

“Whatever Your Hand Finds *to Do*”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ecclesiastes 9.*

Memory Text: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (*Ecclesiastes 9:10, NIV*).

In 2004, a 70-year-old Italian man died. Though 70-year-old Italians dying isn’t anything out of the ordinary, how he died was. Aldo Busato, a retired farmer, was killed instantly by a World War I bomb, part of his collection of military memorabilia. He was in his garden, showing the relic to some friends, when the ordnance exploded, killing him and seriously injuring the person he was showing the bomb to.

How do we make sense of things like this, crazy things that just defy rational explanation? The fact is, as we saw last week, we just can’t. What we have to do is simply learn to trust in the goodness of God, despite what’s for now inexplicable.

Solomon, again, touches on this theme (and others) in the chapter for this week. His focus here, though, is on death, a theme that has appeared in other places in *Ecclesiastes*. As we read, remember that Solomon at times is expressing views from a “secular” perspective, a perspective that should help us understand the futility and meaninglessness of our existence if there is no God who promises us justice, answers, and eternal life. At the same time, though focusing on death, he is also talking to us about life and how we should be living now.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.*

In God’s Hands

“So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him” (*Eccles. 9:1, NIV*).

Verse 1 of chapter 9 continues the flow from the last verse of chapter 8. If you remember, Solomon was talking about our inability to understand God’s ways. Though he ends with that thought, chapter 9 opens up with the above line, which, taken with what preceded it, could be expressed like this: *We surely don’t understand God’s ways, but we can know that the Lord looks after those who are faithful to Him, regardless of whatever they face.*

How fair an assessment do you think this conclusion is? And, even if you agree, what does it mean to say that the faithful are “in God’s hands”?

To say, however, that we are in God’s hands doesn’t, of course, mean that we will never have pain, suffering, or tragedy in this life. The most faithful of all Christians can never be sure of what will await them “under the sun.” That’s perhaps what Solomon meant by the last phrase of verse 1: Sure, we might be in God’s hands, but that doesn’t mean we won’t face suffering. The difference, however, is that as Christians we can trust in the goodness and mercy of God in spite of these tragedies. Imagine going through the things we so often go through without the belief that there’s a loving, caring God who promises to one day “‘wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (*Rev. 7:17, NIV*).

Put yourself in the place of some faithful Bible character who was amid a great trial and, yet, who was certainly still in God’s hands. How about Joseph or John the Baptist, when they were in jail? How about Job, sitting on his refuse heap, just about everything but his life gone? Or maybe Daniel thrown into the lions’ den? Whichever one you pick, try to imagine how easy it would be for that person, in the midst of their trial, to doubt or question the Lord’s love and care. What lessons can you learn that could perhaps help you in whatever situation you are facing now, when you, too, are tempted to doubt?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 9:10*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Christians are uniquely equipped to live with certainty in an uncertain world.

Feel: Our certainty in God's abilities to manage life's situations.

Do: Live boldly and take risks for God's sake.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. A Common Destiny (*Eccles. 9:1-8*)

A Not even Christianity can immunize us from disease, tragedy, or death. When have you seen someone suffer in spite of his or her apparent closeness to God? What lessons did you learn from that experience? List at least three.

B The words "Always be clothed in white" (*Eccles. 9:8, NIV*) have special significance to Christians. What are the implications of being clothed in the robes of Christ's righteousness when we face hard times?

II. Life's Simple Pleasures (*Eccles. 9:9-12*)

A Make a list of the top ten things from which you derive pleasure that have nothing to do with money.

B Our present life is just a tune-up for the life to come. What hobbies or interests are you now pursuing that you hope to perfect in the world to come? How can you use them for God's glory now?

▶ **Summary:** From the perspective of eternity, our lives are shockingly brief. No wonder we are counseled to live now with "all our might."

Learning Cycle

▶ **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: **Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: Why is this lesson important to me?**

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One Fate?

Ecclesiastes 9:2 is a prime example of how important it is to read Ecclesiastes in the context of the whole Bible; here, too, is a good place to repeat the admonition given in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060, that “passages such as these should not be wrested from their context and made to teach some supposed truth that Inspiration never intended them to teach”.

At the same time, Solomon’s point, if understood in the proper context, is well taken. Death is stronger than nature, at least nature as we now know it. One could argue that death is part of nature itself; anything that lives dies. And as we all know too well, it makes no difference if you are righteous or not. Death always wins out.

Yet to say that one fate awaits everyone (and that is death) regardless of how we live is like saying that one fate awaits everyone who drinks (and that is swallowing) regardless of whether we drink water or arsenic. If we take only the short view of things, death is indeed the common fate of all. The short view, however, is just that, the short view; it’s like listening to the first few notes in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and mistaking them for the whole symphony. The Bible, as a whole, gives us the long view.

Look up the following texts: What is the ultimate fate of humanity?
Dan. 12:2, Matt. 25:32-41, John 3:16, John 5:29, Rev. 20:6-15.

No question, the Bible is clear that there is not one fate common to all; there is one of two fates: either eternal life or eternal destruction. No middle ground here; no compromise. Either we will live forever, or we will be dead forever.

The good news is that through Jesus, every human being has the opportunity to live forever. Christ died as the Substitute for all humanity, with no one left out. His provision was more than enough for everyone. In the end, which of the two fates is ours is, really, our own choice.

Think about your choices, not just the big ones, but the day-to-day “little” ones. By these choices, what fate are you, ultimately, choosing?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: How can we reconcile good and bad things happening to both good and bad people?

Think back over times when the innocent and the guilty both suffered the same fate: children, dying in the crossfire of war; victims of crimes, targeted because they are weak; natural disasters—floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.—that wipe out entire neighborhoods.

Many people question, If there is a God, why doesn't He take care of those who serve Him?

All of these situations may leave us asking, Who is in control of this world? Is the death and suffering we see an act of neglect by our Savior? Or are we witnessing the workings of the evil one in nature?

Invite class members to share times that caused them to wonder if God still controls this earth.

► STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: What do I need to know from God's Word?

Bible Commentary

Solomon struggles with unfairness. He witnesses that people who do evil are often rewarded, while those who are good suffer. Solomon tries to help us understand this apparent injustice.

(Review Ecclesiastes chapter 9 with your class.)

I. The Good and the Bad (*Eccles. 9:1-3*)

Ecclesiastes 9:1

When Solomon reflects on “all this,” he is reflecting on the adversity of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. He repeats this thought in Ecclesiastes 10:14.

Consider This: How do we determine who is righteous? (*See Matt. 7:15-20.*)

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The Dead

Here let me die: for to give birth to those
Who can but suffer many years and die,
Methinks, is merely propagating death,
And multiplying murder.
—Lord Byron

“Once a man has realized,” wrote Russian Leo Tolstoy, “that death is the end of everything, there is nothing worse than life either.”

However negative his words, Tolstoy does have a good point. It’s kind of hard, isn’t it, going through life knowing that it ends in death and that death is the end of everything?

Read Ecclesiastes 9:3-6 and think about it from the perspective of someone who doesn’t believe in God or in any afterlife at all. Try to put yourself in the mind of someone who believes that death is the end of everything. What kind of purpose can you find to life? What sense can you make of all the things you do, knowing that you, as well as all your children and all their children, might die before Jesus comes?

Now, however, read the same texts from our perspective as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, with our belief that death is merely a sleep and that through what Christ has done for us, when He returns—which seems to the dead to be only in a “twinkling of an eye” after they die—we will be raised to eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth. How different is the message you get from looking at them from this perspective in contrast to the one above?

We should be so thankful for what Christ has offered us through His death and resurrection. Without it, we would face the kind of hopelessness expressed in the texts for today. How precious our faith should be to all of us; how crucial that we guard and protect it as if our lives were at stake. Indeed, they are.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

When talking about “God’s hands,” Solomon uses the word *hands* as a symbol of power and authority. “All the holy ones are in your hands” (*Deut. 33:3, NIV*), or “You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hands” (*Isa. 62:3, NIV*).

■ *What does Solomon mean by the phrase “no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them” (Eccles. 9:1)?*

The future is under God’s control. No one knows whether that future will be good or bad.

■ *How do we know God will bring justice? (See Gal. 6:7.)*

Ecclesiastes 9:2

Not only do all people share a common destiny, but the wise and the foolish, the good and the bad, all experience similar events during life.

■ *What type of events is Solomon thinking about? (See Job 9:22, Matt. 5:45.)*

The phrase “the clean” refers to ceremonial cleanness. “Those who offer sacrifices” (*NIV*) are those who are in strict compliance with the outward, ritual requirements of religious life.

He that “sweareth,” or “those who take oaths” (*NIV*), refers to a legal agreement. Those who fear taking an oath are generally those with no intention of keeping their promise.

■ *Why should we be cautious about making agreements that we are not committed to keeping? (See Lev. 19:12.) What counsel do we have about making an agreement? (See Matt. 5:33-37, James 5:12.)*

Ecclesiastes 9:3

Solomon is struggling with the fact that both good and bad people die. He fears that this common destiny will encourage many people to be more interested in sin.

■ *Why does it appear that the majority of people prefer the pleasures of life on this sinful earth than the future life of joy with Jesus?*

II. The Dead (Eccles. 9:4-6)*Ecclesiastes 9:4*

The word *hope* is translated “confidence” (*2 Kings 18:19*) and “trust” (*Ps. 25:2*).

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Now Is the Day of Salvation

As Adventists, we love to use Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6 in support of our position on the state of the dead. And rightly so, for the dead indeed “do not know anything” and indeed “they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (*NASB*); at least, that is, not until Jesus comes back. Solomon’s point here, however, wasn’t so much to make a theological statement about the state of the dead as it was to make a statement about life. Though these texts are talking about death, they do so in the context of life and how life should be lived.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:5-10. What is the point about life that Solomon is making? How is he telling us to live? How can we apply this basic idea to our lives here as Christians?

We should be so thankful for what Christ has offered us. Our life here is the only one we are given, at least in this world. And although this life is transient (*Job 8:9*), and though one day this earth and all that’s in it will be gone (*2 Pet. 3:10-12*), it’s fraught with eternal consequences now because how we live here utterly determines our fate for eternity. That’s right: Decisions here, in our short lives, decisions that can take only seconds, can decide our fate for eternity. How crucial it is then that we take our time of probation seriously; that we live a life of vigilance and care for our souls. With such consequential things at stake, how foolish it would be to live any other way.

Look up the following texts. How do they reinforce the idea expressed in the above paragraph?

Mark 14:38

Rom. 14:12

2 Cor. 6:2

2 Pet. 3:10-14

However important the decisions we make, the most important one of all is the one for Christ, the one in which responding to the Holy Spirit, we choose to die to self and live for Him. Have you made that decision yet? Just going to church, or even believing in Jesus, isn’t making that decision, the one that—more than any other—will decide how you’ll spend eternity.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Solomon compares a live dog with a dead lion. At that time, the dog was a symbol of the viciously wicked and was, therefore, the most despised of all animals. (See *Prov. 26:11, Isa. 56:10.*)

The lion was a symbol of majesty and might (*Prov. 30:30*). God and Christ are both represented as lions (*Rev. 5:5*).

Consider This: How does this explanation about dogs and lions differ from our perspective today? (See *Eccles. 9:5.*)

Solomon reinforces the understanding that the dead know nothing. (See also *Ps. 88:10-12.*)

“No more reward” refers to enjoying life here on earth, not to life with Christ in the new earth.

Solomon reminds us that even the living’s memory of those who have died will fade and be lost.

Ecclesiastes 9:6

The strong emotions we once felt disappear in death. (See *Isa. 38:18, 19.*)

“Popular theology represents the righteous dead as in heaven, entered into bliss and praising God with an immortal tongue.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 546.

■ *How does this popular theology compare with what we have just read about what the dead know?*

► STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 What happens after we die? (*Eccles. 9:5, 6*).
- 2 How does our understanding of death conflict with what other Christians believe?

Read Acts 21:29, 34. “Peter on the Day of Pentecost declared that the patriarch David ‘is both dead and buried, and his sepulcher is with us unto this day. . . .’ The fact that David remains in the grave until the resurrection proves that the righteous do not go to heaven at death.”—Ellen G.

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Time and Chance

We've all heard or seen or even experienced for ourselves great injustice, and not necessarily at the hands of others. Sometimes "time and chance" just seem to work in a way that's so unfair, so unjust, so uncaring.

A young woman in the prime of life is struck down with a debilitating disease; a man is laid off from work because of economic conditions; a star athlete slips and falls on some stairs, and a career is ruined. The list goes on and on.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-18. What is Solomon's overall point? Do you agree or not? If not, why not?

Again, from a human standpoint, it can seem that "time and chance" rule over all our lives. But that's not the Bible position, which teaches that there is a God who not only sees all things (*Ps. 11:4, Prov. 5:21*) but is intricately involved in human affairs (*Prov. 16:9, Dan. 2:21, Matt. 6:25-31*), no matter how difficult it is at times to see it. The crucial thing for us, as Christians, is to come to a personal knowledge of God, a knowledge of Him and His love that enables us to cling to Him in faith and obedience when it seems that, indeed, "time and chance" are treating us cruelly.

Look specifically at Ecclesiastes 9:13-16. What point is touched on there?

There are probably a number of ways to look at these verses, but given the context, we could say that Solomon is talking about more injustice, about someone who does something worthy but, for whatever reason (in this case because of poverty), that person's contribution is not acknowledged, or even is forgotten about. Again, from a human perspective that's all true; fortunately, a human perspective isn't the most important one. God's perspective is, and He not only won't forget but will also reward (*Luke 6:35, Col. 3:24, Heb. 10:36, Rev. 22:12*).

What do you say to someone to whom "time and chance" have dealt a cruel blow? How can you assure them of God's love and care amid their sufferings?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 546.

3 Have I used the blessings that God has given me for self-gratification or to minister to the needs of others? (*Review Eccles. 9:7.*)

Application Questions:

1 Review Luke 13:1-5. This story describes the 18 persons killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them. How is this story an appropriate call to repentance?

2 We know there will soon be an end to life as we know it. The good, as well as the bad, will be over. Review Romans 8:19-22. Why does Paul compare the time of the end to a woman in childbirth pains?

Witnessing

How can we help others view God and the world we see in a hopeful light?

Consider This: Why is there more comfort in knowing a loved one is sleeping, rather than in heaven, until Jesus returns? How can we share this truth with those who are confused? When is it the right time to talk about what happens after death? When might there be a wrong time to talk about this?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God's help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Like Solomon, looking at the meaninglessness and unfairness of life, we also struggle with understanding why bad things happen. What is the Lord trying to tell us through disaster?

Consider This: Ask class members to share ways in which we can help those in need.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 191; vol. 3, p. 453; vol. 4, pp. 306, 307; *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 245; *The Great Controversy*, p. 662; *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 91.

“Christ desires His hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure the salvation of the soul after death. ‘Son,’ Abraham is represented as answering, ‘remember that thou in thy lifetime receivest thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you can not; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.’ Thus Christ represented the hopelessness of looking for a second probation. This life is the only time given to man in which to prepare for eternity.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 263.

“In every age there is given to men their day of light and privilege, a probationary time in which they may become reconciled to God. But there is a limit to this grace. Mercy may plead for years and be slighted and rejected; but there comes a time when mercy makes her last plea. The heart becomes so hardened that it ceases to respond to the Spirit of God. Then the sweet, winning voice entreats the sinner no longer, and reproofs and warnings cease.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 587.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, do you know someone whom “time and chance” have really hurt? What can you, as a group, do to show that person the reality of God’s love, even during times of crises?
- ❷ What are ways that you can help those in your church who haven’t yet made a choice to surrender to the Lord? How can you help them see the importance of not delaying this crucial decision?
- ❸ Have people talk about a specific instance in which they saw clearly the closeness and nearness of God in their lives. What can you learn from each other’s experiences?
- ❹ As a class, discuss the idea, expressed in the Ellen G. White quote above, about the need to “prepare for eternity.” What do you think she means by that? How are we to “prepare for eternity”?