explain why they have this reaction, usually it's related to this idea, that life is full of trouble, then you die.

Perhaps I've spent too much time with morbid people, but isn't that just true? When I look at the lives of lots of people around me, when I look at my own life, I think: If I were to die tonight, it might be a fair summary of my life: lots of trouble, followed by death.

And yet, compared to the vast majority of people who are currently alive, and who have lived in the past, my life has been easy.

But even for those of us in late Western capitalist democracies, who have more food, money, education and comfort than we could lazily poke a stick at, life has its difficulties and its calamities.

I think there's a great kindness in Qoheleth here. He wants to tell us how the world is. All is *hebel* — the merest vapour.

Is this a cause for depression? Is the best option suicide? Not for Qoheleth.

He proposes a far better solution.

#### **4 Therefore, *carpe diem* vv 7–10**

Have another look with me at verses 7–9:

7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.

8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.

9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this *hebel* life that God has given you under the sun — all your *hebel* days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun.

Qoheleth's solution to the fact that we lead a brief and incomprehensible life is that we should enjoy it. In the words made famous in one of history's most saccharine films, "carpe diem" — "seize the day".

But note the simplicity of enjoyments in Qoheleth's world: food, drink, and love. The images of verse 8 — white garments and an oiled head — are images of celebration.

Note, too, that there is no mention of wealth and possessions. Certainly Qoheleth sees a value for them, and we'll discuss that further next week.

But they're not essential for happiness. For Qoheleth, the ingredients are food, drink, and love. He will also want to include in a qualified manner work (2:24; 8:15) and wisdom (2:26), but again we'll address that next week.

It strikes me, however, that I am rarely satisfied with the simple pleasures of food, drink and love. I want more. In fact, everything in our society pushes me to want more. If everyone were content with what they had, our economy would fall over very quickly, and our whole society would crumble.

And I think it's here that we can feel the great kindness in Qoheleth's view of the world, where your toil cannot produce any gain, where catastrophe befalls the righteous and the wicked without warning.

Qoheleth should help us be content. His view stops us getting our hopes up in an unrealistic manner.

Life is much less disappointing if you don't have naïve expectations of the world.

It's a simple psychological fact that if you have unmet expectations, you'll be disappointed — that's what disappointment is.

William James, one of the pioneers of psychology, was very interested in happiness: after all, he lived in a country where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were thought to be unalienable human rights, if not duties.

[PPT]

He recognized that self-esteem and consequently happiness worked on a kind of formula: the number of things at which you were successful, over your expectations.

For him, the higher your expectations of success, the more difficult it is to be happy.

James was scathing about the way his countrymen had come to worship success, and particularly success measured in monetary terms.

[PPT]

So he wrote to H.G. Wells:

The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease.

I think that disease is contagious, and has spread from the United States to Western Europe and there are very obvious symptoms in Sydney.

[PPT — BLANK]

Let me give you one very simple concrete example of how managing your expectations should help with joy and contentment.

Road rage, to my mind, grows out of people's refusal to accept the way the world is.

Here are some facts about our present reality: (1) traffic in Sydney is heavy; (2) there are many bad drivers in Sydney.

Now, if you acknowledge these facts, you will go on the road in the expectation that it will take you ages to get anywhere, and someone will probably tail-gate you or cut you off.

There is no point getting frustrated and angry about that. That's the way the world is. You might as well be frustrated and angry about the fact you can't flap your wings and fly.

[PAUSE]

Qoheleth provides us with a cure to the disease of endlessly chasing an imaginary success or trouble-free life.

We should enjoy our fleeting lives, but we need to know how to. We need to learn to be content with food, drink, and love. We must recognize the fact that much in the world is beyond our control. We must face the reality that disaster will come on us.

### **b for this is God's good gift, will and purpose**

But there is more to say about Qoheleth's view of enjoying life. We cannot overlook the fact that enjoyment of life is God's good gift, will and purpose for humanity.

You can see that joy is God's good gift in verse 9:

9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this *hebel* life that **God has given you** under the sun.

God is the creator; he is in control, and he is the one who gives everything. This is most explicit in 2:24–26: [PPT]

2:24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is **from the hand of God**, 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

26 To the man who pleases him, **God gives** wisdom, knowledge and happiness...

The fact that enjoyment is a gift from God should make us grateful. Remembering that joy is not something over which we have control, but is something God controls, should help us to be content.

[PPT — BLANK]

That is, it should not be our expectation that life shall always be pleasant. It is not our unalienable human right to be happy. When calamity strikes, it should be part of what we naturally expect from the world.

While we shouldn't dismiss the very real pain that exists in the world, perhaps even in calamity we might be thankful to God for whatever remains to us of food, drink and love.

That no one can find enjoyment without God, reminds us that humans should fear God. If you want a summary of how humans should live, according to Qoheleth, you probably won't find much better than 3:12: [PPT]

3:12 I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.

[REPEAT]

Life and joy come from God, and they are experienced before God, in full recognition of his grace.

[PPT — BLANK]

### **c know it cannot last**

But Qoheleth can't help himself. He has to remind us that this enjoyment cannot last. Verse 10 of chapter 9:

10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

All human activity comes to an end at death. This should spur us on to seek to enjoy life *now*.

But I think the spectre of death will always temper our enjoyment of life. When we remember death, it should help to focus us on what we want to do with our lives.

I think that this is at least a part of the point of the *Vanitas* genre of painting. I don't know if you've come across it, but here's an example from Pieter Boel [PPT]; the one that I had up at the beginning was by Pieter Claesz.

*Vanitas* paintings show objects of worldly pleasure or power, and juxtapose them with a skull, or an overturned glass, or a similar image of death. They're conscious reflections on Ecclesiastes: the Latin word *vanitas* was used to translate *hebel* — hence the use of 'vanity' in our English translations.

[PPT — BLANK]

Much earlier than *Vanitas* paintings, Herodotus writes that there was an Egyptian practice where at feasts, when the guests were at the height of their revelry, slaves would walk between the tables carrying skeletons on stretchers: a very confronting reminder of how fleeting life is.

Now, we're having some people over for brunch in a few weeks. I've been quite excited planning the menu. I've also been wondering if I should get hold of a skeleton for the occasion, as it appears these men have for their stroll by the seaside.

[PPT]

[PPT — BLANK]

## 5 The full and fleeting life

For Qoheleth, there is a twin truth in operation: life should be both full and fleeting.

Yes, it may be full of trouble, and swiftly end in death, but food, drink and love are good things to be enjoyed. They are good things that won't last, but good things nevertheless.

I think this twin truth — that life should be full and fleeting — saves us from three errors.

### a NOT asceticism

Firstly, it saves us from the error of asceticism. Asceticism is the view that the world is bad, that we should deprive our bodies, and so on. This is not a Christian view. God's creation is good, and is there to be enjoyed with the joy that God gives us. As Paul writes to Timothy, [PPT]

1 Tim 4:4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Any teaching that says you should abstain from marriage or from certain kinds of foods is the doctrine of demons, says Paul.

[PPT — BLANK]

**b NOT hedonism**

But this does not mean, either, that we should stray into hedonism. Hedonism is the wanton pursuit of pleasure — pleasure at any cost.

Ecclesiastes recognizes that the twin aims of humanity are 'to be happy and do good'.

Remember, too, that God alone can give you joy. If you don't fear God, you cannot properly enjoy his creation, because you will be trying to do things that go against the creation's purposes. They may seem pleasurable at first sight, but are ultimately unfulfilling and self-damaging.

**c NOT prosperity doctrine**

Finally, Ecclesiastes' view of the full and fleeting life saves us from destructive pseudo-Christian prosperity doctrine.

Crudely speaking, this teaching promises that if you come to Jesus, you'll be healthy, wealthy and wise.

But for Qoheleth, the full life involves simple contentment with food, drink and love.

Qoheleth does not seek fulfilment in the gaudy, greedy and immodest desires of our contemporary world.

And he is always mindful of the reality of living in this fallen world.

No man knows when his time will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Will you pray with me?

Almighty God, please teach us to be joyful and to do good before you. Please help us to recognize that joy is your gift to us. Thankyou that you have given us food, drink, and love in such abundance in our culture.

Please give us the wisdom to avoid the pitfalls of asceticism, hedonism and prosperity doctrine. Help us live our fleeting lives in reverent fear of you. Amen.