

While There Is Life There Is Hope

Ecclesiastes 9:1-6; Proverbs 3:5-6

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While there is life there is hope. If we did not believe that God was able to make straight what is crooked in our lives here upon the earth, one great encouragement to our perseverance would be lost. For we often cling to the hope that though we may live today under the cloud of darkness (due to unexpected tragedies, trials, afflictions, and persecution), tomorrow is a new day in which the Lord may alter those most difficult circumstances or give abundant grace to face them.

We parents cling tenaciously to such a new prospect of hope for our rebellious children, that while they have breath the Lord is able to give them a new heart. We, who feel like we are drowning at times under the weight of a besetting sin, must seek to look in hope to another day when the Lord's mercy may reach down and give us a wondrous degree of victory over that besetting sin. We, who see our marriages limping along with little or no vitality or life, must encourage ourselves that while we live God is able to breathe new life into that which even seems like it is about to die. We, who are overcome with some financial or physical trial, would find it most difficult to continue to press on if we did not believe that God was able to restore our wealth and our health to us in this life.

He is not simply the God of the dead, but He is the God of the living. As God's dear children, you have an absolutely certain hope for the life to come, that God will wipe away all tears from your eyes, that He will remove all temptation and sin from your life, and that He will make you only capable of joy and incapable of pain and heartache; and you rejoice in such a certain hope that is yours after death. But dear ones, there is also a hope to which you must cling, that because God is almighty, merciful, good, and loving, He is able to help you in the here and now, while you yet have breath and life. He is not only good and merciful after this life, but is good and merciful to you in this life.

That is not to say that everything in life will turn out the way that you want it to turn out. But it is to say that while you breathe, you have hope in the Lord almighty who is able to do great and wondrous things for His people. For nothing shall be impossible with our God. Again I say that if this was not true, a great encouragement to your perseverance in trusting in the Lord in the here and now would be taken from you.

The main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 9:1-6 are these: (1) While We Breathe We See the Same Circumstances Befall the Righteous and the Wicked (Ecclesiastes 9:1-3); and (2) While We Breathe There Is Hope in Almighty God (Ecclesiastes 9:4-6).

I. While We Breathe We See the Same Circumstances Befall the Righteous and the Wicked (Ecclesiastes 9:1-3).

A. Solomon was caught up in seeking to understand the mysteries of God's providence in the last section we considered (in Ecclesiastes 8:14-17). He diligently pursued in wisdom to comprehend the most holy and most wise ways of the Lord in ordaining events in this life that seem to bring reward to the wicked and adversity to the wicked. Although Solomon did not consider his study of God's providence to be fruitless in living a joyful Christian life, He did make it clear that God does not give to us (not even to the most wise among us) an accounting of all His ways (Ecclesiastes 8:17). Thus, we must infer that the Lord calls us to trust Him, love Him, and cheerfully submit to Him whether we understand why He has specifically ordained the events for our life or not (Proverbs 3:5-6).

B. He who was the wisest mere mortal that ever lived has studiously pondered the way in which God's most holy and most wise providence falls out upon the righteous and the wicked, and Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 9:1 that he declares to us the fruit of his study ("For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this").

1. The first truth that Solomon declares to us as a firm and certain conclusion from his study is this: Although it may appear by way of mere outward observation that the reward of the righteous (who trust in Jesus Christ alone for their eternal salvation) is given to the wicked (who continue in unbelief and unrepentant sin) and that the reward of the wicked is given to the righteous, that is not the case, for the righteous man, woman, and child and their works are in the almighty hand of the Lord God who loves them with an everlasting love ("that the righteous, and the wise, and their works are in the hand of God" Ecclesiastes 9:1). Therefore, regardless of what you think you may see in the adversities of the righteous and in the prosperity of the wicked, faith looks beyond what the natural eyes behold and sees behind the curtain of the stage of life that the sovereign almighty God holds those whom He loves firmly and securely in His hand, so that nothing befalls them apart from what He knows will ultimately be for their good.

a. Dear ones, to be held securely in the hand of God is the safest place in the world for you to be, regardless of what His providence may bring into your life (Deuteronomy 33:3; Psalm 31:15; John 10:28-30—quite literally in the Greek text it says, "and they shall not, not forever, perish").

b. How often you may think that if only you could escape the trying circumstances in which you find yourself, you would be safe and secure from those dangerous enemies that would seek to destroy you. But dear ones, nothing could be further from the truth. You are safer within the hand of God (as you willingly submit yourself to His most holy and most wise providence) than any other place you could possibly be—even if bullets should be flying and bombs should be falling all around you (Psalm 91:5-10). Jonah found out the hard way that safety is not found in fleeing from God, but in submitting to God. The disciples of the Lord Jesus learned that they were safer with the Lord Jesus Christ, even in the midst of a terrible storm that seemed out of control and ready to sink their boat, than without Him in their own homes.

c. It is not just some of the days of your life or just some of the events of your life that are in the safe and secure hand of God—no, rather all the times of your life are in His hand. Faith (even when it is weak) lays hold of that Divine truth no matter what God brings into your life or mine. Now only if that truth is grasped by faith can one move on to the other conclusions that Solomon reveals for your good in the following verses. Beloved, if you are not resting by faith on the immovable Rock, that you are safely and securely in the almighty and loving hand of God regardless of what you face in your life right now, you will not know the joy of the Lord as your strength or the peace of God that passes all understanding.

2. Solomon having laid a firm foundation for the safety and security of the one who trusts in the Lord moves next to another conclusion he draws from his study of God's providence: one cannot determine God's love or God's hate for people based only upon the providence of God, for both outward adversity and outward prosperity fall to the lot of all people while they live here upon the earth ("no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them. All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath" Ecclesiastes 9:1c-2). Solomon says in effect that one cannot determine with certainty from a mere outward observation of God's providence alone whether God loves one as His child or hates one as His enemy, for God in His providence brings both adversity and prosperity to everyone alike (to the righteous and to the wicked, to the clean and to the unclean, to him that offers an acceptable sacrifice and to him that does not, to him that takes an oath seriously and to him that does not take it seriously). No one (no matter how righteous) is free of trials in this life, and no one (no matter how wicked) is free of some blessings in this life. The book of providence reveals WHAT God sends by way of affliction or gifts to mankind, but another book is needed in

order to understand WHY God sends what He does into the lives of people—whether out of love or out of hatred. And that book which helps us to understand the WHY (and not simply the WHAT) is the Holy Scripture.

a. Dear children of the living God, what we shall see from our text today is that although you may learn much from the book of God's providence, you must interpret God's providence according to what is recorded in the Bible—you must seek to understand the secret ways of the Lord by what is revealed in Scripture (Deuteronomy 29:29). For, dear ones, if you only consider the severe afflictions and trials in the life of a righteous man by what you see in God's book of providence, you will likely interpret those severe afflictions and trials to always be an expression of God's holy hatred for that righteous man (and by the same token then you must interpret the blessings that fall to the lot of the wicked as indications of God's approval and love of the wicked who hate and despise Christ). If you lived at the time of Job and only viewed Job's suffering the loss of his children, the loss of his wealth, the loss of his health, and the loss of his good name from the book of God's providence, you would likely have come to the same conclusion to which his three friends came: namely, that Job was guilty of some grievous unrepentant sin in the sight of God. Or if you only looked at the mere outward circumstances of those many saints who are mentioned as being men and women of faith in Christ (in Hebrews 11), you would likely conclude that some of them were loved by God while others of them were hated by God (consider Hebrews 11:32-40). Believing Moses died in the wilderness along with many who did not believe in Israel. Righteous King Josiah died in battle as did wicked King Ahab. Was faithful Abraham rich? So was Nabal, an unfaithful fool (the husband of Abigail). At other times, God clearly makes a distinction in His providential dealings between those who are His people and those who are His enemies. Lowly Mordecai is exalted to a position of authority in Persia, while wicked Haman is hung on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. Dear ones, the children of God can in God's providence fall into grievous sins as can the enemies of God. David commits adultery. Solomon worships the false gods of his wives. Jonah tries to flee from the Lord His God. The disciples are filled with pride in seeking to know who is the greatest among them. Peter denies even knowing the Lord (three times). Paul struggles against the temptations of lust (in Romans 7). This is not to excuse their sin, but it is true that sinner and saint alike fall into grievous sins according to God's most holy and most wise providence.

b. Dear ones, that is why you must be ever so careful not to presume from mere outward circumstances alone that there must be some unrepentant sin in the life of a brother or sister who undergoes much hardship and trial, or on the other hand presume from mere outward circumstances alone that you must be quite the holy people because everything in your life and family seem to be going just the way you want them to go. The Lord may, in fact, be taking a brother or sister through some difficult trial not to reveal some unrepentant sin in his/her life, but rather to encourage all believers that He (the Lord) is ever faithful to His promise to uphold His people even in the midst of their suffering (1 Corinthians 10:13). Now that is not to say that God does not discipline Christians (and severely discipline us at times due to our rebellious ways) by what we suffer in this life. But God does so in the life of the child of God, not because He hates His child, but because He loves His child (Hebrews 12:5-6). You cannot interpret all trials and afflictions in the lives of those who cling to Christ and His righteousness as indications of God's anger against them or interpret the blessings which God sends into the lives of the wicked as indications of His loving approval. Why does the Lord graciously restrain one Christian from falling into some gross sin, while He does not restrain another Christian from falling into that same gross sin? Is it because the Lord loves the one Christian more than the other? David was said by God to be a man after God's own heart, and yet the Lord did not restrain David from sinning with Bathsheba, even though the Lord did restrain Joseph from committing adultery with his master's wife. Even sin, dear ones, has its purpose in the life of the Christian (not that we condone sin or not that God is the author of sin or temptation to sin). But the Scripture teaches you through your sin to be humble before your Holy Father when you see how your sin offends Him who has loved you with a perfect love and a perfect holiness. The Scripture teaches you by your sin, that you constantly need your Savior due to the corruption within and that you are all in the process of being sanctified and conformed to His image (even

though you have been justified by faith alone once and for all). The Scripture teaches you by your sin, that salvation from beginning to end is all of grace and that you are to pass along to others these lessons of God's mercy and grace that you have learned from the sin into which you have fallen. The Scripture teaches you through your sin, that you are to look for heaven, at which time sin and its effect in your life will be forever removed. The Lord has given to you His Holy Word, so that your dull conscience might be enlightened to understand to some degree (though not fully), WHY He does what He does in this world.

c. Dear ones, the difference between the children of God and the enemies of God is not to be found in their outward circumstances in this life—it is to be found in the promise of life, righteousness, and forgiveness that the children of God have received by faith alone from the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:11-12). This, and this alone, explains WHY God brings what He does into the lives of His children who trust Him and into the lives of His enemies who disbelieve Him. This and this alone clarifies whether hardships in life are sent as acts of God's love to sanctify those upon whom they fall, or as acts of God's wrath to condemn those upon whom they fall. The same Babylonian captivity may be used to punish in holy wrath the enemies of God in Israel and to sanctify in love the children of God in Israel (like Jeremiah the prophet).

3. Note briefly in Ecclesiastes 9:3 that Solomon declares the lack of difference in God's providence as it relates to mere outward circumstances between the righteous and the wicked to be vanity and emptiness (read Ecclesiastes 9:3). Solomon is not accusing the most holy and most wise providence of God to be mere futility or vain determinism from a heavenly perspective. However, from the perspective of one who is thinking and living "under the sun" (from a mere earthly perspective) and who does not have the biblical insight and knowledge to understand WHY God sends the same event upon the righteous and the wicked, none of this will make sense to him. It will appear to one who thinks and lives "under the sun" that either there is no God and a irrational fate controls everything, or if there is a God who is all-powerful, He must be completely devoid of all moral standards and entirely capricious and arbitrary in what He does—no rhyme nor reason in what He sends—for no distinction is made in what He sends upon the righteous and upon the wicked. And this will only further harden the heart of one, who has a mere earthly perspective, to become "mad" in sin and rebellious against God until the very time of death, if he only thinks and lives "under the sun" (viewing these matters from a mere earthly perspective) rather than "above the sun" (from a heavenly perspective). For one who thinks and lives "under the sun" will conclude that it really makes no difference ultimately whether one is good or bad (godly or ungodly), because the same outward circumstances fall upon both the righteous and the wicked—the one trusting in Christ or the one trusting in himself, the one trusting in the Lord or the one trusting in Mohammed (or in anything else). There is no lasting joy and peace, dear ones, when you think as one who lives "under the sun." There is no meaning or purpose to life. There is only meaning and purpose for everything that happens in your life and in the life of your loved ones when you think and live "above the sun", in the light of God's revelation of His everlasting love for those who rest by faith in the righteousness of Christ as their only hope of eternal salvation and His everlasting wrath for those who rest in their own righteousness.

II. While We Breathe There Is Hope in Almighty God (Ecclesiastes 9:4-6).

A. Solomon now briefly retraces the steps of those who think and live from a mere earthly perspective ("under the sun"). Solomon (in Ecclesiastes 9:3) had brought this earthly-minded person through his vain life to the point of death. There it all ends as far as making any change in the way one thinks about God, sin, salvation, providence, life, death, heaven, and hell. After death, the way that a sinner might have thought, believed, and lived in this life cannot be altered. But while there is breath, there is hope that a sinner who lives only for what he can see with these natural eyes may be given the eye of faith to behold and receive the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation that is offered to him ("For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion" Ecclesiastes 9:4). While one is joined to all the

living (here upon earth), there is hope. For even the most contemptible creature (a dog) that roamed the streets at night as a scavenger) was better off in some respects than the most noble creature (a lion) that was dead. In other words, in some respect the vilest criminal that is living is better off than the most respected citizen that is dead. It is in this respect that Solomon says the living are better off than the dead: the living have hope of being changed and transformed by the power of God, whereas the dead who die in their sin and unbelief do not. This truth also applies to you as a Christian. For while you live, there is hope that you can by God's grace confess your sin to God and to others, apply the cross of Christ in overcoming sin, lay up treasures in heaven in the use of those gifts God has given to you to be rewarded by Him at that time. However, all opportunities here upon the earth to confess your sins, to heal the divisions that exist between brothers and sisters, to use your gifts to glorify God and spread the gospel of salvation to family and friends will come to an end at death. Therefore, you are exhorted by Solomon not to squander the time that you now have to show your love for others, to say the things you ought to say and not to leave them unsaid, to do what you ought to do and not to leave them undone, for death will bring those opportunities to an end. As I said at the beginning of the sermon, it is this hope that God uses to encourage you (while you have breath) to press on and not to give up ("I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" Psalm 27:13). Dear ones, the Lord is able to make what is crooked straight even in this life. For nothing is impossible with our God.

B. Solomon then lists some characteristics of death in Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 that show the advantage of those who live in comparison to those who die.

1. The living know they are going to die, so that they can make preparation for their death whereas the dead cannot make preparation for death. The living are moving toward the destination of death, whereas the dead have arrived at the destination of death. All plans and preparations after death are useless. Thus, do not wait until it is too late to trust Christ, to love Christ, and to obey Christ. Live each day in preparation for death, so that you do not leave matters undone when you die between yourself and God and between yourself and your spouse, children, parents, brothers and sisters in Christ, and neighbors.

2. Next Solomon says that the dead know not anything as to earthly events or people. God knows what goes on in this world, but the dead (whether in heaven or hell) do not know what events befall those who are yet living. This, however, is not to deny that there is conscious knowledge in the dead, whether the dead are in heaven or whether the dead are in hell (the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16).

3. Next, the dead have no further earthly opportunities to receive rewards for their earthly service, while the living do have such opportunities.

4. Next, the memory of the dead perishes so soon, while the living are remembered by those who know them.

5. Finally, the dead no longer have love, hatred, or envy for the things of this world—all those earthly affections for the things of this life pass away at death. The dead carry away nothing from this life with them. For the dead have no longer any portion in that which is done under the sun. But the living yet have a portion in this world. The living yet can love that which is good and hate that which false in this world.

C. Dear ones, are you rapidly hastening to death without hardly any thought of its finality as it relates to the things you ought to do and to the things you ought not to leave undone here upon the earth? What will you want to say to family and friends upon your deathbed that you could have said now? What will you want to do for family and friends upon your deathbed that you could have done now? What sins will you want to have mortified in your life as you lie in your deathbed that you could have mortified now? Although you may not see a difference between the outward circumstances of the righteous and the wicked in this life, there is coming a time of judgment when the Lord will separate the righteous from the wicked, and will reward them accordingly as they have trusted in Christ and served Christ while in the land of the living, or on

the other hand ignored, neglected, and disbelieved Christ and rather served themselves in the land of the living (Matthew 25:31-46). Dear ones, do not wait until it is too late—now, while you yet breathe is the time to desire, to pray for, and to seek the grace of God to make the changes in your life that ought to be made. The fact that there is hope in the land of the living also encourages you never to give up praying for others who need Christ or have fallen away from Christ. Always hope in the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

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