

“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?

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?

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.

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.

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?

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:

- 1 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?
- 2 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?
- 3 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?
- 4 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”?

God and the Fisherman

by A. B. ARLOO

The Afram Plain lies in eastern Ghana, within the 10/40 Window. Because of the difficult terrain, only 14 of the 126 villages that dot the plain had heard the Adventist message, and only 133 members lived among the 1.6 million people. The area was designated a Global Mission focus area for evangelism, and 135 Global Mission workers braved the harsh climate, almost impassible roads, and treacherous rivers to bring the gospel to the people. And God went before the lay evangelists and prepared the ground for sowing the seed.

Maxwell Vitashi is a fisherman who makes his living on a fast-flowing river that slides along the edge of the plain. One day Maxwell paddled his canoe upstream for miles searching for good fishing. Suddenly, his boat capsized, dumping him into the middle of the river. Desperately he swam against the swift current toward the distant shore. But he was no match for the powerful river, and soon he was too tired to go on. He knew he would die.

Maxwell was not a Christian, but in his need he prayed to the great God of the heavens to save him. He had hardly finished his prayer when unseen hands picked him up and tossed him into a spot where the stumps of two trees stood. He grabbed hold of the stumps to catch his breath. But how had he gotten there? He could see no human anywhere near him.

As his hands became numb, he wondered how long he could hold on. Again he prayed, and from nowhere two men in a canoe paddled toward him. They lifted him into their boat and carried him to shore near his village. The men laid him gently on the beach. Dazed, it was several minutes before Maxwell thought to thank his rescuers. But they had disappeared. *Who were those men?* he wondered. He had lived in this village all his life, but he had never seen them before.

Maxwell told his neighbors of his miraculous rescue, which he attributed to the great God who had heard his prayers.

A few days later, the Global Mission evangelists visited his village. Maxwell welcomed them and listened eagerly to their testimonies. When they held public meetings, Maxwell was the first in his village to ask for baptism.

Maxwell is one of many who found God and His truth through Global Mission pioneers. Your Mission offerings help make possible programs such as Global Mission outreach.

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