LESSON 10

THE SUBJECT NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

Ecclesiastes 9:1-18

In this lesson we talk biblically about what no one wants to talk about: death.

OUTLINE

When people talk about death and dying, they often use terms like passing on, slipping away, going to a better place, and enjoying rewards. Some would rather talk about the end of life in anything but realistic terms. Not Solomon. He speaks honestly—realism balanced with hope.

I. The Certainty of Death

A. The Reality of Death

B. The Responses to Death

II. The Complexity of Life

A. In This Life, the Best Man Isn't Always Rewarded

B. In This Life, a Good Man Isn't Always Remembered

OVERVIEW

A Chicago gambler named Willy Stokes, Jr., was buried in his Cadillac Seville made into a coffin. He was sitting at the steering wheel wearing a hot pink suit, hands on the wheel, with five $100 bills stuffed between his left thumb and forefinger. One of his gangland buddies walked by the coffin-car and said, "Man, that's living!"

Actually, that's dying. You can give death a hot pink suit and a fancy Cadillac, but it doesn't change a thing. Dead is dead.

Why is everyone so afraid to face the reality of death?

Solomon has written a book filled with realism, and he is not afraid to talk about death. He has said throughout this book that if you try to live your life without God, it will be a meaningless life—and therefore a meaningless death. To get to the end of a life of emptiness and despair and face the reality of who-knows-what after death . . . that could make anyone afraid to confront the reality of dying.

This may seem like a morbid subject to some, but it is not. It is a realistic and relevant subject. In fact, nothing is more relevant to every person who reads the book, than a discussion of death. The last time I checked, the statistics on people dying were exactly 100 percent. That makes it a relevant subject.

The Certainty of Death

In verses 1-10 Solomon confronts the reality of death and talks about what our response to death should be.

The Reality of Death

An old Italian proverb says, "When the chess game is over, the pawns, the rooks, the kings, the queens, all go back into the same box." One thing the righteous and the wicked share in common, Solomon says, is that they both die. Life ends the same way for everyone on planet earth (Hebrews 9:27).

You would think something so pervasive would be easily discussed, but it's not. We don't even like to say the word "death." We say, "passed away," "passed on," "went to be with the Lord," "got promoted to heaven," "in a better place," and "enjoying their rest." If any of those are true, it's because something else happened first: They died!

The late pastor Ray Stedman had a thought on why people are so uncomfortable at funerals: "A funeral is one event where one can no longer escape ultimate reality. A funeral is proof that we can no longer escape ultimate reality . . . that we are not in control of our own lives." The subject of death is avoided because everyone knows it's coming—the one thing in life they can't escape.

The Responses to Death

We can identify two things not to do and one thing to do when it comes to responding to death.

1. Don't Deny It

   How we respond to death says a lot about the contents of our heart—what we really believe. When I was a student in seminary, I worked as a chaplain at a major hospital for two years. I came in contact with death, and the people whose lives were affected, every day. I saw people devastated by death, and I saw people face death with calm and assurance. Death tells a lot about who we are.

   Some people choose to deny the reality of death. As a young pastor, I was asked to conduct the funeral of someone I had never met. At the service, as I was walking to my car, a young woman came running across the parking lot screaming at me, using language I hadn't heard in a long time. She was a daughter of the deceased, and was angry that I had mentioned her sister in my remarks, but had not mentioned her. Of course, not knowing the deceased, I was using information furnished to me by others and had not intentionally omitted mention of her. But she was so angry over the death of her father that she chose to vent on me.

   Denying death is a dead-end street; a strategy with nowhere to go except despair and frustration.

2. Don't Ignore It

   Another response to death is to hope against hope that it will pass you by. "Where there's life, there's hope" comes from verse 4. "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (verse 4), this person says. Better to be a despised dog and alive, than the king of the beasts, but dead.

   The problem with this approach is that hope is only valid when it is based on reality. Hope is like faith—it all depends on the object of the hope or faith. Hope in hope avails nothing, but hope in Christ who conquered death is totally

different. However, hope in Christ doesn't ignore death. It acknowledges that death is real but has been overcome by the Resurrection of Christ.

Solomon reminds us of everything that can't be done after we die—especially the person who dies apart from God (verses 5-6). But there's no reason we can't do those things while we're alive. It's a reminder that death is coming—live life while we can!

3. Do Embrace It

Solomon doesn't want us to be morbid, discouraged, and oppressed in light of the certainty of death. He wants us to ask, "What does the approach of death mean to me *now*?" The answer comes when we embrace the reality of death and focus on the life we have to live before it arrives.

Verses 7-10 give us a recipe for joyful living:

a. Eat Every Meal Like You're at a Banquet

Solomon wrote in Proverbs about coming to our meals with a glad heart (see Proverbs 15:17). Meals are to be occasions for celebration and fellowship, but far too often we eat on the run or while watching television. And it's not the food that's the issue; it doesn't have to be an expensive meal. It's what you bring to the table in your heart that matters.

The modern concept of "fast food" goes contrary to Solomon's notion. In fact, there is a growing movement among food experts and connoisseurs called "slow food" which promotes a return to the Mediterranean and Near Eastern ideas of meals as an extended event of socializing and fellowship—as well as the pure enjoyment of good food. This is certainly an extension of an ancient idea found in the Bible.

Every meal that goes by without using it as an opportunity to interact with friends or loved ones is an opportunity missed.

b. Celebrate Every Day Like You're at a Party

Putting on white garments and anointing one's head with oil were preparations for a party or celebration. Solomon is saying, "Do this every day—not just when there is a wedding or birthday or reunion. Make every day a celebration of life as a gift from God." The admonition to rejoice makes its way into the New Testament as well (Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16). Even amidst a message of a world

dying in sin, we find the admonition to always rejoice. Don't become preoccupied with death and forget that life is to be lived as a celebration of the goodness of God.

c. Enjoy Every Day of Your Marriage Like You're on Your Honeymoon

Remember that Solomon had violated his own marriage vows by importing wives from Egypt and having hundreds of concubines and wives in his harem. But there was a first wife, the wife of his youth, to whom he failed to stay faithful. It's important to note that, at the end of his life, he is admonishing his readers to "live joyfully with the wife whom you love." Lifelong marriage takes work and commitment, but it can be the source of unending joy when invested in daily.

d. Work Every Day as If it Were Your Last Day to Work

I have read that if a person goes to work right out of college, by the time he reaches age 50, he will have worked 56,000 hours. How many of those hours, for the average Christian, have been lived for God? And what might be the impact if they were? That doesn't mean becoming a pastor or missionary. It means thanking God each day for the work you have to do and asking Him to use you in your job for His glory and honor.

Irish poet Evangeline Patterson made this observation that I think bears well on this point: "I was brought up in a Christian environment where because God had to be given preeminence, nothing else was allowed to be important. I have broken through to the position that because God exists, everything is important."

That viewpoint will allow us to see our work places as sacred—as places of worship and work blended together. Our work, in fact, becomes a form of worship as we do our work "heartily, as to the Lord and not to men" (Colossians 3:23).

These four admonitions from Solomon can transform our lives from ones of dullness and drudgery to ones of joy, anticipation, and expectation. They are reminiscent of a verse we have already covered in these lessons, Ecclesiastes 5:20: "For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart."

Do you dwell unduly on the days of your life? Do you worry about death and dying? God wants your attention in life to be focused on the joy of living, not on the certainty of dying. But not

as a means of avoidance! If you know Christ, you are not afraid of death. You know that death is a doorway into His presence forever. And because you are so certain of that fact, you are free to focus on the life that is yours to live now—and to live it with joy!

The Complexity of Life

In our pursuit of joy in this life, Solomon wants us to be realists. Life is not all sweetness and light. There will be harsh realities that can be upsetting if we are not aware of them and prepared for them.

In This Life, the Best Man Isn't Always Rewarded

This is a well-known passage of Scripture that is worthy of duplicating here:

> I returned and saw under the sun that—
> The race is not to the swift,
> Nor the battle to the strong,
> Nor bread to the wise,
> Nor riches to men of understanding,
> Nor favor to men of skill;
> But time and chance happen to them all.
> For man also does not know his time:
> Like fish taken in a cruel net,
> Like birds caught in a snare,
> So the sons of men are snared in an evil time,
> When it falls suddenly upon them.

Solomon is reemphasizing an earlier message: Life isn't fair, the best man doesn't always win, sometimes you do your best and come in last. These are hard lessons for us to learn, and ones we would do well to teach our children because it is simply how life is. Far too many adults have not learned these lessons and find themselves in despair when things don't go the way they expect.

Who was the biggest guy in the Bible? Goliath—but he was killed by a teenager with a sling. The wealthiest man? Solomon, but he ruined his life with poor choices. The fastest? Joab's brother, but he got run through with a spear. The handsomest? Absalom, but his beautiful hair got hung in a tree and he was killed. The strongest? Samson, but he was tricked by a woman and captured. The race doesn't always go to the strongest, fastest, most handsome, wealthiest, or biggest.

Pursue life with everything at your disposal, but be a realist. Sometimes the best person isn't always rewarded in this life.

In This Life, a Good Man Isn't Always Remembered

Solomon tells a little story about a poor man who saved a city from destruction but who was then forgotten by everyone. The evil ruler who was going to destroy the city got more press and attention than the one who saved the city.

Have you ever done the right thing and then felt you were ignored or overlooked for your contribution? Those experiences are painful, to say the least. But they are consistent with life in this world: unfair, unpredictable, disappointing, and below expectations—sometimes. Life is not always that way, but it is frequent enough that we need to be realists and plan on it.

How to plan? Live every day focused on life, not death or disappointment. Life is a good gift from God who sees every good work and rewards us accordingly.

What—and who—are you focused on today?

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-10.

   a. As Christians, how is it that we are able to look at death in a positive light?

   b. For non-Christians, why is it understandable that death is frightening?

   c. In light of the fact that death may come at any moment, how are we to live our lives?

   d. Ask yourself: *What does the approach of death mean to me now?*

   e. Do you have a tendency of eating meals quickly, as if it's a task you must finish quickly?

   f. Why does Solomon suggest eating "with joy" in verse 7?

   g. Do you often find yourself celebrating life? Why is this important to do?

   h. Are you married? If so, do you still invest in and celebrate your marriage daily? How?

   i. What is the biblical way to approach work? Do you always follow this mandate?

   j. Explain the significance of the quote by Evangeline Patterson: *Because God exists, everything is important.*

2. What harsh realities does Solomon remind us of in Ecclesiastes 9:11-18?

   a. How can we learn to accept these and not let them eat at us when they happen?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 9:3-10 and discuss the following questions:

   a. What responses to the subject of death does the lesson talk about?

   b. What responses do you think you should adopt, based on how the subject of death makes you react now?

   c. *Death tells a lot about who we are.* Explain the truth in this statement.

2. Read Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 and discuss the following questions:

   a. What four ingredients does Solomon give us for joyful living? Elaborate on each. What would each of these pieces of advice look like in our lives?



b. Do you do any of these things in your daily life?

c. If not, why should you consider adopting them into your daily routine?

3. Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-18.

   a. What are some harsh realities of life that Solomon wants us to realize? Explain each point.

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   b. How can we learn to live with these realities?

4. Discuss how the certainty of death can help us realize the complexities of life.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 bears a striking resemblance to a passage from *The Gilgamesh Epic,* a Sumerian writing from around 2000 B.C., long before Solomon's time. "Make thou merry by day and by night. Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing. Day and night dance thou and play! Let thy garments be sparkling fresh, thy head be washed; bathe thou in water. Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand. Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!" If the parallel is more than coincidental, it shows that wisdom literature migrated between cultures in Solomon's day and that he was widely read.