

# The Justified Life

Ecclesiastes 8:16–9:9

In the fourth and final section of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher reinforces what he has already set out and pushes wisdom into the corners. Or to change the metaphor, he builds new stories upon the foundation he has already laid. These are not castles in the sky, but God’s gift to the forgiven today.

## The Map

- I. 1:1–2:26 Satisfaction cannot be found in a vaporous world. Only God can give it.
- II. 3:1–5:20 God is sovereign over all despite grief and hardship.
- III. 6:1–8:15 Look beyond appearances in order to understand and live wisely.
- IV. 8:16–12:14 Last, Solomon addresses challenges and difficulties, and the need to seek wisdom and live joyfully despite them. This is the gift of God.
  - i. 8:16–9:9 Live joyfully despite your lack of control of events and brevity of life under the sun.

## God Knows

The business done on earth is beyond us, even if you stay up all night trying to figure it out (8:16). Solomon doesn’t look at it, throw up his hands, and despair. He sees it’s God’s work, and our small selves, even the wise, can’t figure it all out under the sun (v. 17). It’s wisdom to know that you do not know, but God does (Is. 46:10; Job 28:23). If we acknowledge that God is God, then it follows that we are not. Jesus is Lord, not us. The Trinity is God almighty, and there is no other. The righteous and wise and their works are in His hand (9:1). Yahweh did not wind up the world like a clock and step away in deistic fashion. He personally governs every minute detail, and everything holds together in Christ (Col. 1:17). Not a hair falls from your head or a sparrow to the ground apart from the will of the Father. But looking only at the face of things, you can’t tell whether He loves or hates you or anyone else: “People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them” (v. 1; cf. 6:1–6, 7:1–15). The same thing happens to the righteous and the wicked, to one who confesses sin and one who refuses, one who gives and the who takes, one who does good and one who does evil, one who swears on the truth and one who won’t (v. 2). This is messed up, and we’re the ones who made it this way: “Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (v. 3). God made man upright, but they sought out many schemes (7:29). Trying to be God was our first mistake, and yet we are flummoxed by the results. Those who sew the wind, reap the whirlwind (Hos. 8:7). We can’t see much beyond the end of our noses, but God sees everything, and He can show us our evil hearts and cleanse us by the blood of Christ. He can reveal to us that we are not victims but perpetrators, not sinless but sinners, that only by His grace are we not accusers but more than conquerors in Christ.

## Hope for the Living

Truth is counterintuitive, and wisdom confounds evangelical cliches. Once you’ve heard that it’s impossible to grasp everything in the world, that evil is bound up in our hearts and then we die, the flesh wants to wear sweatpants all day and mope around the house. If we trust in our own understanding and refuse to repent of sin, it is really bleak. But if you are alive, there’s hope; better to be a living dog than a dead lion (v. 4). Just because we wrecked everything doesn’t mean all hope is lost. Biblical hope rests on the unchanging thing: “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means

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clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6-7). God loves to show mercy far more we are apt to ask for it. Now is the time to do that as the dead are gone and their earthly reward has ended, their names forgotten (v. 5). But you know people's names now, so pray, ask, bring it up, and don't be ashamed of the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Don't keep back the truth because you assume they would never accept it. Neither would you were it not for the intervening grace of God. Solomon describes life in this world not as a time of frustration, regret, angst, despair or boredom, but one hopeful possibility. Even at the end of his life with a wracked body and Christ-filled mind, Paul knows that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain.... For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:21, 23-24). All that we experience, we experience here. Love, hatred, envy, and everything else the dead had has gone with them and will never return to this life under the sun (v. 6). This is no denial of the resurrection, but an affirmation that this life comes first and that it ends. The author of Hebrews: "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). While it's today, call on the Lord to be saved, and call others to call on Him too. Has there ever been a more obvious and urgent time to recognize God made us, that we are sinful and Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?

## Your Portion

The gospel is the good news of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus plus nothing for the salvation of the world. We don't add our good thoughts, our good works, our intelligence or even our desire to believe it because before Jesus saved us we didn't have any. Justification by grace alone through faith alone based on Christ alone to the glory of God alone is unshakeable. Thus everything we do is received by the Father through the Son, providing true assurance that our works are accepted (v. 7). We don't earn His favor; we already have it: "Eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works" (v. 7). White garments were hard to keep clean and thus saved for festive occasions, and so the Lord's people are told to always wear them (v. 8). Those in Sardis wear white garments, showing purity and victory, as does the bride of Christ (Revelation 3:4-5; cf. 19:8). Anointing oil makes hair moist and skin vibrant, the ancient version of taking a shower and doing your hair (v. 8). Last, he says to live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the vaporous days of your vaporous life; that is your portion in life (v. 9). The phrase in the Hebrew here is to "see life with the wife whom you love", meaning to take in the full range of emotion and experience (cf. 2:1). Don't "see" conflict, pettiness, bitterness, complaining, squabbling, discontent, selfishness, sin in the past and the rest. Instead, dwell with her with understanding so you can pray (1 Pet. 3:7). This is what God gave you, your portion and lot: Christ and everything else. He marked it out, chose it, wrapped it and handed it to you. Solomon's gives no five-point plan for happiness. He says God's already gave it in His sovereign grace and goodness, so eat bread and drink wine with a merry heart. Dress like you are loved and forgiven, created male and female. Love and bless others as God has blessed you. Love your wife or husband all of your days including today because this is what God gives to enjoy now.