

Explore the Bible: Facing death?

August 3, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Aug. 22 focuses on Ecclesiastes 9:1-10.*

My grandparents had an old gumball machine with a glass filled with pennies right beside it at their house when I was growing up. As children, we always would run to the machine when we arrived at their home, put a penny in the slot, and turn the knob. Every time, a nice round gumball would fall down the shoot to the little clear door.

I wonder if we often approach life and God in a similar fashion. If I do right, if I attend church, pray, read my Bible, maybe even tell others about Jesus, and tithe, then God will turn the knob of life and blessings will come shooting down to me. This “prosperity gospel” is not only a lie, but it also robs the true gospel of its nature.

Iain Provan write: “It is untrue, however, that the faithful obedient person will only and ever possess such things [blessings] and can somehow be sure of avoiding illness, disaster, and death if he or she can simply muster enough religious devotion. To believe this is to believe something profoundly unbiblical; to teach it is to insult every Christian... who has known illness, poverty, and misery; and to press it on the sick, the poor, and the unhappy... is to place a millstone around the neck of those who are drowning rather than offer them the comfort and home of the [real, true] gospel.” (Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, p. 184) Provan remind us faith is not about control or manipulation, hoping that God always will do as we wish.

The teacher of the book of Ecclesiastes seems to have been influenced by other sources in the ancient Near East, or at least that the wisdom of Ecclesiastes influenced more than just the Israelites. This week's text is one of the places we see this take place. In the Zondervan *Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, Vol. 5, Duane Garrett writes: "Our three different sources, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Israelite, have essentially the same message: 'In the light of the brevity of life, enjoy yourself!' This attitude, of itself, may not be too remarkable, but the specific nature and sequence of the advice suggests a common wisdom tradition." (p. 512) While there might be connection between the advice of these ancient sources, Qohelet asserts God is sovereign (v. 1), the giver of favor (v. 7), and the giver of all our days (v. 9).

Reality of death

Qohelet expounds pragmatically this week on what is common with all living things—death. But John Goldingay asserts in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs for Everyone*, "With Ecclesiastes it affirms that facing death doesn't then inhibit you from enjoy life—again, rather the opposite." I can't change the fact that death is coming for you and me any more than I can change the love that God has for all humanity. I can try to hide from death, cheat death, deny its existence, but death will come for all. There will come a point for all when the breath of God that gives life will be withdrawn from our lungs for the last time. This finality cannot be avoided by how we live the lives we have been given.

While Qohelet does not yet have the same understanding of resurrection that will be revealed by Christ and the teachings of the New Testament, what he says is truly Christian as he reminds us that God is God, and we are not. God's ways are beyond our comprehension, our control and our earthly view. Facing these facts about life and death do not leave Qohelet to despair, and neither should we. For we can know the God who gives life.

As Christians, we know an even greater understanding of eternity than Qohelet possessed, as we live on this side of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Future secure with God

We do not control the future, nor can we erase the past. What we can do is trust that it is our God who has forgiven all the sins of our past, is present with us as we face present struggles, and will hold our future secure. We trust just as Paul did in 2 Timothy 1:12, "...I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day." Paul uses the word "committed" or "entrusted" to him—a banking term. It means "on deposit" or secure. Our future is secure with God through Jesus Christ. No one is ready to die and face their Creator until they have done this first.

We all face death. But we all don't have to fear death. When we commit ourselves to Jesus, not even the great equalizer of death will worry us, for we know that even in death, God has the final say. Qohelet concludes this week, reminding us life matters because it is a gift from God—we are to enjoy it and honor him with it.

I remember finishing high school and facing all the uncertainty of the next chapter of life—moving to college, choosing a major, starting a career, perhaps finding a future spouse, and all the other parts of life that are decided in those pivotal late-adolescent years. I spoke to a good friend, lamenting that I wished God would just tell me what he wants from me: What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go? Who am I supposed to be with? My friend wisely responded, "Do you think if God actually spelled it all out for you, that you would actually believe him?" It's both a challenge and blessing that we truly do not know what comes next.

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