

THIS WAY TO JOY

ECCLESIASTES 9



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

This Way to Joy: Ecclesiastes 9
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Ecclesiastes 9: Introduction

Life doesn't always work out the way we think it should. If we're seeking happiness from this life, then we're bound to be disappointed. Even what happiness we can know never quite satisfies, and doesn't hang around very often.

We need more than happiness to bring rest to our souls. We need joy.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 In the Hand of God

Pray Psalm 115.9-11.

O Israel, trust in the LORD;
He is their help and their shield.
O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD;
He is their help and their shield.
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD;
He is their help and their shield.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.1, 2.

Prepare.

1. What does Solomon say about all the works of men? What does he mean by that?
2. By “one event” does Solomon mean any *specific* event? Explain.

Meditate.

The experiences of life are really no different for those who live “under heaven” and those who live “under the sun”. Everybody knows and experiences love and hatred; everyone is involved in various kinds of works. The difference lies in one’s perspective.

No one can know what a day might bring, whether good or evil, love or hate, joy or tragedy. But the righteous man – the wise man – knows that, come what may, his life is in the hand of a loving, caring, all-powerful God, Who knows the end from the beginning and does all things well.

The wise man, therefore, is unaffected by changing circumstances; he trusts in God and follows Him no matter what. The wicked and unclean – those who do not sacrifice to God or vow to Him – they all are also in the hand of God; “all things come alike” to them, except that they don’t have a large enough perspective on life to be able to rest in the goodness and sovereignty of God. When adversity arises, they will scramble to secure whatever high ground of happiness they think might give them peace, if only for a time. But “under heaven” is the way to a life of peace, contentment, hope, and joy, even in the midst of adversity. And if there is one thing Rehoboam must surely know, it is any ruler is bound to face adversity, uncertainty, and threats to his and his nation’s wellbeing. Only by considering in *his* heart that he and his kingdom are in the hand of God, can he expect to know the peace and confidence that God works all things together for good, for the righteous and wise.

This is the great strength of the Christian faith in an age of uncertainty. Peter says (1 Pet. 3.15) that the hope in which we live, grounded as it is in the glory and promises of God (Rom. 5.1, 2; Rom. 8.28), enables us to exude confidence, contentment, joy, and peace to people who are tossed and dashed by every changing circumstance. When they see our peace, which we have by resting in the hand of God, they will surely ask a reason for the hope that is within us. We must make it our business to cultivate a *life* of witness so that our *words* of witness will have maximum power.

Our message to this age is simple, as the bumper sticker says: “No Jesus? No peace. Know Jesus? Know peace.”

Reflect.

1. How does knowing that all our works are “in the hand of God” affect those who trust in Him? How does it help them in doing all their work?
2. How would you counsel a new believer to prepare for and deal with adversity? How would that be different from what he did before he came to faith in Christ?
3. How can Christians bear effective witness to their unbelieving friends and neighbors in uncertain times?

Except that our belief in Christ raises us up to heaven and promises eternity to our souls, the physical conditions of life are the same for us as for the brutes. Jerome (347-420), Letter 108.27

Help me to prepare for adversity today, Lord, so that when it comes, I will...

Pray Psalm 115.9-13.

How do you expect the Lord to bless you today? Give Him thanks in advance, and renew your trust in Him.

Sing Psalm 115.9-13.

Psalm 115.9-13 (*Plainfield - "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus"*)

All who trust in Jesus yield – ever to His Name be glory! –
find in Him their help and shield – ever to Your Name be glory!
O Israel, trust the Lord! He helps us evermore!
Fear Him obey His Word: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

2 Madness, Then You Die

Pray Psalm 115.17, 18.

The dead do not praise the LORD,
Nor any who go down into silence.
But we will bless the LORD
From this time forth and forevermore.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.3.

Prepare.

1. Why, “under the sun”, is it considered “evil” that the same things befall everyone?
2. What is the nature of the “madness” that characterizes those who live “under the sun”?

Meditate.

Happiness apart from God is merely circumstantial, and therefore, fleeting. When things are going well, people are happy. But let their situation change – and it always will – and their lives can spin out of control. Neither wealth nor power nor celebrity can shelter or exempt anyone from whatever a day might bring. And who can know what that might be (v. 1)?

When adversity comes, people “under the sun” simply hie to what they hope will be better circumstances. But since their hearts are evil and their minds are filled with “madness”, what hope do they have of finding real happiness “under the sun”? Thus they lurch here and there all their lives, seeking to optimize happiness by maximizing their surroundings. And then they die.

“Are we having fun yet?” There is real wisdom in that bumper sticker. Happiness – sought as true and lasting joy and wellbeing – eludes everyone “under the sun”. The believer does not seek happiness; rather, he rests in the joy of his salvation, even in the face of those same circumstances which perplex and distress those living “under the sun”.

When unbelievers see that joy, that hope, lived out consistently amid the same kinds of circumstances that threaten to bury them, they will know what true happiness really is, and then we can tell them where it can be found (1 Pet 3.15).

Reflect.

1. How would you explain the difference between happiness and joy?
2. Why should we be more concerned to realize joy than to find happiness?
3. What is the advantage to our witness that the same trials and tribulations that unbelievers experience come upon us as well?

The difference as to present happiness, arises from the inward supports and consolations the righteous enjoy, and the benefit they derive from varied trials and mercies. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 9.1-3

Fill me with the joy that comes from knowing You, Lord, and send me into my Personal Mission Field, ready to...

Pray Psalm 115.14-18.

What kind of “increase” do you expect from the Lord today? How will you serve Him, so that you bless the Lord by your life?

Sing Psalm 115.14-18.

Psalm 115.14-18 (*Plainfield - "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus"*)

Grant us, Savior, great increase – ever to Your Name be glory!

Bless us with eternal peace – ever to Your Name be glory!

Heaven and earth are Yours; let every soul adore

and bless You evermore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

3 There's Always Hope

Pray Psalm 115.1.

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.4-6.

Prepare.

1. What advantages do the living have over the dead?
2. Why do “all the living” have hope?

Meditate.

Young people seldom think about dying. They're too busy having fun. Rehoboam was probably no different. But Solomon had been down the path Rehoboam was wanting to stroll, and he longed to talk a little sense into his silly mind.

At the same time – and here I think we can sense the deep love of a father for his son – Solomon seems to be saying, if only to himself, as long as his son is alive, there's hope that he will find his way to the truth. Death is final; there is no hope beyond it. A man's life may be no better than a dog's, but as long as he's alive, the possibility exists that he can find the Lord. But death is coming, even if a man lives like a lion, and after all the good times and big fun, the grave awaits.

So it's not true, as the bumper sticker says – and Rehoboam probably thought – “He who dies with the most toys, wins.” No: He who dies with the most toys, dies. And that's that.

The mission of the Church in our secular and postmodern times is the same as it's always been: make disciples. Each of us has been assigned a Personal Mission Field by the Lord, and there we regularly encounter people who need to know the Lord. We may think some of them are too far gone ever to believe. Some may even have told us to “bug off” and “let it go” when we've tried to share the Gospel. But we must never give up on the lost. As long as they are alive, there's hope they might come to their senses and, like the prodigal son, make their way home to the Father.

Our job is to keep up hope on our end, nurture relationships, look for ways to serve, share the Good News when we can, and pray, pray, pray.

Reflect.

1. Peter says people should be able to see the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3.15). What hope?
2. People don't like to think about death; but why should they?
3. We who are still living know we're going to die (v. 5). How should knowing that shape the way we live “under heaven”?

The most despicable living man's state, is preferable to that of the most noble who have died impenitent. Solomon exhorts the wise and pious to cheerful confidence in God, whatever their condition in life. The meanest morsel, coming from their Father's love, in answer to prayer, will have a peculiar relish. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 9.4-10

Thank You, Lord, for one more day to live for You. Help me to make the most of it by...

Pray Psalm 115.9-13.

What are you trusting the Lord for today? Will you trust Him to help you share the Good News with one who is dying in his sin? Do you believe He'll bless you if you do?

Sing Psalm 115.9-13.

Psalm 115.9-13 (*Plainfield - "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus"*)

All who trust in Jesus yield – ever to His Name be glory! –
find in Him their help and shield – ever to Your Name be glory!
O Israel, trust the Lord! He helps us evermore!
Fear Him obey His Word: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

4 Live It Up, but...

Pray Psalm 115.3.

But our God *is* in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.7-10.

Prepare.

1. Is Solomon encouraging Rehoboam in his self-indulgent ways?
2. This passage is intended as a warning. Of what?

Meditate.

It almost – almost – sounds like Solomon is giving up, acquiescing to the inevitable. His son isn't listening, so, what the heck, go ahead and do what you have in mind anyway.

The clause, "God has already accepted your works", is a subtle reminder that those who choose life "under the sun" are not beyond the scope of God's providence. God does whatever pleases Him, even where the works of vain and foolish people are concerned. God sees their works. He "accepts" them for what they are, but in the overall scheme of things, they will not amount to any lasting good. God has given Rehoboam this "vain life" "under the sun", and, sadly, that indeed appears to be "his portion in life". He has already tallied up the life of the fool, and it will not lead to knowledge or wisdom, but only to the grave.

As Solomon ran through this brief litany of what Rehoboam might do, we can imagine the son hearing selectively and saying to himself, "All right, that's what I'm talkin' about; now you're makin' sense, old man." But then there's that "under the sun" phrase, coupled with the words "vain" and "vanity" (v. 9). Solomon is not giving up on his argument; he's setting Rehoboam up for the ironic conclusion. None of these things which Rehoboam is so hotly pursuing are anything other than vain idols. Read a dramatic pause after the word, "wisdom" in v. 10. Then imagine Rehoboam's face suddenly turning glum as Solomon brings his thought to its conclusion.

What Solomon is doing here is a form of *argumentum ad absurdum*, in which, taking a person's wayward assumptions or convictions to the extreme, we try to help them see the folly of their position. "Go on, son, do whatever is in your heart." Keep on doing it all your life. Have fun. Indulge your passions. Make the most of your work – while you can. Because it all leads to the grave, and there, that which really matters – wisdom – is nowhere to be found.

We might think this approach a kind of taunt, but it's really a kind and caring tactic. Fools don't naturally take the long view; someone has to show them that the bridge is out at the end of their joy ride. It may as well be us, since we can lead them to the right way across the chasm (Jn. 14.6).

Reflect.

1. These verses look like an endorsement of foot-loose-and-fancy-free living. But are they? Explain.
2. Why is such a life "vain" and little more than "vanity"?
3. Is there any nugget of truth for the believer in these verses? Explain.

Remember, my brethren, that there is no confession in the grave; nor can penance be granted when the time for repentance is past. Hurry while you are still alive. Pacian of Barcelona (fourth century), *On Penitents 12.1*

Lord, let the works of my hands and the words of my mouth be for Your glory, as I...

Pray Psalm 115.3-8.

Make sure there are no idols in your life. Pray for the people you know, who are deceived in their pursuit of worthless idols and have not heard the Word of God.

Sing Psalm 115.4-8.

Psalm 115.4-8 (*Plainfield: Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

Idols made by men's own hand – ever to Your Name be glory –

see nor hear nor understand – ever to Your Name be glory!

They neither feel nor walk, nor can they speak or talk.

All those who serve them fall, but unto Your Name be glory!

5 In the Hand of Chance?

Pray Psalm 115.1-3.

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.
Why should the Gentiles say,
“So where *is* their God?”
But our God is in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.11.

Prepare.

1. What does Solomon say about life “under the sun”?
2. What does he mean by “time and chance”? How do these relate to living “under the sun”?

Meditate.

If Rehoboam won’t trust God, then he’s on his own. As Solomon has explained, undoubtedly with Rehoboam’s agreement, nothing in this life works out quite like you think. Life isn’t fair, at least as we think about fair, and it isn’t predictable. No one can know what a day might bring. All our hopes and dreams can be dashed in a moment.

There is a place for everything in the divine economy, and God is sovereign over all. Amid the vicissitudes and uncertainties of life, the believer rests in God’s sovereignty, and knows contentment, joy, and hope. The unbeliever? The person who chooses to live “under the sun”? He is the servant of chance – as he will insist – and all he can do is hope for the best.

But there are no guarantees for those who put their lives in the hand of chance. None of the things we think *ought* to be a certain way necessarily *work out* that way. Apart from God, what hope can anyone have? The heartless cosmos can seem fickle and cruel to one who believes chance rules it all.

Chance is the operative power of the cosmos for the people of our secular age. It is the engine of evolutionary theory and the play-maker for every person’s life. This, at least, is what our secular gurus proclaim. It’s not, however, how they live.

Chance is by definition, unknowable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. No one lives as though something unknowable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable is waiting for them just beyond the door. Instead, people live as if the world is knowable and orderly, and with a place for everything – just as the believer in God professes, and as the Scriptures – like Ecclesiastes – teach. We can’t make sense of an uncertain world unless we rest all the uncertainty around us in the hands of God, and trust in Him.

Reflect.

1. Chance is the unbelieving world’s alternative to God. Explain. Why is this not a good idea?
2. How can a believer, trusting in God, deal with the uncertainties of life? When things go wrong, or

don't work out, how can we continue to know rest and joy?

3. Solomon is speaking from the “fool’s” vantage point (“under the sun”) in referring to “time and chance” as absolute. Why did he do that? What effect was he hoping for in Rehoboam?

We would like to think that the best always win, that the deserving are always rewarded. But our experience shows that these expectations are not always realized. not to the swift ... strong ... wise ... men of understanding ... men of skill: These five assets were enjoyed by individuals. But while some planned and counted on their assets, God in the end determined their lot. Earl Radmacher (1937-2014), NKJV Study notes on Ecclesiastes 9.11

Thank You, Lord, that I am not subject to chance, but rest in Your sovereign care, so that I...

Pray Psalm 115.9-13.

Thank the Lord that you can trust in Him, rather than in chance. As He is mindful of you always, consider ways you can be more mindful of Him throughout the day ahead.

Sing Psalm 115.9-13.

Psalm 115.9-13 (*Plainfield: Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

All who trust in Jesus yield – ever to His Name be glory! –
find in Him their help and shield – ever to Your Name be glory!
O Israel, trust the Lord! He helps us evermore!
Fear Him obey His Word: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

6 Suddenly...

Pray Psalm 115:9-11.

O Israel, trust in the LORD;
He *is* their help and their shield.
O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD;
He is their help and their shield.
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD;
He *is* their help and their shield.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.12.

Prepare.

1. What does man not know? Why not?
2. How should people prepare for sudden trials?

Meditate.

The troubling fact that we cannot fully know the details of our lives is punctuated throughout by the fact that our lives can also be suddenly cut short.

Learn the lesson of the fish and the birds. What could be freer than these? Until, suddenly...

So we go along in our lives, thinking ourselves free and invincible. Then suddenly, the net, the snare, some unforeseen evil. Then what, Rehoboam? Then nothing – that is, if all you have to look forward to is the grave and Sheol. Does he think he’ indestructible? Impervious to “chance”? The fool might think that each day is just going to be one more joy ride, one more stage in his life-long cavort; instead, each day might be his last, and if he hasn’t thought about this, perhaps he should.

Two responses to the Gospel that you might hear in an age such as ours: “I know you’re probably right, and I’m sure that some day I’ll become a Christian. For now, though, I still want to sow my wild oats.” Well, if sowing wild oats is what life’s all about, why ever stop? And if it’s not, why waste your time?

The second: “I want to become a Christian, but I’m not quite ready. I need to think about this awhile before I believe.” As I once heard Jim Kennedy say in response to this, “Fine, just do me one favor: Between now and then, don’t die first.”

Believers need to help unbelievers consider the foolishness of banking everything on fun and chance. Such confrontations won’t convert anyone – only the Gospel and the Spirit can do that. But they might help achieve a breakthrough in the armor of unbelief with which many of our lost friends protect themselves against the claims of Christ.

Solomon hoped as much for Rehoboam, and we might hope as much for our unbelieving friends as well.

Reflect.

1. Believing in chance offers no firm footing for a happy life. Explain.

2. How do people today try to deal with the unforeseen things that befall them “in an evil time”? How should we respond when we see sudden trials coming upon an unbelieving friend?

3. How does the believer deal with the uncertainties of life? How can we know joy even when things go wrong?

*Many can know chronological time. Everybody, for example, knows that noon is the time for healthy people to eat lunch. The time, however, which is determined by physicians, is not known to everyone but only to the physician. And since there is only one physician for the soul, to whom we say, “O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you,” only this physician knows our time. But the individual does not know his time. Didymus the Blind (313-398), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 286.1*

I can't know what lies ahead of me this day, Lord, but I can prepare for any eventuality by...

Pray Psalm 115.4-8.

Pray for the people in your Personal Mission Field who are trusting in idols of one kind or another. Pray that they will see the vanity of such confidence. Pray that God will allow you to come alongside them when trials befall, and that He will use the sudden troubles of their lives to open their hearts to Him.

Sing Psalm 115.4-8.

Psalm 115.4-8 (*Plainfield: Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

Idols made by men's own hand – ever to Your Name be glory –
see nor hear nor understand – ever to Your Name be glory!
They neither feel nor walk, nor can they speak or talk.
All those who serve them fall, but unto Your Name be glory!

7 Better Wise than Mighty

Pray Psalm 115.12, 13.

The LORD has been mindful of us;
He will bless us;
He will bless the house of Israel;
He will bless the house of Aaron.
He will bless those who fear the Lord,
Both small and great.

Read Ecclesiastes 9.13-18.

Prepare.

1. What makes wisdom so powerful?
2. Why do people tend to scorn wisdom?

Meditate.

Wisdom doesn't always get the recognition or appreciation it deserves. Witness Rehoboam's hardness against his father's counsel. Wisdom may not make you rich or famous, but it contains more power than the greatest weapons of war. That's because God sees the wise person, and He blesses.

It is enough for the wise person to be wise. Wise doesn't need a lot of hoopla and hooray, much less the acclaim or rewards of the world. Wisdom's satisfaction is in itself, because wisdom partakes of the very essence of God (Prov. 8). "Under the sun", men despise the contributions of wisdom, probably because they remind them of the God Who beckons to them from His throne in the heavens, and they're not interested in what He has to say.

But Solomon, though wise, was neither small nor lacking in power. He was a great king and, at the end of his life, a wise one again. If Rehoboam wouldn't listen to him for his wisdom, perhaps he would hear this mighty king as he tried to dissuade his son from a life of folly – not by force of arms, but by quiet counsel, confrontation, and cajoling.

Rehoboam may have considered his father, in his declining days, small and powerless. But Solomon advised him to look for the wisdom in his words, and not at the doleful record of his recent days, or the decrepit state of his body (see chapter 12).

Does it seem as if Solomon keeps going over the same ground, with only a little twist here and there? There are only so many ways of answering the fool according to his folly (Prov. 26.4, 5). But we can see the value of what Solomon was trying to do: Make his son face-up to the presuppositions and convictions that were governing his life. Lead him to consider the implications of those views, and to contemplate the folly of his thinking. And always – always – hold out for his consideration the beauty and consistency of life "under heaven".

We must never tire of seeking to persuade our unbelieving friends to forsake their folly and embrace the truth in Jesus.

Reflect.

1. Why is being wise its own reward?
2. How have you experienced God “answering the fool according to his folly” in your own life? Why is this an important part of growing in the Lord?
3. What makes wisdom so powerful?

*A man may, by his wisdom, bring to pass that which he could never do by his strength. If God be for us, who can be against us, or stand before us? Solomon observes the power of wisdom, though it may labor under outward disadvantages. How forcible are right words! But wise and good men must often content themselves with the satisfaction of having done good, or, at least, endeavored to do it, when they cannot do the good they would, nor have the praise they should. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 9.13-18**

Give me wisdom for today, Lord, and empower me to serve You as I...

Pray Psalm 115.1-18.

Consider how you will glorify God today. Lay aside any idols that keep you from trusting Him. Seek His Presence and blessing for the day ahead, and rejoice in advance of the goodness He will show you.

Sing Psalm 115.1-18.

Psalm 115.1-18 (*Plainfield: Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

Not to us, O God, not us, but unto Your Name give glory!
For Your love and faithfulness, ever to Your Name be glory!
Why should the nations cry, "Where is their God on high?"
You rule us, Lord, on high: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Idols made by men's own hand – ever to Your Name be glory –
see nor hear nor understand – ever to Your Name be glory!
They neither feel nor walk, nor can they speak or talk.
All those who serve them fall, but unto Your Name be glory!

All who trust in Jesus yield – ever to His Name be glory! –
find in Him their help and shield – ever to Your Name be glory!
O Israel, trust the Lord! He helps us evermore!
Fear Him obey His Word: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Grant us, Savior, great increase – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless us with eternal peace – ever to Your Name be glory!
Heaven and earth are Yours; let every soul adore
and bless You evermore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Life doesn't always work out the way we think it should. How should Christians deal with the uncertainties of life? What can they expect as they do?

2. In what sense is it "madness" to try to live your life apart from trusting in the Lord? How can we as Christians keep any such "madness" from creeping into your lives?

3. The best people can hope for "under the sun" is whatever happiness they can wrest from work, wealth, and friends. Why is that not enough to give rest to their souls?

4. Why is wisdom more powerful than weapons? Should they who seek to be wise bring God's wisdom to bear on contemporary issues? Explain.

5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 9? How are you implanting that lesson your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.