



ECCLESIASTES 8:16-9:10

16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. Uncertainty: God's Has a Plan, but We Can't Know It (8:16-17)
 - a. The Limits of Human Investigation (8:16)
 - b. The Mystery of God's Sovereign Work (8:17)
- II. Certainty: Death Comes to All, but the Living Have Hope (9:1-6)
 - a. God Preserves the Righteous, Not the Wicked (9:1)
 - b. Yet Both the Righteous and Wicked Perish (9:2-3)
 - c. Yet the Living Have Hope (9:4-6)
- III. Conclusion: Hope Turns Death into a Celebration of Life (9:7-10)
 - a. Step into Joy Deliberately (9:7a)
 - i. Enjoy Bread and Wine—Nourishment and Festivity (9:7b)
 - ii. Enjoy White Garments and Oil—A Posture of Joy (9:8)
 - iii. Enjoy Married Love—A Gift to Lighten Hardship (9:9)
 - iv. Enjoy Work—Freely Chosen, Strenuously Engaged (9:10a)
 - b. Step into Joy Urgently—Because Death Ends the Opportunity (9:10b)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

After wrestling with corrupt kings, crooked systems, and the limits of wisdom in 8:1-15, Solomon admits what our restless hearts hate to hear: there *is* a divine plan, but it's not ours to map (8:16-17). God's "work" is real, comprehensive, and beautiful in its time—but opaque from our side of the sun. We feel the ache of eternity, but we can't see the blueprint. Our calling is not to crack the code, but to trust the Author of our stories.

Despite our paralyzing uncertainty, Solomon directs us toward the only future we can certainly know: we will die (9:1-6). The same event awaits the righteous and the wicked, the devout worshiper and the hardened rebel, the oath-keeper and the oath-breaker. Death flattens every human category. Solomon considers this a tragic misfortune of life under the curse. Yet he immediately reminds us why this judgment is just: our hearts are "full of evil" and "madness." We die because we sin. Still, he refuses to let the universality of death erase life's value. Precisely *because* the hearts of the living still beat, they "have hope." They can still think, choose, love, repent, feast, work, and worship. The dead are done. The living—however fragile—still have a chance to live before they die.

This brings us to Solomon's loudest imperative in the book: "Go..." (9:7–10). Having stripped away our illusions of control and nailed us with the certainty of death, he does something counterintuitive. He doesn't tell us to withdraw, hoard, or brace; he tells us to *enjoy*. Bread and wine, white garments and oil, married love and strenuous work—these are not distractions from reality but God's appointed way of living *in* reality. If death comes to all, then every shared meal, every warm marriage bed, every task done "with your might" becomes a defiant act of faith. "God has already approved what you do" does not sanction sin; it blesses God-centered joy. Under the shadow of Sheol, joy becomes an act of holy rebellion. The certainty of death is not a reason to give up; it is the reason to get up. If the grave is coming either way, the only real mistake is never to live.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

—Solomon has just explored how wisdom responds to corrupt and unpredictable power, showing that the fear of God and the practice of joy are how we endure the vanity it creates.

— Now he steps back and admits what every honest seeker eventually feels: even the wisest investigator runs out of runway. Solomon applied his heart, pulled all-nighters, watched the "business" of earth—and hit a wall. The more he studied the tangled mess of human activity, the more he realized he couldn't crack the code. There's a design, but it's encrypted. There's a plan, but it's above our pay grade. You can devote your life to searching, and "you will not find it out." And even the sage who thinks he's got it figured out eventually learns he's bluffing. The point isn't despair; it's humility. The fear of God means acknowledging the ceiling of our understanding, trusting that behind the chaos of "under the sun" stands the God who actually sees the whole story. We choose joy not because we've mastered the mystery, but because the mystery is in His hands.

—"I applied my heart to know wisdom":

- Eccl. 1:13: "I **applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom** all that is done under heaven."
- Eccl. 1:17: "And I **applied my heart to know wisdom** and to know madness and folly."
- Eccl. 7:25: "I **turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom** and the scheme of things."
- Eccl. 8:9: "All this I observed, while **applying my heart to all that is done** under the sun."
- Eccl. 8:16: "When I **applied my heart to know wisdom**, and to see the business that is done on earth..."
- Eccl. 9:1: "But all this I **laid to heart, examining it all...**"
- Despite the ceiling of human understanding, wise people seek wisdom with all their hearts. Prov. 2:1–5: "My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God."

—"business" (עֲשֵׂה, or 'inyan') – meaning task, occupation, burden, trouble, preoccupation.

- Eccl. 1:13: "It is an unhappy **business** that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."
- Eccl. 1:14: "All is vanity and a striving after wind... the **business** that is done under the sun."
- Eccl. 2:23: "For all his days are full of sorrow, and his **work** is a vexation." ("work" = inyan)
- Eccl. 2:26: "...To the sinner he has given the **business** of gathering and collecting..."
- Eccl. 3:10: "I have seen the **business** that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."
- Eccl. 4:8: "One person who has no other... yet there is no end to all his **toil**." ("toil/busyness" = inyan)*
- Eccl. 5:3 (Hebrew v. 2): "For a dream comes with much **business...**"
- Solomon concentrates his wisdom on the frenetic pace of human activity. We run to and fro. We fill our schedules down to the hour, out to the year. Solomon finds our activity "unhappy", full of "vexation", ceaseless, and sleep-depriving.
- This hectic pace does not cure vanity; it compounds it. Yet "God has given" this "unhappy business" to "the children of man to busy with." He has consigned us to toil. He has placed us in a world where work is both necessary and exhausting.
- Despite what self-help books tell you, there is no escape. The "balanced life" is a myth. A thousand plates spin at once, and nothing stops them until you die.

- This reminds me of a blog I wrote years ago called, "The Myth of the Balanced Life" based on Pr. 14:4: "Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much revenue comes by the strength of the ox." I wrote the blog during the trenches of raising babies and toddlers. Here's an excerpt:

Our culture tells us that strong people are balanced people. They garner the strength of their determination, their will, and their resources to maintain order in every area of life. They exercise regularly, cook every meal, stick to a budget, and their children eat with napkins in their laps. If you're strong—we are told—your life is clean, orderly, and balanced.

My life rarely feels clean, orderly, or balanced. If you don't believe me, just hang around the Rowntree house from 4-6pm—right after the naps the little ones should've had, and right before the dinner they're starving for (and probably won't eat much of—yes, it's a strange phenomenon). If you do come, I advise that you bring ear protection, lest you never recover from the chorus of blood-curdling screams. In fact, you might even join that chorus before it's all over.

Our lives are messy, but I'm learning to be comfortable with that. According to Proverbs 14:4, strength does not mean "balance"; it means "mess". Strong oxen make messy barns, and strong people have messy lives. Mess isn't always a problem that needs to be resolved, but rather, a sign that something is right.

—The self-help world has sold us a fantasy the Bible never promises—the myth of a perfectly balanced life. Ever since Genesis 3, work and relationships have been tangled and vexing. Ecclesiastes presses this truth, not to crush us but to free us: life under the sun is messy, and that mess is normal. Yes, there's a place for wisdom and order—but only a place. When "balance" becomes our gospel, we end up placing ourselves at the center and calling it health. The way of Scripture is different. It accepts the chaos of real life and calls us to fear God, love people, and do our work without insisting on a clean, ox-less manger.

—"neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep":

- Eccl. 2:23: "For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity."
- Eccl. 5:12: "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep."
- Another lie the culture tells us is that we can all simply choose to have 8-9 hours of sleep. There's a hint of truth here: We can stop depriving ourselves of sleep through doomscrolling and procrastination; we can choose to prioritize rest over hyper-productivity; we can work with our hands in the daylight so we enjoy "sweet... sleep" at night. But we cannot erase the curse. Stress, relational wounds, and trauma all disrupt sleep in ways no scheduling hack can fix. Part of life under the sun is the curse of restless nights.
- As painful as it is to hear this, it at least means this: You're not crazy! You're human.

—"then I saw all the work of God"

- Eccl. 3:11: "**He has made** everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out **what God has done** from the beginning to the end."
- Eccl. 3:14: "I perceived that **whatever God does** endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it."
- Eccl. 7:13-14: "**Consider the work of God:** who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: **God has made** the one as well as the other."
- Throughout Ecclesiastes, "the work of God" has referred to His sovereign plan—seasons of pain and prosperity—each of which is "made... beautiful in its time."
- Furthermore, this sovereign plan is hidden, even from the wise: "**he cannot find out** what God has done from beginning to end (3:14)... **man cannot find out** the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he **will not find it out**. Even though a wise man claims to know, **he cannot find it out**" (8:17).

- When Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God “has put eternity into man’s heart”—yet “cannot find out” God’s work—it means this: God has simultaneously placed in our hearts a desire to understand the big picture (“eternity in our hearts”) AND the inability to do so (“cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end”). We feel the ache of the infinite while living with finite minds.
- Why would God place eternity in our hearts if it would only lead to the frustration of not being able to satisfy it? To drive us to Him—the Eternal One. The solution is not untangling the mystery of Providence but in fearing God.
- Solomon “saw the work of God”—by eyes of faith, He could perceive the existence of a divine plan. But he could not discover which way it was headed.

—Kidner quotes a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* when commenting on this verse. It reads, *“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. / It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.”* *Macbeth* sounds like Solomon lamenting life’s vaporous quality. But Solomon’s eye pierces the fog to behold “the work of God”—not its blueprint, but its reality. The wise know that even if life is “but a walking shadow”, it is not “a tale told by an idiot.” Quite the opposite: life is authored by an all-wise and loving God (cf. Ps. 139:15-16).

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.

—“But all this I laid to heart, examining it all”: Despite the frustrating outcome of Solomon’s investigation into God’s mysterious plan, he rested in the following comfort...

—“how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God”:

- Earlier, Solomon exhorted us to choose gratitude in material gifts that flow “from the hand of God” (Eccl. 2:24). Here, the focus is not on what comes “from” God’s hand but rather what rests peacefully “in” God’s hand: us.
- God’s hand gives gifts; God’s hand holds us.
- Specifically, God’s hand holds “the righteous and the wise and their deeds”. His hand does not hold the wicked or the foolish or their deeds. The latter grouping is discussed in the next verses where death looms over both the righteous and wicked. In light of what he said earlier about the prosperous wicked, Solomon is hinting once again at a final reckoning—a comfort to righteous sufferers. Even if He doesn’t reward our righteous behavior right away, He will. Even if we don’t understand His mysterious work, we can trust Him to keep us and reward us in the end.

—“Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him”:

- Interpreters understand this in two ways. Some believe “love or hate” refers to God’s treatment of His people—whether He accepts or rejects them. Their interpretation rests on the context of “the work of God”, where the text emphasizes the divine side of the equation, not the human side. But I don’t think this interpretation fits. First, if “the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God”, they should not have to fear God’s potential rejection, as many verses clarify. Second, this would nullify the comfort Solomon intends—namely, that our inability to know God’s plan does not spell disaster, but rather, ultimate relief. Third, while “the work of God” is in the immediate context, so is “the righteous and the wise and their deeds.” Therefore, it’s fully possible that “love or hate” refers to our hearts, not God’s.
- The second interpretation, which I have been alluding to, is that the “love or hate” refers to human love and hate, not divine. Besides the immediate context of human “deeds”—which no doubt includes hateful and loving deeds—these same words appear later in verse 6: “Their [referring to dead people] **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.” Contextually, verse 6 forms an *inclusio* (bookend), where verse 1 and 6 both refer to human “love” and “hate.” The *inclusio* is deliberate, and it unlocks the key to interpreting this as human love and hate, not divine.
- The point, then, is simple and sobering: no one knows what relational joys or conflicts—what love or hate—await them in life. Such things are “before” us in the fog of Providence.

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.

—“It is”:

- These two words do not appear in the Hebrew. English translators supply them to smoothen the flow. Literally, it reads, “All is like the same for all; one fate is for the righteous and for the wicked...”
- This matters because in English “It” looks like it refers back to the “love or hate” of verse 1. But in Hebrew, there is no pronoun and no backward reference. Solomon is starting a new thought: despite life’s uncertainties, death comes for everyone.
- In Solomon’s logical flow, he seems to be saying, “We don’t know what lies ahead for us in this life (v. 1), except for this one certainty: we will die.”

—“the same event”:

- This reminds us of Eccl. 2:14: “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that **the same event** happens to all of them.”
- In Eccl. 2, Solomon shows the superior of wisdom—it illuminates our path—but also its limitation: it still ends in death. The same idea occurs here, where the wise rest in God’s hand—but they still die.
- Benjamin Franklin would have added one more “certainty” besides death: “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

—“the righteous and the wicked... the good and the evil... the clean and the unclean... him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice... the good one [and]... the sinner... he who swears... he who shuns an oath”:
Solomon multiplies categories to erase every excuse. It doesn’t matter if you’re faithful, moral, ritually clean, or disciplined—or none of these things at all. The same fate arrives for every one of us.

—“This is an evil in all that is done under the sun”:

- The same fate of death for the righteous and wicked, Solomon labels, “evil”.
- Most translators render the word this way, which makes me hesitant to interpret the word differently. I could be wrong. But their justification for the translation seems far-fetched to me. Realizing it is blasphemous to label God’s judgments as “evil”—far be it from our holy and good Creator!—interpreters argue that Solomon is merely saying, “It appears evil from my ‘under the sun’ reality, but that’s not the whole story.” Perhaps that’s what it means. My problem with it is that Solomon doesn’t say it “appears” evil; he says it “is” evil.
- The NET Bible renders it thus: “This is the unfortunate fact about everything that happens on earth: the same fate awaits everyone.”
- In my opinion, this is closer to the meaning because it aligns better with Solomon’s blunt statement that God’s judgment is *ra*—a Hebrew word with a wide semantic range: moral evil, harm, injury, misfortune, calamity, disaster, painful circumstance, and more. It aligns best with God’s revealed character to label His perfectly just judgment as an “unfortunate fact” or horrible “misfortune” for those under the sun. It also accords with Solomon’s statements about human sin (e.g., 6:3), which underscore that God’s judgments are never arbitrary but perfectly just. Finally, it best aligns with Solomon’s brutal honesty as a rhetorical tool that shatters our illusions. He’s labeling the human experience of death as a tragic misfortune—not accusing God of moral evil, and not claiming that His judgment “appear” evil.

—“And also, the hearts of the children of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts”:

- This seems to echo Gen. 6:5: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
- The flood washed away the wicked—but not wickedness. Solomon says the same evil resides in every human heart. The reason we haven’t seen another flood has nothing to do with human progress and everything to do with God’s mercy.
- I’m also reminded of these two verses:
 - Jer. 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

- Matt. 7:11: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"
- It's always struck me how Jesus parenthetically assumes we are evil. So much of society is built on the idea that we're basically good. Alongside Jesus, Solomon says, "Open your eyes."
- Why does Solomon say this? He seems to be reinforcing how this unfortunate reality of death is nevertheless a just judgment. We sin; therefore, we die.
- The "righteous" suffer the same fate because—even if they TRY to live a holy life—they (we) all fall short by a million miles. The only One who can say, "I don't deserve this fate!" is the One who never sinned: Jesus. Yet, He did die—in our place.

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.

—"the living has hope... a living dog is better than a dead lion":

- One commentator (Bartholomew) views this statement as a sarcastic mocking of life's worth—as if we can't take this statement at face value. He contributes some insight (see my next comment), but I disagree. In this passage, Solomon genuinely believes life is better than death because the living has hope. It's better to take him at face value because hope provides real value. Furthermore, the advantages listed in vv. 5-6 (as well as in vv. 7-10) argue for the genuine advantage of life.
- But here's where Bartholomew does, in my view, contribute to our understanding. He notes how dogs in the ancient world were despicable and disgusting. Then he adds that whatever comfort "hope" offers—it doesn't seem much: "For the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing" (v. 5a). But wait—Solomon calls this an advantage? To know you will die? This seems less of a comfort than a countdown.
- Knowledge is power; knowing your will die sparks energy: the energy to truly live.
- In this light, the "dog/lion" proverb is meant to sting: if life has an edge over death, it's only the pitiable edge of a scavenging street dog over a dead lion.

—Still, Solomon views life as advantageous, if only barely so (in vv. 4-6. Note that in vv. 7-10, life wins over death by more than a slim margin).

- "living know they will die, but the dead know nothing": Life is advantageous because even if our knowledge is painful (we will die), it's better than death's darkness.
- "they have no more reward": Life is advantageous because we can at least enjoy its rewards, which Solomon spells out in vv. 7-10: joy, bread, wine, intimacy, and work.
- "for the memory of them is forgotten": Life is advantageous because we can still impact the living. This disappears after we die.
- "Their love... hate... envy... have perished": Life is advantageous because we can still experience the rise and fall of human emotions. Even painful emotions function like a pinch on the arm: They remind you, "I'm alive enough to feel." The dead feel nothing.
- "no more share in all that is done": Life is advantageous because it can be shared in, participated in, experienced. Death doesn't just sit you on the bench; it ejects you from the game.
- "under the sun": This final clause reminds us that Solomon is examining our material earthly lives, not our eternal experience. Of course, both the righteous and wicked will experience resurrection, and with it, everlasting joy or shame. But that's not Solomon's focus here.

—How does Solomon's teaching that life is inherently better than death (9:1-10) align with his argument in 6:1-6 that death is (in that context) better than life?

- In chapter 6, Solomon is speaking about a specific kind of life—one loaded with blessings but lived apart from God, where a man "has no power to enjoy" anything God gives. That joyless, honorless existence is so wasted, so hollow, that Solomon concludes it would have been better never to have lived at all. In other words, life without God's gift of enjoyment is not a gift—it's torment.

- By contrast, here in chapter 9, Solomon is speaking about life as it's meant to be lived: received gratefully from God's hand, enjoyed as a gift, seized with joy, love, work, and bread "under the sun." This life—even with its pain and immanent death—is better than death because it still holds hope, reward, impact, and participation.
- The two passages are not contradictory but complementary. Chapter 6 warns us what life becomes when we remove God from it—an existence so miserable that death offers more rest than life. Chapter 9 invites us to receive life as God intended—with joy, gratitude, and holy fear—an existence that is meaningfully better than death, even in a cursed world.

—In sum: Even under the curse that includes painful toil and eventual death, life is inherently valuable and worth living—if, and only if, you fear God.

—This passage doesn't mention the fear of God explicitly, but Ecclesiastes has already made it clear that joy, wisdom, and the ability to enjoy life's gifts flow only from a life rightly ordered toward God (e.g., 2:24–26; 3:14; 5:1–7; 7:18). The fear of God is the quiet assumption under every joy-affirming passage in the book. Without it, life collapses into the restlessness and misery of chapter 6; with it, life becomes the meaningful gift of chapter 9.

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.

—The "Enjoy God" sayings of Ecclesiastes become more robust as we progress through the book. The deeper we plunge into life's miseries, the more emphatically he insists on pleasure, which diminishes the curse's sting. Here, for the first time, Solomon says:

- "Go!"—proactively pursue God-given pleasure!—don't just receive passively when it drops in your lap.
- "bread... wine"—In the past, Solomon has only said generically to "eat" and "drink," but this adds color (explored more later) and covenantal structure.
- "God has already approved what you do": Divine approval of human pleasure is explicit, not implicit
- "garments/white... oil/head": A lifelong posture of festivity and gladness; a whole-life embrace of joy, not just a meal-by-meal one.
- "wife whom you love": Our joy is to be relational, not just experiential. First mention of married love.
- "do it with your might": Don't just accept or tolerate your toil, but labor strenuously, give massive energy toward the work of your hands.
- "no work... thought... knowledge... wisdom in Sheol": Death's shadow looms larger over his strongest call to joy. The reality of death presses the urgency to truly live.

—"Go":

- In a sense, we receive pleasure passively, for it is a gift from God's hand throughout Ecclesiastes. The world lives for "gain" not "gift." They squeeze God's creation like a lemon for every drop of "gain," but it never satisfies them because their appetite only grows. But for those who fear God, pleasure is not something wrung out of the world. We open our hands rather than clenching our fists. When we passively receive life's blessings as gifts, we enjoy more than just gifts—but the Giver Himself.
- In another sense, we receive pleasures assertively: "Go!" Solomon commands. This corrects any misunderstanding about the passivity of our reception. It's passive in the sense that we open our hands to receive, but it's assertive in the sense that we must actually step into the pleasures God provides. Joy doesn't force itself on us. We must rise, move, partake, linger, savor. We must choose the meal, choose the companionship, choose the festival, choose the moment—because God has already chosen to give it. Passive in posture, active in participation.

—"bread... wine":

- Not just general eating and drinking, but a specific feast of bread and wine, and a heart posture: "with joy... with a merry heart."

- Bread represents ordinary sustenance; wine speaks of special occasion. Paired together, these elements exhort us to enjoy the full spectrum of life's delights: mundane and memorable, ordinary goodness and extraordinary gladness.
- Melchizedek offered bread and wine to Abraham (Gen. 14). Contextually, he was welcoming Abraham with a priest-king's blessing—refreshment, fellowship, and divine favor after battle—but the moment also pointed beyond itself. In Israel's imagination, bread and wine became symbols of covenant hospitality and priestly blessing, ultimately foreshadowing Jesus, our greater Melchizedek, who gives His people not only sustenance and joy but fellowship with God Himself.
- Bread and wine are shared in the Passover Meal but also in our Greater Passover, communion. We cannot read Solomon's exhortation to enjoy bread and wine apart from its canonical context of covenantal communion with God: our greatest gift, and our deepest joy.
- The elements of communion speak not only of the body and blood of Jesus but also of celebrating life, abundant life, made possible by Jesus. Jesus could have chosen different elements to signify His body and blood, but He chose these: natural elements that nourish and gladden, sustain and celebrate. Bread strengthens the heart; wine makes it merry (Ps. 104:15). In the Lord's Supper, these ordinary symbols of provision and joy are lifted into the realm of redemption. Jesus strengthens and gladdens us, not just with life, but with life eternal.
- For many people, Communion feels like a funeral service for a dead Savior. We burden ourselves with quiet, morbid introspection, based on a misunderstanding of the verse warning us to "examine" ourselves, lest we take the Supper in an "unworthy" manner. Contextually, the Corinthians were getting drunk and depriving the poor—that's the meaning of "unworthy." But Communion isn't meant to remind us of our sins; it reminds us of our Savior, and the forgiveness He offers. It is not a funeral service but a celebration of life in Jesus' name.
- Note on wine: Solomon is speaking to its general purpose, but alcohol is not for everyone. Pr. 31 says kings shouldn't drink it because it blurs their discernment to rule. Likewise, alcoholics should definitely not drink wine.

—"For God has already approved of what you do":

- Contextually, this is not suggesting that God approves of any action we take. In the parallel passage of Ecclesiastes 6, Solomon has already argued that it's better not to live at all than to waste your precious breaths on godless living. Now, in Ecclesiastes 9, he contends for the superiority of life over death—if we fear God—which is the foundation for joy throughout the book.
- "what you do" refers to God-fearers who "Go... eat... drink..."; who wear festive "garments" and whose faces are marked with the "oil" of gladness; who drink deeply of married love; and who "work" with all their might.
- Some people interpret "take up your cross and follow Jesus" as something beyond self-denial—something closer to "self-erasure." These are the "overly righteous" of 7:15, who restrict heaven's bounty and call it "righteous." It is not. It is self-righteous. Paul warns against it in Col. 2:20-23, where he exposes the illusion of holiness by deprivation: "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."
- Christ's example, just as much as Paul's warning, calls us to something better—not self-erasure, but a God-centered discovery of sustaining joy. As David Ford memorably put it (qtd. by Gibson), "Jesus literally ate His way through the Gospels"—a reminder that the Lord Himself embraced table-fellowship, feasting, hospitality, and gladness as part of His kingdom ministry.
- The fear of God guards us against the extremes of both self-indulgence and self-righteousness (Eccl. 7:15); it guards us *for* God-centered joy.

—"garments... white":

- When someone invites you to a ball, you wear neither street clothes nor funeral attire. You dress for the occasion. Solomon says, "Let every occasion be one of joy."
- But how does this square with Solomon's earlier claim that it is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting (Eccl. 7:2), or that "sadness of face makes the heart glad" (Eccl. 7:3)? At first glance, they seem to contradict. But they are actually cautioning us about different dangers. In Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon critiques the frivolity and escapism of the fool—the person who drowns reality in entertainment, noise, and surface-level laughter. For that person, mourning is better because mourning forces wisdom, sobriety, and a reckoning with death.
- Here in Ecclesiastes 9, Solomon is correcting the opposite danger: the paralyzing grief, cynicism, or dread that can swallow a person who sees life's miseries clearly but stops short of receiving God's gifts gratefully. Chapter 7 pulls us away from shallow laughing; chapter 9 pulls us away from joyless living. One warns against plastic happiness; the other admonishes us not to refuse God's good gifts.
- Ecclesiastes does not promote perpetual feasting or perpetual mourning, but discerning participation in both. We mourn honestly because life is a vapor, and we rejoice freely because every vapor is still a gift from God.

—"Let not oil be lacking on your head":

- Earlier, I alluded to Psalm 104 in the context of bread and wine, but now that Solomon has introduced "oil" it deserves a full quote: "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."
- Bread strengthens the heart; wine gladdens the heart; oil makes the face shine.
- Oil in the ancient world was a symbol of flourishing. It wasn't merely cosmetic. Oil meant vitality, abundance, honor, and hospitality. To have oil on your head was to be marked as someone living in God's abundance—not scraping by, not trudging through life dull-faced and dry-skinned, but refreshed.
- Oil signified festive joy. In Israel, you anointed your head for celebrations—banquets, weddings, high moments. You didn't anoint during mourning (cf. David declining oil while grieving over Bathsheba's child). So to "not let oil be lacking" is to take up a posture of ongoing celebration, a refusal to let grief freeze your face forever, a willingness to re-enter the goodness of life.
- Oil also conveyed honor and welcome. In an era of dusty roads and harsh heat, hosts honored guests by refreshing them with perfumed oil (cf. the rebuke to Simon the Pharisee: "You did not anoint my head with oil..."). Oil said: You belong here. You are welcomed. You are valued.
- Oil was a sensory reminder of God's blessing. Its fragrance lingered. Its sheen caught the sun. It was a tangible reminder that God's gifts are not merely functional (bread) or festive (wine) but beautiful. Oil touched not the stomach or bloodstream but the surface—your countenance—signifying that joy should not remain hidden in the heart but should radiate outward.
- In Ecclesiastes' logic, oil is the opposite of the "heavy burden" of 6:1; it is a lived counter-sign to life's futility. It is the visible declaration: My life is marked by God's goodness, not defined by the curse.

—"Enjoy life with the wife whom you love... that is your portion in life":

- Solomon has not yet mentioned married love, although he must have thought of it while writing, "if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone" (4:11). That quote flows from the miserable isolation of the workaholic (alone in his office) and the sluggard (alone on his couch). An essential component of curse-defeating joy is relationships.
- Joy isn't fully itself until it's shared. I'm reminded of a quote by CS Lewis: "It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than a tin can; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with."
- Why doesn't he say, "Enjoy life with the wife or husband whom you love"? Why does he restrict it to men?

- We observe similar language when Solomon alerts us of the aggressive adulteress but not her male equivalent (7:26).
- Ecclesiastes—like Proverbs—is written in the voice of a father/teacher addressing a male audience. This isn't a theological claim about gender value; it's simply the rhetorical posture of Israel's Wisdom Literature. The "son" addressed throughout Proverbs ("My son...") establishes the pattern: wisdom is framed as a father tutoring the next generation of men who will lead households, work the land, inherit property, judge disputes, and steward Israel's life. Ecclesiastes stands in that same stream. The principles apply to both genders, but Wisdom Literature postures itself as an address of older men to younger ones. Assumed within this posture is that wisdom is meant to be passed down generationally.
- Of course, women can learn from these same principles. What Solomon applies to men could just as truly be reversed and applied to women; the wisdom cuts both ways.
- One of the purposes of marriage is to increase joy. While it's true that "those who marry will have worldly troubles" (1 Cor. 7:28)—and every spouse can nod to that—Christians sometimes overcorrect. In reacting against romantic idealism, they slip into a kind of Pharisaical cynicism. Yes, marriage is hard. But it is also wonderful. Wisdom avoids both extremes and speaks of marriage in the balanced way Scripture does: realism without pessimism, delight without naivety.
- Does this mean marriage is superior to singleness? Some Christians argue this way too—and it's wrong. For some, singleness is a "gift" from God. Singleness is better for those called to singleness. If marriage was inherently better, we might have expected the perfect Son of God to have married. Instead, both marriage and singleness carry divine purpose, and the "better" one is simply the one God assigns. Furthermore, since God controls the seasons—not us—we are wise to cooperate with His timing rather than forcing our own (1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 26-27).
- "that is your portion":
 - "Portion" is inheritance language, and Solomon uses it repeatedly in Ecclesiastes to describe the God-given share of joy allotted to us in a frustrating world (Eccl. 2:10; 3:22; 5:19; 9:9). It is not the "gain" we claw out of life but the gift God places in our hands.
 - Scripture elsewhere describes a spouse in the same inheritance terms: "House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD" (Prov. 19:14). In other words, a godly spouse is not an achievement but a divine bequest.
 - When Solomon says enjoying "the wife whom you love" is part of your "portion" (Eccl. 9:9), he is framing marriage—and the joy it brings—as part of God's gracious inheritance to His people. This reframes marital joy not as something we manufacture but as something we receive with gratitude.
 - I always loved this framing. I feel it characterizes my experience with Alicia. I met her when I was 21. I married her at 22. I knew nothing. After more than two decades of marriage, we both realize: we barely knew each other. We dated for fifteen months before making vows, but you don't really know somebody until you've journeyed through hills and valleys over many years. In truth, I'm forty-four, and I feel like I'm just getting to know myself! Buried parts of my personality began emerging in my forties—parts that suffering and time uncovered with God's the help of God's sanctifying chisel. Given these realities, I feel so lucky (blessed!) to have found such a perfect mate. God knew what I needed more than I did. I think she'd say the same. Our love was not the reward for wisdom I inherently lacked as a young man. It was a gift, and it was evidence of His perfect wisdom.
 - That said, I'm still glad I had the privilege of marrying young. Wisdom requires years, which youth inherently lack. But God made up for what I lacked by gifting me with a partner I didn't deserve and didn't know I needed—in the ways I needed her.
 - Although I lacked wisdom, I loved God with my whole heart. And I think that's part of the instruction of Wisdom Literature: Fear God, and He'll give you everything you need—including, potentially, the perfect spouse. This is not to suggest that everyone finds that perfect spouse.

But fearing God—loving Him with your whole heart—is the surest way to walk in the center of His provision. Whether He gives marriage or singleness, He gives what is best. And when He gives a spouse, that spouse becomes part of the inheritance He handpicked for you.

—“Whatever your hand finds to do”:

- Solomon spoke similarly in 3:22: “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work...”
- But here, Solomon expands it. In 3:22, he assumes some kind of work, but in 9:10, he invites us to explore diverse ventures, ones that bring us joy.
- He expands on the thought of “enjoy your work” not only by inviting exploration but by exhorting us to be diligent: “do it with your might”. There’s actually a joy in working hard. They say it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill—about a decade of labor. Joy increases in tandem with skill and the success it yields. So work hard! “Whatever your hand finds to do”—pick a horse and ride it. Don’t change every two years. Hone your craft by intense labor, and you will yield the fruit of intense joy.

—“for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going”:

- This final clause strengthens the bond between the “Enjoy Life” section (9:7-10) and the “You will die” section (9:1-6).
- How can such disparate ideas link arms? Because the key to enjoying life is knowing you will die. Death clarifies. It strips away illusions, exposes trivial pursuits, and forces us to reckon with what actually matters. The brevity of life doesn’t have to diminish joy. Viewed properly, knowing you will die intensifies joy. It pushes you back into the present with urgency. One of the greatest ills of our culture is the inability to *be present*. O the tragedy of living in the past or for a future you might never see! But O, what a joy—to embrace God, relationships, work, and blessings TODAY.
- The shadow of death is not meant to paralyze but to prioritize. Solomon doesn’t say, “You are going to Sheol, so despair.” He says, “You are going to Sheol, so live.”

—N.D. Wilson (qtd. by Gibson) exhorts us in a way that matches Solomon’s urgent plea to live before you die: “Ride a bike, see the Grand Canyon, go to the theater, learn to make music, visit the sick, care for the dying, cook a meal, feed the hungry, watch a film, read a book, laugh with some friends until it makes you cry, play football, run a marathon, snorkel in the ocean, listen to Mozart, ring your parents, write a letter, play with your kids, spend your money, learn a language, plant a church, start a school, speak about Christ, travel to somewhere you have never been, adopt a child, give away your fortune and then some, shape someone else’s life by laying down your own.”