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Love or Hate?
Ecclesiastes 9: 1-18

Love or hate DIG: What is the crucial question that the Teacher asks here? Why does Solomon say that our world under the sun gives us no clue as to what God thinks of us? What does the statement, "For God has already accepted your deeds" mean? Why are time and chance paired together? What do we learn from the little parable at the end of the chapter?

REFLECT: Do you feel you deserve a reward in this life for your righteousness? Or would some kick-in-the-pants be more appropriate? In what ways do you feel you receive the benefits of faith in this life? Given the unexpected nature of life, how do you prepare yourself for such disruptions? How can you best help others through them?

In a life under the sun, apart from God, no one can tell if He loves, or hates us.

Before the positive emphasis of the final three chapters can emerge, we have to make sure that we shall be building on nothing short of hard reality. In case we should be cherishing some comforting illusions, **Chapter 9** confronts us with the little that we know, then with the vast extent of what we cannot handle: in particular, with **death**, the ups and downs of fortune, and the erratic kindnesses of those around us. But first it asks the crucial question, whether we are in **the hands** of **Friend** or **Foe**.



Love or hate? 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 (9:1). When we read the words of **David** in **Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the dome of the sky speaks of the works of His hand,"** it is obvious that we have a powerful and glorious **Creator**. But it takes more than that to know what **He** thinks about us? Whether we take the words **love or hate** here to be a biblical way of saying "acceptance" or "rejection," or to have their simple, primary sense, we shall have, either way, only an uncertain answer about **the Creator's** character from the world we live, with its mixture of delight and terror, beauty and ugliness. But then **Solomon** makes matters more difficult for us, supposing that we are reasoning only by what we see **under the sun,** cutting **God** out of the picture. Then, for good measure, **he** presents us with **three uncomfortable facts** before **he** ends the chapter.

Death: Anything can happen to anyone; the same thing can happen to the righteous as to the wicked, to the good and clean and to the unclean, to someone who offers a sacrifice and to someone who doesn't offer a sacrifice; it is the same for a good person as for a sinner, for someone who takes an oath rashly as for someone who fears to take an oath (9:2). Our world **under the sun** gives us no clue as to what **God** thinks of us. Things that are supposed to matter most to **Him** turn out to make no difference – or none that anyone can see – to the way we are disposed of in the end. Moral or immoral, religious or profane, we are all mowed down like grass. In a thousand years, as we

say, it will all be the same thing.

Yet, while **death** seems to say this – and **it** has a way of getting the last word – we find ourselves protesting immediately. **The Teacher** speaks for all of us when he cries out: **This is another evil among all those done under the sun, that the same events can occur to anyone. Truly, the human mind is full of evil; and as long as people live, folly is in their hearts; after which they go to be with the dead (9:3).** When we look at the world as it reveals itself to us, with **death** being the universal obliterator, and with **evil** running riot, those two things are not unrelated. To live in an apparently **pointless** world is deeply disillusioning, and disillusion breeds destructiveness or despair – the madness of the violent or the hopelessly withdrawn.

As a result, is despair all that's left? Apparently not, for the human race would have perished long ago. And **Solomon** agrees. **Life** is decidedly worth **living**. After all, even at its worst, **life** is better than nothing, which is what **death** appears to be. **For as long as a person is linked with the living, there is hope – better to be a living dog than a dead lion (9:4)!** The robust good sense of this popular proverb paves the way for a spirited refusal in the next two verses to let **death** browbeat **the living** before **thei**r time. The sarcasm seems obvious to most. **For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; there is no longer any reward for them, because all memory of them is lost. What they loved, what they hated and what they envied all disappeared long ago, and they no longer have a share in anything done under the sun (9:5-6).**[306] The advantage to **the living** is simply consciousness; they are aware and **the dead** are not. Thus, while **the living** may be better off than **the dead**, they are nonetheless miserable.

Under the cloud of **death**, the next three verses brighten up the passage as far as anything **under the sun** can. **So go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God has already accepted your deeds (9:7).** At first, this jars the reader. Does this mean that **Solomon** believes that **God** gives people unlimited approval of their actions? Heaven forbid! This merely summarizes what **he** had previously said about **the enjoyment** of **life**: (a) wealth and possessions, which stem from one's labor, ultimately are gifts from **God (5:18-19)**; (b) only **ADONAI** gives the ability to **enjoy** the fruits of one's labor **(2:24, 3:13, 5:18)**; and (c) the ability to enjoy those things depends on whether one pleases **YHVH (2:26)**. So the statement: **for God has already accepted your deeds** means that possessing **God's** gifts and the ability to enjoy them are evidence of

God's prior approval that one can do so. If God had not approved of the gifts, one could not **enjoy** them.[307]

The Teacher continues **his** call to **enjoy life**. **He** warns **his** readers to waste no opportunity or expense to seize whatever good things **life** has to offer. **Let your clothing always be white, and never fail to perfume your head. Enjoy life with the wife you have loved throughout your meaningless life that he has given you under the sun, all the days of your futility; for that is your allotted portion in life and in your labor that you work at under the sun. Whatever task comes your way to do, do it with all your strength; because in sh'ol, where you will go, there is neither working nor planning, neither knowledge nor wisdom (9:7-10).** This ends **Solomon's** appeal to **enjoy life** in the present, especially in view of **death**. **He** urges **his** listeners to act now, because **death** brings everything to an abrupt stop.[308] But **death** is not the only hazard.

Time and chance: **Yet another thing I observed under the sun is that races aren't won by the swift or battles by the strong, and that food doesn't go to the wise or wealth to the intelligent or favor to the experts; rather, time and chance rule them all. For people don't know when their time will come any more than fish caught in the fatal net or birds caught in a snare; similarly, people are snared at an unfortunate time, when suddenly it falls on them (9:11-12).**

Time and chance are paired, no doubt, because **they** both have a way of suddenly taking matters out of our hands. This is obvious enough where **chance** is concerned – for providence operates in secret, and to our human perspective is largely made up of steps into the unknown and events out of the blue, any of which may change our lives forever. With regard to time, it has already been shown (**to see link click Cj – All in Good Time**) how relentlessly our lives are swung from 0ne extreme to another by the tidal pull of forces we do not control. All this counterbalances the impression we may get from the maxims about hard work, and that we can achieve success. It seemed to **Solomon** that in this life, we are truly like fish taken in by an evil net, or else unaccountably spared by the masters of our fate and captains of our souls.

Wisdom and folly: The third fact to upset our calculations is presented to us rather sadly in a little parable. **Here is something else I have seen as wisdom under the sun, and it seemed important to me: there was a small town with few people in it; and a great king came to attack it; he surrounded it**

and built massive siege-works against it. Now there was found in it a man who was poor but wise, and by his wisdom he saved the city; yet afterwards, nobody remembered that poor man. So, although I say that wisdom is better than strength, nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised; nobody pays attention to what he says (9:13-16). We can immediately identify with **the people** in **the small town,** and feel their relief when the amateur strategist brings off his masterpiece. If we are honest, we may still see ourselves in the last scene, when they totally forget **the man** who saved **them**. But the parable is not a moral tale to show what people should do; it is a cautionary tale to show what they are like. If we are to identify with anybody, it is with **the poor wise man** – not as though we should imagine that we are universal consultants; simply that, sadly enough, we should learn not to count on anything as fleeting as public gratitude.

In the pattern of this chapter this is one more example of what is unpredictable and cruel in life, to sap our confidence in what we can make of it on our own without **God** in the center of it. **A wise man speaking quietly is more worth heeding than the shouts of a ruler commanding fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but a person who makes a mistake can destroy much good (9:17-18).** The last two verses give an extra boost to the parable by showing first how valuable and then how vulnerable **wisdom** is. We are left with more than a suspicion that in human politics, the last word will regularly go to the loud voice of **verse 17** or the cold steel of **verse 18**. Seldom to truth, seldom with any value.[309]