

XII. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective  
*From Vanity to Vitality*  
“The Day of Death and the Day of Judgment–Part 2”  
Ecclesiastes 8  
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In this study we will pick up in Ecclesiastes 8:10 and we'll try to get through Ecclesiastes 9:6. The title of this study is The Day of Death and the Day of Judgment. The Day of death ushers men and women into the Day of Judgment. One of the things that seems to be at work with the one writing Ecclesiastes who I believe is Solomon is his statement of analysis and repentance in process. It is clear that Solomon had a great beginning but it's also clear that he had lost his way. He lost his way when he began to be fascinated with the knowledge and when he arrogantly began to consider the understanding and he lost wisdom. It was seen in his rebellion and his sin against the Lord, so much so that the Bible indicates that by the end of his life a foothold for Molech (a pagan god that calls for child sacrifices) had found residence at temple mount where Solomon had been used to build the great Solomonic temple.

I have put in great study on this book to try to ascertain some constant significance but one of the things that's clear is that while there are pockets and precepts that kind of work together, the fact is that under the inspiration of the Spirit this book is not very linear at all for me and for me that is very difficult. I like to be able to outline something to see how something moves from one thing to the next but it is so pronounced in the middle of this book that you will find an amazing paucity about the content of the book particularly in the middle of the chapters. One commentator gets to Ecclesiastes 8 and then skips to Ecclesiastes 12. I can't take chunks of narratives in this book because they're not that connected. The tissue that would connect them theologically or grammatically doesn't seem to be there. I think that in and of itself is telling us that Solomon, as he is working his way through this, is repenting of his lifestyle that comes from a life view that is under the sun – self-centered, sin-saturated, self-absorbed – instead of one that is God-centered, glory-committed, from the One who is above the sun in His transcendence.

The wisdom from above (Godly wisdom) is what gives meaning, unity, and cohesiveness in life. So while Solomon is in the middle of it, the fact that he is processing this is even showing up in the way that it is written. So you end up having to take it piece by piece and see how he started over here but ended up over here and in the middle of it he handled this other thing which brought to his mind something else. Then things that seem contradictory actually are contradictory because the life that is lived that is not God-centered in the world and life view always leads to confusion, chaos and contradiction. This is showing up in the way that he is writing it. So let's pick up where we left off in the last study.

Ecclesiastes 8:10–11 says *[10] Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. [11] Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*

He uses the word wicked to mean those in rebellion against God. My best shot at these verses are here are those who are in rebellion against God but boy do they put on a religious picture. Do you know where you would find them? They set up their wickedness and covered it by finding their way to the holy place. I think Solomon is referring to the temple mount, the place of worship. The wicked did this so well that they developed a reputation and were

venerated for their presence in the holy place. Solomon is talking about those who put on a pretense. Our word for them would be the word hypocrite, but that's not what he is aiming at by simply identifying these people.

Solomon is telling us that you can't know the condition of a person's heart simply by where they show up because they can show up in places that are used to camouflage the condition of their heart. The word that is very prevalent today is the word grooming. They groom religious people to accept them and esteem them, while in reality it is only hiding the wickedness that is in their life. These people here are being praised throughout the city by what they are doing in the holy place and everyone is talking about them. He calls this vanity, emptiness and it shows you the depravity of man.

One day I was sitting in the church I grew up in, the Christian Missionary Alliance Church and a preacher came in and said 'I believe when we get to heaven there will be some people there who we did not think were believers that actually are. They were saved by grace but their progress was such that we just weren't sure and so we may be surprised. Having said that I believe the greatest shock to us are the people we think are going to be there with a front row seat that are actually going to hear 'depart from Me, I never knew you.'

He is referring to the text at the end of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus will say on the Day of Judgment, in Matthew 7:22–23, [22] *On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'* [23] *And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'* In other words, they will say 'look at what we did that people acclaimed' but the Judge who goes to the heart of the matter says, 'I never knew you.' There was no saving personal relationship with the God of glory. They had deceptively passed themselves off as religious, even religious leadership. They were probably acclaimed and Paul will say they can even appear as angels of light (II Corinthians 11:14). Solomon here in Ecclesiastes is pronouncing his own judgment of what he sees these people doing.

Then he gives an analysis in Ecclesiastes 8:11. Because these wicked men have set up this camouflage and the God of glory who knows their heart has patiently and forbearingly withheld judgment it seems to have only emboldened them because whenever you don't speedily bring the judgment people begin to think they are getting away with what they are doing. It initially sounds like Solomon is making a criticism of God, doesn't it? So God why don't you nuke them? Look at what they are getting away with and the more vanity is spread the more confusion that is brought. I don't think Solomon is complaining with God about His patience. One reason why is that if there is anyone who benefitted from the patience of God to lead him back to repentance, it would have been Solomon.

I think Solomon is telling us how deceptive our depravity is. Paul says in Romans 2:4, [4] *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?* God's patience is designed to lead us to repentance, but the depravity of man (the children of man) is so evil that unless God changes the heart, the patience of God will be used to embolden sin in the depraved heart. This is what Solomon now identifies as the vanity of life; where we will actually take the patience of God to boldly sin as we have never sinned before. Let's keep going.

Ecclesiastes 8:12–13 says [12] *Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.* [13] *But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.* Here he says he sees a sinner in the holy place who goes

on sinning hundreds of times in the patience of God and it looks like their sin is prolonging their life instead of bringing judgment upon their life but that is not what is happening.

Solomon says what is really happening is that the one who fears the Lord has the joy of the Lord. There is no joy in what the wicked are doing for it is only emptiness. What does it mean to fear the Lord? I want to give you some thoughts from two venerated preachers/theologians with one being John Owen. John Owen says the fear of God in the life of a believer is when the smile of God is that which you most desire in life and the frown of life is that which you most want to avoid in life. The smile of God is your greatest delight and the frown of God is your greatest abhorrence.

God's redeeming work has secured us in Christ and as we live out our life God is patient but God does not love our sin. Even if He has to use the mechanism of suffering He will help us walk away from that sin so that we love Him in life more than sin. The second preacher is Michael Eaton and he says 'the fear of the Lord in the life of a believer is a lifestyle of divine awe and thoughtful caution in light of the majesty and greatness of God with whom we have to do.' I find that very insightful. A lifestyle of awe – awesome is our God and that means we live in awe.

I believe our need to know the intimacy we have with God is not found by diminishing God until He is small enough for us to feel intimate with Him. I believe the intimacy we need with God is the confidence of intimacy that comes through His Son by seeing how great is our God and that God is the One who loves us. This reminds me of the quote from C.S. Lewis when in his book The Chronicles of Narnia it says 'Is Aslan a tame lion? Aslan is many things but you can't tame him.' He is not a tame lion. Awesome is the Lord our God. A lifestyle of awe and caution in light of the awe and greatness of God and this is the God with whom we have to do. Solomon says the fear of the Lord is bringing their joy.

The one who does not fear God, which is the beginning of wisdom, may seem like he is prolonging his days but he is really enjoying the patience of God and the Day of Judgment is inevitable. And it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. For those who don't know our God, He is a consuming fire. Now Solomon kinds of shifts on us as we continue to this next section in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 8:14 says *[14] There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.* Another vanity Solomon sees is the wicked person who lives their life and is enjoying the fruits of what ought to be connected to the righteous and he sees the righteous enduring things that actually only the wicked should be enduring.

We call this the doctrine of common grace. We see God in His patience not only withholding judgment but we see God allowing the blessings of His kindness and mercy even to fall upon the wicked. The rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). The sun shines on both. The blessings of God and the agricultural season is there. Remember the covenant with Noah? Genesis 9:11–17 says *[11] I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." [12] And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: [13] I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [14] When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, [15] I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again*

*become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16] When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” [17] God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”* From Noah comes believers and unbelievers.

My dad used to say ‘When the Lord starts blessing someone, a rising tide floats all the boats.’ It’s amazing for God brought a Gospel Awakening to our nation in 1735 to 1765 and how many unbelievers were blessed in our nation because the Gospel moved forward? It was not redeeming grace but it was common grace. We also see the fact that when God begins to bring judgment there seems to be collateral damage in the lives of God’s people. If He brings a climatic, catastrophic judgment we call even in insurance policies, the acts of God. Not always does God make the distinction of those in the land of Egypt and those in the land of Goshen. God in His sovereign hand allows some of that collateral damage to fall upon His people as well.

The reason things don’t seem to all make sense is because we can’t see them all from God’s perspective and God’s ultimate end. God is at work in a broken world and He hasn’t removed all the brokenness but He is fixing our brokenness one by one in our lives. Let’s keep going.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 says *[15] And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.* What does man do?

I basically read what many quote – eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die. The fact is that very seldom do people stay with that world and life view if they don’t know the Lord. They actually die. The incongruity, vanity and striving after the wind does not simply lead you to eat, drink and be merry. You may chose that for a while but that in and of itself is so empty that you just die and even seek death. This secular movement throughout the western world that is walking back into paganism, away from the Gospel blessings it has enjoyed, do you think it’s any accident that we embrace a culture of death, beginning with abortion moving to infanticide?

We are in a culture of death. It is nihilism. Dr. Schaeffer said ‘You keep asking the questions as to what people believe and drive them back to the core of what they believe. My greatest fear that has not happened that I know of yet, is I do what I do well and they don’t come to Christ they will walk out of my room and commit suicide because there is no meaning. It’s all vanity.’ What Solomon is saying in Ecclesiastes 8:15 will lead to a culture of death and then come to the next verse.

Ecclesiastes 8:16–17 says *[16] When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, [17] then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.*

So here man does not know the joy of rest. Our refusal to honor the Lord’s Day is a declaration the world’s frantic pace of busyness has drawn us into its web and we think we don’t want to miss anything. We are afraid to rest. We are afraid to embrace the cycle of God – six days labor, one day rest, rejoice, reverence and worship. As Christians we’re going to do our best to squeeze in an hour a couple of Sundays a month, but we’re really embracing the world and life view of vanity that says busy.

Then we keep developing this technology that is going to save us time but it actually swallows up our time. Remember how long it took to write a letter, go to the post office and mail it? Now we have email. What has email done to your schedule? It’s so wonderful to be in

touch with people because we have the telephone but now we have FaceBook that controls our schedule. You would be utterly shocked at how rapidly even the things that are supposed to save us time so we can spend on where we ought to spend time and even the time of rest and renewal have become the occasion for more busyness, because we're afraid we're going to miss out on something.

I believe in work, a work ethic and that the protestant work ethic was one of the great blessings of the Reformation that has blessed particularly western civilization so I love work. But I believe there is a cycle to life that you encounter every day, every week, and it ought to be built in your life and that is why God put three feasts in the Old Testament for rest and renewal. God made you in a cycle and He even modeled it for you. Six days He created and on the seventh day He rested. When you begin to have a world and life view and a heart that is fed from the world the vanity of that leads you to increasing, frantic, and sometimes meaningless busyness. With no margins in life therefore there is no emotional margins, no financial margins, no calendar margins for none of those are there.

I could give you some tricks on how to develop your calendar but most of us would take those simply to get more busy. I think the place to start is to rest in the Lord, then do your work heartily unto the Lord. I plead with you to embrace the Lord's Day. God made it as a gift to you. Jesus says in Mark 2:27-28, [27] *And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. [28] So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."* In the New Covenant I don't have a ceremonial Sabbath but I like to tell people to set aside the Lord's Day and call it holy because God says if you do that He will cause you to ride on the heights of the earth on the wings of an eagle.

How can we rest from our normal labor, embrace the blessing of gathered worship and then spend our time in renewal of our relationship with the Lord and each other and anything that detracts from that does not find a place? On the contrary, the third point of vanity Solomon is giving us is busyness and that man then sees not the work of God in His life because it is obliterated by all the busyness in our life. Now let's go to Ecclesiastes 9 and I'll finish with the first six verses.

Ecclesiastes 9:1 says [1] *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.* Let's stop for a moment and look at this matter of love and hate.

Many have a hard time with verse 1. Love and hate, well there is just no difference. Love and hate, well it doesn't matter. I want to encourage you because he is not saying either one of those things. He saying in a broken world that which is love the world will tell you is hate and that which is hate the world will tell you is love. I am immediately drawn to the Bible where it says "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13) as God confirms the depravity of the heart of Esau and God overwhelms in His love the heart of Jacob and brings him to saving faith, not because he merited it or deserved it or God needed him but out of His unmerited love. Then Esau receives not only what he merits but what he wants.

When we look at Jacob and Esau we try to work our way through this love and hate and then it's even compounded when you think about which one of them you like the most. I'm convinced in some way that Esau came from somewhere in Alabama originally for he hunts, loves to cook up wild game and knows how to season it so his daddy just loves it. Esau takes care of the agriculture but not Jacob. He is in the tent helping mommy, finding some way to be deceptive, lying and attempting to take anything he can from anyone just as long as he wants it. I am bent toward Esau for I'd stop by and pick him up on a Saturday to teach him how to play

golf. Then the Lord reminds me that I'm Jacob and He loves me. He loved me and brought me from what He hated, now look at what He had to do out of love for me with His righteous anger and wrath on His Son.

Working through these matters with a God-centered world and life view is not easy. Right now our session is grappling with a statement in the midst of this sexual revolution – how do you minister to people in sexual brokenness and addiction? The world says if you love them, to accept them you have to accept their behavior and yet the Word of God tells us to love them you must hate their behavior and if you hate their behavior how do you love them? If I don't speak the truth I'm not loving but if I love without truth then I'm not loving. If love without truth what I'm really saying is that it is more important for me that you love me and accept me as I will accept you, than for you to know the love of God. Yet if I speak the truth without love then I am misrepresenting God who loved us so much that He gave Himself for us while we were sinners in our helplessness and in our brokenness.

This matter of living for the Lord and understanding hate and love is not easy in a broken world and that is what Solomon is telling us here. This is why you have to keep your eyes God, you need to be filled with His Word and you need His wisdom which comes by way of His Word, His Spirit and prayer. James 1:5 says *[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* How do I show my kids I love them? It is not by accepting all of their behavior. How do I deal with the behavior in their life that I hate because I know what it is going to cost them, to show them that I love them? We desperately need the Spirit of God and the wisdom of God. Let's look at the last five verses.

Ecclesiastes 9:2–6 says *[2] It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. [3] This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. [4] But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. [5] For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. [6] Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.*

It's almost like you see him standing beside a grave and he is grappling with the dust of death. When I was 14 years of age I had already experienced two funerals in my life and I was so young I don't really remember them. I barely remember being at the one of my grandfather's sister because I was only 4 years of age but I do remember sitting in the house and avoiding going in the living room which was where they had her body. The other one was when I was 7 years old at my great grandmother's funeral but when I was 14 my uncle died and he was only 28 years old. I'll never forget the impact that had on my life as the mortality of humanity and my own mortality came to me. Up until then I was pretty sure that I had superman's cape on for life, but I sensed my mortality that day.

I'll never forget my uncle's funeral. I was in one of the lead cars as part of the family from the funeral home to the cemetery and the policeman told us that when we arrived at the cemetery cars were still leaving the funeral home which was eight miles away. I saw all of these people grappling with all of this and then I watched my uncle's wife, my mother's sister, just come unraveled, totally dissolved. I actually sat next to her for the next 18 hours just holding her hand because she couldn't even get her breath. That was a sobering moment in my life.

Since I have become a Christian I read an interesting insight from the life and ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He said ‘Every parent and every person ought to come face to face with a funeral and death to bring sobriety to the way you view life.’ That is what Solomon is doing in Ecclesiastes 9:1–6. Death and then the judgment and the sobriety of death. It is there we confront our mortality and the matters of eternity. There are two destinations of eternity. There are God-given consciousness begins to work and even our depravity begins to feel the hammer chisel of reality. Then we need to tell people that we would love to introduce them to our Savior who tells you ‘O death where is your sting, grave where is your victory?’ Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord who has won the victory over the stinger of death, sin, over the dominion of death, the grave, and over death itself for He lives. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the privilege to be in Your Word together. God, I thank You for this Lord’s Day. I also want to thank You Father, for the ancillary blessing of our cultural recognition of the value of fathers and we’re able to do it from a Christian world and life view. God, I want to thank You for the men in this church and our Embers to a Flame ministry. I’m constantly, along with others, moving into these mainline churches and while I thank God for every faithful woman who is standing there for Christ, I always ask the question ‘where are the men?’ Thank You for those that You have brought here and please make them men of God. Because they are men of God they are men of grace to the glory of God and they will bless a wife, children and grandchildren. Father, I want to thank You that we have been in Your Word today. I thank You for the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Teacher, particularly when I come to texts that are this challenging as these middle chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes are, but I thank You that the Holy Spirit is here with the Word and that You are at work in the hearts of those who have read this today. May they grapple with what they have heard and may we realize that everything doesn’t fall well into the package but we have Divine precepts to deal with the confusion, chaos and brokenness of a world under the curse of sin, bodies under the curse of sin, cultures that are cursed by sin and we do so with a message of Your grace which is greater than our sin. So thank You God for Your wonderful, redeeming, reclaiming work in Solomon and thank You for the Spirit-given honesty of what he has brought to us from this text. Now Holy Spirit guide us that we might live, never embolden to sin, but overwhelmed and propelled by the love of Christ and the grace of God with an awe of the transcendence of our God and that the fear of the Lord would fill our soul so that we fear nothing else. I thank You for perfect love which casts out all fear, in Jesus’ Name, Amen.