

## Ecclesiastes 9:1-10:3

### *The Dealing of God with the Righteous Throughout History*

#### **A. The Righteous in God's Hands**

How God works is his secret. With this confession, the church continues on towards the messianic age. This is possible because The Teacher has observed one thing very clearly: the righteous (pious) are in God's hands in all their doings; they are dependent on him. From his hand they also receive all kinds of gifts (see 2:24; 3:13; 5:18), which they enjoy with thanksgiving. It follows that they can also do their work with strength granted by God. Undoubtedly, *all* creatures, even the ungodly, are in God's hand (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10). But, above all, The Teacher wants to comfort and encourage the pious in the national assembly. Whether they experience love or hatred, they are and remain in God's hand, and may rejoice in his special protection.

Once this has been understood, The Teacher can say (speaking now out of *experience*) that all things are the same for all men, whether one swears an oath in a godly manner (Deuteronomy 6:13), or whether one ignores God completely. This interpretation recommends itself by the parallelism in v. 2: the positive is consistently mentioned first, followed by the negative, the evil. But we can also explain v. 2b as follows: There are those who take oaths all the time (think of the Jews at the time of Jesus), and there are those who shun the oath, who do are afraid to swear at all, out of respect for the LORD.

If we interpret it this way, the parallelism is broken, but the meaning becomes clear. Death comes to all. And *yet* the hearts of men are full of evil. They are proud and ungodly; and then they go to the realm of the dead!

Death remains an evil thing, especially for the righteous. When death enters the picture, there is an end to serving God on earth. (cf. Hezekiah's song of thanksgiving in Isaiah 38). A live dog is better off than a dead lion. It is incorrect to say that The Teacher does not look beyond the grave. He knows about God's judgment (3:18). But The Teacher speaks to God's people who have received a task and calling in this world. The promises of prosperity in life and the fruits of life are given *here*, and *here* the righteous see their life perish in the power of death. Therefore also *here* death must be swallowed up in victory, even though The Teacher does not know how that will happen. God gave the earth to the children of men, and the dead do not praise him. For that reason, death and the grave are so terrible (cf. Psalm 88:10-12; 115:17). At least the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they are eliminated. They have no reward anymore; they will be forgotten. Whoever has departed from this earthly community will not return to it again. Love, hatred and envy (4:4) are the common motivations for human actions here. In any case, the righteous remain in the hand of God. This was how The Teacher began, and he holds on to that.

## **B. The Righteous in their Office**

From this flows The Teacher's call to enjoy God's good gifts, as mentioned before (2:24; 3:12,22; 5:18; 8:15). Enjoying life with your wife whom you love is a new element which is put forward. Bread and wine appear as gifts of God and as part of his promises (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 33:28; Isaiah 33:16). God "favours" their use (v. 7). Recall the words of Article 12, Belgic Confession: all things were created "for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God." This is a mandate from the temple for God's people, the people who are called to work with all their might (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-5), because in the grave this will not be possible. Everything that is mentioned in vv. 7-10 is determined by God's mandate and promise in his covenant. For this reason, we should not say: in addition to encouraging us to live a joyful life, The Teacher also advises us to labour faithfully. Life is a unit. Therefore this whole idea can only be folly for the flesh, even though it seems attractive. The church may, and must, accept life, including marriage, as a gift from her God, and must know that everything is included in God's messianic plan of salvation as he makes his way through history. The emphasis lies here on our office. No one need ask: are you not worried about the misery of the world, about the want in the church? There is room for real enjoyment of life, even in a situation of oppression by a foreign power.

In verses 11 and 12 The Teacher wants to stress how we depend on God's decree in everything. The phrase, "time and chance" of course, does not contradict God's rule. The word "time" is used by The Teacher in the sense of "time determined by God" (3:1-15). But God's manner of doing things is incomprehensible, and therefore, there are many "accidental" circumstances which completely thwart our calculations. The strong do not always win the battle (fortunately). A fish feels free in the water, and a bird feels free in the air, but a net may be set, and the bird is snared or the fish caught. Likewise man does not know his time. You can think of the hour of death, but also of a sudden setback, which makes the church feel close to being swallowed up by death (one can think, for example, of an occupation by a foreign power which is hostile toward the church). Is the way of the church a dead-end road despite all the toil of the wise? Will our work be futile and destroyed? Nevertheless, God continues with his messianic work of salvation despite any "time and chance". Thus we can do no better than begin with our work and persevere.

## **C. Their Wisdom Triumphs Nevertheless**

The Teacher has often stated that wisdom (piety) is of no account, and that folly triumphs. A poor wise man could and would have delivered the city, but no one listened to him; his pious words were rejected as impractical. The city fell. The people preferred to listen to the hysterical shouts of fools (the officials of the besieged power), than to the sedate words of wise men. Yet wisdom is better than might, The Teacher concludes. Wisdom must overcome in the end, and therefore no one may keep his wisdom to himself, on the grounds that no one will listen anyway. The Teacher maintains the antithesis here: an oppressed but wise church is better than a stronger enemy who shouts out words of folly. (cf. the history of Hezekiah and Sennacherib, 2 Chronicles 32.)

Yet one fool (sinner) can destroy much good. This can make a wise man despair, since he is powerless against such a fool. In spite of all that, the crushing victory which is pronounced over the fool, means that one day wisdom will triumph. God reaches his goal, whatever happens. God's wisdom which he works on his own will once be victorious. It is certain where God's dealings with his church will end.

The Teacher expresses it in this way: the heart of the wise man inclines to the right side, but the heart of the fool to the left. The meaning is clear. The right side is that of happiness, the good ending, so that the wise man ultimately does achieve something. The, left, on the other hand, is the wrong side, the side of unhappiness, failure and punishment (cf. Matthew 25:33). The fool demonstrates to everyone (viz., to all for whom the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom) that he is a fool. It is the end of a matter which counts. "He laughs best who laughs last." The following verses continue this thought.

## Questions

1. I direct your attention again to the fact that Ecclesiastes 9:1 is based on revelation, while vv. 2-6 are based on experience. The last thing which we *see* is that men and animals die (3:18-21) and that the righteous and the ungodly are, in this respect, treated the same.

Verse 5 is also based on experience. Are you familiar with Rev. B. Telder's point of view about the believers who have passed away? His friend, Rev. C. Vonk, wrote a book (in Dutch) on the same topic entitled: *The Dead Know Nothing*, referring to Ecclesiastes 9:5. What objection do you have against this use of the text? Could not a second book be published, with the title: "They Have No Further Reward"? For if Rev. Vonk were correct, this text would say this as well. And volume three could then be called: "The Memory of Them is Forgotten". Discuss this thoroughly with each other.

2. Did The Teacher mean that when one dies everything is finished? Note that he talks time and again about God as Judge. What does this imply for the question which we are discussing?
3. What does Luke 20:37 say in this connection?
4. What is the connection between vv. 6 and 7? How can one place his engagement and marriage in God's service? Could you pray on your wedding day: "Lord Jesus, come quickly"?
5. Notice that again in chapter 9:16 the power of wisdom is shown; you can do the most with it (cf. 7:19). Is Article 37 of the Belgic Confession of importance in this connection?

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