

Carpe Diem

Ecclesiastes 9:1 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.

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.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

⁹ **Enjoy life** with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion **in life** and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom **in Sheol, to which you are going**.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance **happen to them all**.

¹² For **man does not know** his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

(Ecclesiastes 9:1-12)

The Fall or Creation?

I've often said that the entire Bible is a commentary on **Genesis 1-3**. In these three chapters, we have **two basic themes**. The first is **creation**. The second is the **fall**. The reason we need 1,186 inspired chapters commenting on these three is because if there is a way to go astray in our thinking on them, we will find it out.

In **the best of our thinking**, these two chapters give us the original blueprint for how God designed mankind to live and flourish on his earth and the subsequent way we immediately blew that design through sin, both of which were always fully under God's sovereign omniscience, control, and providence. The rest of the Bible details how our destroying that design in sin was no accident or lack of education, but

the bent of the heart of each and every person who has ever been born of Adam. But further, it shows God's perpetual, longsuffering grace to overcome our nature and our sin through his own perfect plan and sovereign power to restore his image and creation back to the pristine condition from which we fell. More, to give us a *better* condition than the one we were given at creation.

On this side of the tracks, looking back at these chapters over the long course of history, there are **two starting points** for going astray in our thinking. The first is to think about creation with little to no regard for the fall. The second is to think of the fall with little to no regard for creation. When we do this, we end up in disaster, both theologically and practically. Today, I'm more interested in the "**practically.**"

But first, why would this happen to us? I think it is because these two doctrines are both true simultaneously. The fall exists in God's creation. God's creation is now fallen. This being the case, we have **a paradox**. We have good and bad living together side-by-side. Intentionally. This is part of God's plan. This can be frustrating to living our lives and thinking clearly about this world. To think about only the good without the bad is to live in a utopia that doesn't exist. To think about the bad without the good is to become

preoccupied with evil and to fail to realize the undergirding plan to which redemption is returning those who turn to Christ by faith.

We must remember that death entered the world through sin. And yet, “to die” was not the original condition in which we were created. We were created to have eternal fellowship with the only living God. This fellowship was disrupted through sin and with sin came death. And yet, though we all die, we still live in God’s creation. This creation is now fallen and cursed. However, it is still God’s creation, and remnants of its original condition can still be seen all around us. Christians should understand this better than others, for we have been made “new creations” and as such are able in a way that no others can, to experience the original design of creation even in our fallen condition. No, this isn’t perfectly. Yes, we still live in this paradox. Nevertheless, in ways that other people cannot understand, we are able to enter into that original good design because of who we have become in Christ.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 – Context and Structure

This is the theological background that came to my mind as I started studying **Ecclesiastes 9:1-12**. In some ways,

this passage is a virtual repeat of 8:10-17. Specifically, like the former, Solomon gives us another “joy” passage. It is the sixth of the seven, and the longest and most detailed of them all.

But rather than the context of **grave injustice** all around us, this time the context is that of **death**. It’s a theme we’ve seen before in the parallels earlier in the book such as, “**All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return**” (3:20). Previously, there was a time to die. Now, the focus is on the mystery and unknowability of when that time is for any one of us.

Of course, death and injustice are both the result of sin, and those necessarily take us **back to the fall**. However, joy was the original condition, and the purpose for which we were made was to enjoy the world that God gave to us, and as such, this takes us **back to creation**.

The previous passage ends on the note of **God’s mysterious providence** over the course of our **lives**. It began by looking around at the injustice in the world and in the middle, it commended joy. The one today begins on the note of his mysterious **providence over our deaths**. It then moves to joy and finishes up on the mysteries of death. In this way, the two passages are symmetrical:

A. The mysteries of injustice (8:10-14)

B. Joy: eat, drink, toil (15)

C. God's mysterious providence over our lives (16-17)

C'. God's mysterious providence over our deaths (9:1-6)

B'. Joy: eat, drink, dress, marriage (7-10)

A'. The mysteries of Death (11-12)

BOLD = TODAY'S PASSAGE

In these ways, you can see how similar the two passages are to one another.¹ Thus, I must reinforce some of the points I made last week in our look at this week's passage. I do this because of the parallels, but also because I think they are that important to latch onto in the way you carry out your life here on this earth.

Ecc 9:1-12 is clearly **a unit of thought**. This is made clear by the repeated language at the beginning and end. The first verse says, "**Man does not know**" and the last verse repeats that same phrase. The second verse begins, "**It is the same for all.**" The second to last verse ends nearly the same way, "**time and chance happen to all.**" While tight **parallels** do not continue to a center, the broad thematic parallels do. It begins with death and ends with death and in the middle is the response of joy.

¹ In his chiastic study, **Yoreh** has 3:16-22 paralleling much of these two passages together (8:16-9:10).

A The inevitability of death, vv. 1-6

B Enjoying life as a response to death's certainty, vv. 7-19

A1 The unpredictability of death, vv. 11-12²

Vv. 1-6 are connected by the language “love and/or hate,” which begin and end this section (1, 6). These verses are yet another reflection of life under the sun (3, 6), and as such they tell us what we can observe with our eyes about this fallen world. The same is true of vv. 11-12 (11). As I said, this reflection focuses on the mysteries of death and how no man can know his time. The middle verses contain the only commands in the passage, further marking them off as a true center. There are seven of them and they form a 3 + 3 + 1 pattern,³ emulating the pattern of creation in Genesis 1. Thus, we see Genesis 1-3 rising to the surface throughout our passage.

Seeing this A-B-A structure is vital to interpretation. It helps you realize that the Preacher is not thinking linearly, moving away from topic A to B and then to C. Rather, he is thinking of two things *simultaneously*. And since the whole

² Robert McCabe, “Navigating Life in a World That Has Been Scarred by the Fall: Reflections on Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 and Living in a World of Suffering,” *SBJT* 17.4 (2013): 57. https://www.academia.edu/9316661/_Navigating_Life_in_a_World_That_Has_Been_Scarred_by_the_Fall_Reflections_on_Ecclesiastes_9_7_10_and_Living_in_a_World_of_Suffering_.

³ Vs. 7: Go, eat, drink (3). Vv. 8-9: Let ... be white,” “let not oil,” “enjoy life” (3). Vs. 10: “Do it” (1).

of it has things from Genesis 1-3 in mind, then to think rightly about the Preacher's observations, and to be able to carry out his commands, you must understand how death and joy can and do exist simultaneously, just like creation and sin. Of course, we do this all in Christ, as Christians, as those who know our own sin and the forgiveness that he has given to us through his sacrifice. Let's turn to see how this makes such a huge difference in the way we interpret the passage and go on to live our lives.

The Inevitability of Death as a Set-Up (Ecc 9:1-6)

The passage begins with **more reflections on God's providence**. "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" (Ecc 9:1). The major point of this verse is that **the deeds of the righteous and the wise are in the hand of God**. This is a tremendously comforting doctrine, one which he takes to heart. It is meant to be internalized, not passed over. This is God's omnipotence and providence over all our deeds. Indeed, *he's got the whole world in his hands*. But because the focus is on the righteous and not the wicked, it reminds us of **the faith confession** that was brought up in

8:12 that the fate of those who fear God will be OK. Yet it also continues the thought of the previous vs. (**8:17**) that the ways of God are ultimately a mystery. If that is true, then whatever befalls you, you must rest on that certainty that all of your deeds are in his hands. Dear Christian, he's got you.

It is into this that the second half of the verse comes into view. **It is difficult to translate and understand.** He brings up love and hate—**two opposites.** The basic question here is, whose love and hate? Does this refer to God or to man? Most commentators think it refers **to God.** That is, a man lives his whole life, but simply by looking at the circumstances around him, because all can end up having good or bad happen to them, one cannot know if God loves or hates them. If this is the case, then it makes the initial point about being in his hands all the more important to internalize. Because what you see with your eyes might lead you to the opposite conclusion. A minority think this refers **to our emotions.** The idea would be that even though we all experience these emotions, no man can really figure out their sources or meaning (Alter, LXX) or that God controls even our love and our hatred (TEV). In this case, though God has your deeds in his hands, you still act in ways that are incomprehensible. You are the paradox. It doesn't matter for the sake

of the overall meaning of the verse which we go with, because it does not alter the larger meaning. **God has all things in his control.**

It is into this that **the great mystery** arises. “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” (2). This is list of **six contrasting opposites** that combine to comprise the totality (the “**all**”) at the beginning. As such, it is a **1+6** or a total listing of seven [Genesis 1 is 6+1]. These **opposites** show that whatever event is in mind, **it happens to everyone**. None escape it, and therefore, it isn’t something that happens *because* we are “good or bad,” because we love God or because we hate him.

And yet, **it is an evil (ra) thing**. “This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all” (**Ecc 9:3**). What is that event? **Death**. Death is evil. That this has death in mind is made clear in what follows. “**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.**” The next two verses contrast the living with the dead. “**But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog**

is better than a *dead lion*” (4). “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” (5). Vs. 6 returns to **love and hate**, but now makes clear that the context is in fact death. “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.” Let’s look at these more closely.

First, **death is evil**. And yes, strictly speaking, no one dies *because* one is evil vs. being good. However, this does not mean that sin is unrelated to death. It’s rather worse than many believe. As we saw in ch. 7, **human depravity** is pervasive, and unrelenting. All fall under its trance. The hearts of the children of man (lit. Adam) are full of evil. This is what leads to the death of each of us. However, this evil leads to **madness** while we live.

While I suppose that each person is given over to their own unique and personal form of madness, there is a kind of madness that is common to many. It is a madness that can’t let God be God. It will not trust that he really has all things in his hand. This is **the madness of worry and anxiety**. Greidanus begins his explanation of our whole passage with these words that sound like they were written yesterday,

Many people today go through life with little joy. They are **anxious** about the **economy**: concerned about being laid off; worried they may lose their home; angry about high gas prices; some wondering where their next meal will come from. Others are anxious about their **health**: Will the cancer return? Will a stroke leave me paralyzed? Will a matching organ donor be found in time? Still others are anxious about **death**: Will it involve much suffering? Am I ready to face my Maker? Who will look after the kids?⁴

To be consumed with such thoughts is ... madness. Why? For several reasons. **First**, God is in control of your life. Total control. This was **vs. 1**. This kind of anxiety is a direct contradiction to that control. It is madness. **Second**, you *are* going to die. This is the end of **vs. 3**. “... and after that they go to the dead.” Worry and stress about it isn’t going to make take or add one second to the life God has ordained for you under the sun. So why do it? Madness. We’ve seen and continue to see this play out before our eyes on a world-wide scale with the absolute fear and paranoia of death around disease. **Third**, and finally, it will say later, you have absolutely no idea when that moment will come for

⁴ **Sidney Greidanus**, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 229.

you. Worry and anxiety about it is a kind of pretending that this isn't true, that you can know. And that is madness.

Vv. 4-5 seem like a hopeless outlook on life. This is ironic because he actually begins them by saying that the living have hope. But then he immediately contrasts these living *with dogs*. A living dog is better than a dead lion. This is hardly a complement, yet the king of the jungle is rather toothless in the grave. So it's an absurdity.

He then says that the living know that they will die. This also seems quite hopeless in outlook. Especially when this bleak contrast is compared with what comes next, “the dead know nothing, they have no rewards, their memory is forgotten.” Vs. 6 continues the seeming onslaught. Those who were alive but are now dead, whatever they were in life, whether they loved or hated or envied (sinned) or whatever, it has all perished with them. They no longer have any share in what is done under the sun.

I need to pause for a moment here at the end of this first section and make an observation of my own. As I've been preaching through Ecclesiastes, it has become increasingly clear that there are two very different ways of reading the book. These verses exemplify this on a grand scale. Many people—fine scholars, incredibly smart and educated

commentators, and ordinary Christians alike, read verses like this **very cynically**. If you are one, you are not alone.

However, the deeper I get into this study, the more I think this kind of reading is **fundamentally flawed**. I do not think it appreciates the book as literature, and therefore it misses the points that the literature is forcing the words to convey. I think the cynical view is a profound misreading of Ecclesiastes. I can tell you that even loving this book as a high schooler, as strange as that sounds to some people, this was *not* my reading of the book. Maybe that's why I liked it so much.

You must understand **what Solomon is doing** here. Some think he is making really bad theological statements because he's just confused. In this instance, it would be something like a total blindness to *life* in the afterlife. This kind of an interpretation will become even easier to make at the end of **vs. 10** when he says, "**there is no work or thought or knowledge of wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.**" Boy, that just sounds **downright depressing**.

But beloved, **this is wisdom literature**. It isn't a systematic theology. This is not giving you these observations about death and the afterlife as some kind of Puritan treatise on heaven and hell, soul-sleep or annihilationism. Rather,

he is setting you up by giving you profound opposites so that you might be better able to see what he is about to contrast death with. But you need wisdom to understand. Those opposites are not just in pairs in phrases, but in the overall structure of the passage (and book).

You can let your reading of the text beat you down, or you can come to a conclusion that whoever wrote this book was out to lunch, or you can say that this just isn't an uplifting book, or whatever you want to do. But if you do those things, you are not using wisdom and you are not seeing his message clearly.

Carpe Diem (Ecc 9:7-10a)

The only way to really help you see this is by going straight into vv. 7-10. These are the center verses and heart of this text, and this is very deliberately understood from the way he has crafted his passage. In vs. 7, he abruptly changes the subject. “Go, eat your bread *with joy*, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.” This very obviously takes us into our sixth “joy” of the sermon. What is the purpose of it here? To explain that, I want to go on a slight diversion.

Reading through the commentaries, we find them discussing these “joys” with a different kind of metaphor. Specifically, they use the **Latin** phrase: *carpe diem*. Translated popularly as *seize the day*. I’ll talk about the phrase and its relationship to the passage in a moment. But first, let’s look at two very different reasons one might seize the day. In this, consider these lyrics as parallel to the two very different ways of reading Ecclesiastes—as a book of great hope or a book of total resignation.

First, there’s the song by **Green Day** called “Carpe Diem.”⁵

*Breaking in a sweat
Like a bomb threat
Is your silhouette fading out?
Nothing left to lose
Detonate the fuse
Another breaking news blowout
Ain't it beautiful?
So unusual
Life's a gas and it's running out
Living a cliché
Gonna seize the day
Bottle rockets and celebrate, celebrate, celebrate*

⁵ **Green Day**. “Carpe Diem.” ;*Uno!*, Jingtletown Recording (2012).

*Carpe diem, a battle cry
Are we all too young to die?
Ask a reason and no reply
Are we all too young to die?*

This opening lyric very clearly has **disaster** in mind—bombs, fuses, breaking news. We're too young to die. Sounds like Ecclesiastes. The response? *Oh well, let's just seize the day since we are still here.* This is precisely that kind of resignation that so many think the Preacher of Ecclesiastes has in mind in these joy passages. I don't.

The second song comes from the kid's TV show Phineas and Ferb:

*If there's one thing we can say
I know it sounds a bit cliché
There's no such thing as just an ordinary day
And you don't have to build a roller coaster
Just find your own way to make the most of
These days of summer
And dance to the beat of a different drummer
Just grab those opportunities when you see 'em
'Cause every day's a brand new day, you gotta **Carpe Diem**⁶*

⁶ Phineas and Cast, "Carpe Diem," "Rollercoaster: The Musical!" *Phineas and Ferb* S.2, Ep. 110 (2011).

This is a song for kids to **enjoy their summer break**. But it isn't saying you should seize the day because those days of school are so rotten. Many kids think that, but that's the cynical view. It doesn't say that. Rather, it says there is **no such thing as an ordinary day**. The message is completely positive. Because life is so interesting and every day is unique, you should make the most of each one, grab the opportunity while you have it. This isn't *carpe diem* out of resignation or cynicism; but enjoyment. That's very appropriate for a children's song.

So, **why would commentators call these seven joys the seven *carpe diems*** of Ecclesiastes? Here, it may be helpful to understand that the phrase itself, like the reading of so many of Ecclesiastes, has been **lost in translation**.

“**Seizing**” conjures images of taking, getting things done, **dog-eat-dog jungle**, crushing it and killing it. In the words of Nike: “**Just Do It.**” This is carried out by active, self-reliant people often obsessed with **instant gratification**—a kind of perverted joy. Happiness, if it has any part, is **self-absorbed**. This is Green Day's song. This is the rugged American individualist, the mountain-man, the athlete, the entrepreneur. This idea fits very nicely with the cynical reading of Ecclesiastes. “**Might as well live it up since you are going to die**”

anyway.” This takes, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do” (Ecc 9:7) in the way that Isa 22:13 reads, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (cf. 1Cor 15:32). But is this really fair to what Ecclesiastes says?

I said that both this passage and the phrase *carpe diem* have been lost in translation. Many people understand neither of these. The phrase originates in the old Greek poet Horace. In his Ode, his poem tries to dissuade a woman (Leuconoe) from heeding astrologers and divers who vainly inquire into the future. Instead, he says, enjoy the present, for this is all we can do. *Carpe diem*, but trust not in tomorrow.⁷ In many ways, this sounds cynical.

This is because when people hear *carpe diem* today, thanks in large part to Robin Williams in *Dead Poet's Society* (indeed, even taking him out of context) they think it means, “*Seize the day, boys.*” That is, strike while the iron is hot, take the bull by the horns, go out and take it.

⁷ *Ask not ('tis forbidden knowledge), what our destined term of years,
Mine and yours; nor scan the tables of your Babylonish seers.
Better far to bear the future, my Leuconoe, like the past,
Whether Jove has many winters yet to give, or this our last;
This, that makes the Tyrrhene billows spend their strength against the shore.
Strain your wine and prove your wisdom; life is short; should hope be more?
In the moment of our talking, envious time has ebb'd away.
Seize the present; trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may.
(Horace, Odes 1.11).*

However, the term originates in **horticulture**, where it meant more literally “**plucking the day**,” as in gathering the ripened fruits and flowers. **Robert Herrick** said it this way, “**Gather ye rose-buds while ye may, Old Time is still a-fly-ing; And this same flower that smiles today Tomorrow will be dying.**”⁸ **Plucking a ripened flower** is a very different metaphor than **taking the bull by the horns**. The more famous is a “**rather forceful and even violent concept of seizing the moment ... gathering flowers ... for timely enjoyment is a far gentler, more [pleasing] image.**”⁹

True *carpe diem* is **joy for joy’s sake**. It is taking time to smell the roses, meander down nature’s garden, and enjoy creation, take each day one at a time and live it to the fullest. That’s Phineas and Furb. It is what **Gus** (Robert Duvall) tells **Lorena** (Diane Lane) in the TV Miniseries *Lonesome Dove* (1989). Lorena is obsessed with going to San Francisco. He tells her, “**Life in San Francisco’s still just life. If you want only one thing too much, it’s likely to turn out disappointing. The only way to live is to learn to like all the little**

⁸ **Robert Herrick** (1591-1674), “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry Third Edition* (1983), at *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46546/to-the-virgins-to-make-much-of-time>. William’s character John Keating actually quotes from this poem and is actually encouraging the students to make their lives extraordinary. This is not a cynical view of life.

⁹ See the fascinating article, **Chi Luu**, “How ‘Carpe Diem’ Got Lost in Translation,” *JSTOR Daily* (Aug 7, 2019), <https://daily.jstor.org/how-carpe-diem-got-lost-in-translation/>.

everyday things.” “Yeah, like what?” “Like a sip of good whiskey or a soft bed or a glass of buttermilk...”¹⁰

Whether scholars realize this original meaning or not, this actually fits the joy passages, not in an ironic way, but in a glorious and truthful way. It is into this that I want you to consider the verses. *Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.* The Psalmist says, “From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart” (Psalm 104:13-15). Does that sound like resignation? Of course not. This is true *carpe diem* of God’s creation. And it is precisely what Ecclesiastes has in mind.

He adds, “For God has already approved what you do.” It’s amazing to watch commentators spin round and round as they try to interpret this. Longman says, “It sounds as if he believes that God gives people unlimited approval for their actions.”¹¹ That’s not what’s going on. Rather, “Long ago God approved our enjoyment of food and drink. The

¹⁰ “On the Trail,” S.1, Ep. 1, *Lonesome Dove*, Motown Productions (1989). Thanks to Dr. Judd Burton for this great analogy of reading Ecclesiastes properly.

¹¹ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 229.

Teacher is ... thinking of the creation story.”¹² “The enjoyment of God’s gifts is something which God has decreed from the beginning.”¹³

He continues, not with sarcasm, but with a wonderful understanding of creation. “Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (8-10a). The entire section has a virtual parallel in Gilgamesh:

*Gilgamesh, fill your belly—
Day and night make merry,
Let days be full of joy,
Dance and make music day and night.
And wear fresh clothes,
And wash your head and bathe.
Look at the child that is holding your hand,
And let your wife delight in your embrace.
These things alone are the concern of men.*¹⁴

¹² Greidanus, 233.

¹³ Roger Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 144. Cited in Greidanus.

¹⁴ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, in *Before Philosophy*, trans. H. Frankfort et al. (New York: Pelican, 1949), p. 226.

Why bring this up here? Because the point is, what the Preacher is saying **resonates with all mankind**. It is part of our shared gifts from God.

But this is not just for a demigod like Gilgamesh to enjoy. The Preacher **commands you** to enjoy them. These are imperatives: *Go, eat, drink, let be white, let not oil, enjoy life*. He has an incredibly world-affirming view of food, alcohol, merriment, purity, beauty, marriage, sex, family, and work. These things are meant to be enjoyed, not sinfully, but in God-honoring obedience and happiness.

He is not commanding this out of defeatist acceptance to the evil fate of death. He is saying it because in spite of death, God still put you on his good earth and he put you here to enjoy what he made. In spite of your toiling under the sun, in spite of your having a vain life, enjoyment is still possible. Creation still exists despite the Fall of man into sin. Christians should be able to understand this better than others.

Carpe Diem (Ecc 9:10b-12)

The most difficult hurdle for my interpretation is probably **vs. 10**. “... do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge of wisdom in Sheol, to which you

are going.” There are two difficulties here, the first half and the second half of the verse.

In **the first half**, is God somehow giving *carte blanche* to do anything you feel like? Some go that route. But this is the Preacher of Wisdom. Do you seriously believe that’s what he has in mind? The context is not doing sinful things, but **things that God has approved**, such as those things mentioned by the Psalmist. It is working with your hands, gardening in the dirt, baking and cooking, raising cattle, being a wife and raising a family, making love with your marital spouse, planting a tree, stitching clothing, doing work that beautifies others or makes them happy—within the confines of the Law of God. **Luther** takes it right back to **Genesis 3** and the command to work. **Be merry, but don’t be idle in this life. Work. Tire your body with labor. Make your heart free of anxiety. Be content with what is in the present. Do not afflict your heart with grief. Enjoy the things God gives you as a gift.**¹⁵

The **second half** seems even more troubling. **What does he mean that there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol?** Is he saying what when we die, that’s it?

¹⁵ **Martin Luther**, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 15: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Last Words of David, 2 Samuel 23:1-7*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 15 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 150.

No, he says you go to Sheol. That's a place and it isn't a place that your body goes. But that's even worse, for Sheol is the Hebrew equivalent of Hades—**Hell!** Is he saying that we all go to hell?

In the OT, **everyone went to Sheol**, the pit, Hades. This is no longer true now that Christ has led a train of captives out of captivity. Believers are now justified, the law has been obeyed, and justice has been met. That temporary holding place for those who trust in Christ is now empty and they are in the presence of the LORD. But perhaps the ancient Greek conception might help you understand, even if it isn't necessarily technically what Solomon might have been thinking, though it could have been. **Hades had different compartments**, as we've just seen that, for the entire place is not now empty, only the side we call Paradise. In their conception, they called it **Elysium**. It was the place of forgetfulness, of sleeping. That idea fits nicely with no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom.

But again, his point is **not to make a systematic statement on Hell**. His point is to contrast *now* with *tomorrow*, *life* on earth in a physical body with life in *the grave* where when you go and look at the dead body, there is no life. The contrast both before and after the joy is the key. This is a

sandwich, not a hot dog, something with a middle rather than something that moves only from beginning to end.

Thus, vv. 11-12 return us to death. “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, and when it suddenly falls upon them.” There is a lot here, but the main point is to bring back that stark contrast between life and death so that in returning to the theme of death, it might reinforce your resolves to live ... now!

The beginning of this was famously paraphrased by Patrick Henry in his “Give Me Liberty, or Give me Death” speech (1775). “The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.”¹⁶ Henry was appropriating the Preacher for the Colonialist cause of the Revolution. However, the race here is the race to death. He is returning to how absurd it is that “time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time,” his time to die.

¹⁶ Patrick Henry, “Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Death,” (1775), *Monticello Digital Classroom*, <https://classroom.monticello.org/view/73500/>.

It is interesting to compare this “time and chance” to the opening, their deeds are in the hand of God. It is yet more opposites at work. Some people don’t like the idea of “chance.” They say it is an absurd idea. Others do not like the idea of a providential God. Here we have both sitting side by side in Scripture like bread between the meat.

In my conception of “chance,” I do not believe that it is just random accidents of a chaotic universe just happening or not. Rather, God set the universe up to work according to laws, and those laws are reasonable and repeatable and they do certain things. When I throw a penny into the air, it will come down because of gravity —unless there is a miracle. However, *how it comes down* is open to those who do not know the future. I don’t know how it will land. Heads or tails? Or ... something else? One of my most memorable moments in college happened between classes, when I accidentally dropped a penny on a tile floor in a stairwell just as my Stats professor walked by whose class I was just five minutes from starting. Thing is, it was the one and only time I ever had a penny land *on its side*. I was in such shock that both the penny *and* the *Statistics prof* were there at that moment, I just looked him and said, “What are the odds of that happening?” He thought I was pulling his leg and walked

off mad thinking that I was making fun of him—because he's the stats guys!

God has made us all **susceptible to the ravages of time**—we get old, we get sick, we lose our minds, and so on. He has also made it so that from our perspective, **things happen that we cannot predict**. The one thing many want to predict is the day they will die. But they can't. So he returns to the dehumanizing fact that death takes us like **fish** in a net and **birds** in a snare. It is sudden and inescapable. His point is **not to become all morbid**. It is rather to highlight the joy you are to have here and now. It's the second piece of bread in the sandwich.

While all kinds of unbelievers have thoughts of *carpe diem*, some even have good ones, it is really **only the believer in Christ who can make sense of it in the face of evil**. Our reading of this book as Christians should be precisely the opposite of the pagans with their cynicism and resignation, precisely because of Christ. The cynical view of Ecclesiastes misses the whole point of this with its belief that the Preachers is just resigned himself to eat, drink, and be merry because what else are you going to do? It's like watching Lonesome Dove, a western with danger and treats and hazards and death, and then watching that scene about the

buttermilk (which is right in the middle of the series by the way), and coming away thinking that this was just a throw-away line. No. It is the point of the show.¹⁷

It is fascinating to me to see that such cynicism was quite absent from the way the Church Fathers interpreted this text. Cyril of Jerusalem is representative,

For this reason Solomon also, in Ecclesiastes, covertly alluding to this grace, says, “Come hither, eat your bread with joy,” that is, the mystical bread. “Come hither,” he calls, a saving, beatific call. “And drink your wine with a merry heart,” that is, the mystical wine. “And let oil be poured out upon your head”: you see how he hints also of the mystical chrism. “And at all times let your garments be white, because the Lord approves what you do.” It is now that the Lord approves what you do, for before you came to the grace your doings were “vanity of vanities.”

(Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Lectures* 4.8)¹⁸

This “spiritualizing” of the text that was done so often in the early church is almost completely foreign to modern

¹⁷ We recently watched another western, 1883 and it very clearly has this same idea as the point of it. Capt. Brennan (Sam Elliott), “I’ve watched this girl for the last six months and she has outlived us all. I’m 75 years old and she has out-smiled me, out-loved me, out-fought me... She’s outlived me. She’s out-lived all of us.” “This Is Not Your Heaven,” 1883 S.1, ep. 10 (2022).

¹⁸ J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 263.

interpretation. And most conservatives really can't stand it. But in hating it so much, they miss the point that is being made. This is more than Gilgamesh, more than Green Day, and more than Patrick Henry seeing some of the same things as the Preacher. This is the Preacher of Wisdom whose trust in Christ made him take the world of both creation and the fall seriously, yet in such a way that he did not ultimately despair or ignore sin, become a hedonist or worship creation. This is a Preacher who knew that only those who fear God will finally be able to see his deepest meaning of all. *Enjoy the life God has given you.*

Perhaps I can help you see it by going to [the NT](#) and how it appears that portions of our text are used in a couple of places. The first is [Acts 2:46](#), which the Appendix to the Greek New Testament lists as coming from our text.¹⁹ [Ecc 9:7](#) with its eating and drinking finds a mysterious allusion in, “[Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.](#)” This refers to the [common fellowship and holy communion](#) that they had with Christ and with one another. In this way, it is not too much different

¹⁹ The following is in [Greidanus](#), 226-27.

from the spiritualizing of the Church Fathers, for this can only have as its source, their common faith in Christ.

Second, vs. 8 with its garments and oil seems to parallel **Matthew 6:17**. “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” This has to do with obeying God out of sincerity and love. It reminds us of **John 15:10-11**. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

And that’s **the secret**, the mystery that death itself can reveal to those yet alive, to those who have been made alive by Christ through his word. This is the secret hidden in plain sight by our Preacher, if you know how to see it. **Keep his commandments and enjoy his good creation**, knowing that your fall into sin has been dealt with on the cross, that satisfaction has been made, and that though you die once, the second death will have no power over you. God is renewing his creation and has in store such pleasures and treasures that no eye has seen, or mind has understood. But those pleasures and treasures are rooted in the original goodness of creation, which he has commanded you to enjoy.

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