



# *Ecclesiastes 9: 3-6*

## *A Common Destiny for all*

Text: Ecclesiastes 9: 3-6

Reading: Ecclesiastes 9.

Singing:

Psalm 23: 1-3.

Psalm 19: 6.

Psalm 39: 3, 5, 6.

Hymn 42: 1-8

Psalm 49: 1-5.

### **Theme and Points:**

*The Lord teaches us to face the power of death in this life under the sun.*

*Death is:*

- 1) inescapable*
- 2) irreversible*
- 3) impartial*

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## *Ecclesiastes 9: 3-6*

### *A Common Destiny for all*

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*This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope –even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten, Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.*

In chapter 9, we come to a certain conclusion of the Preacher that he has hinted at before, but not yet dealt with in depth and with emphasis, and that is the truth that everyone must and will die. Therefore the title of this chapter: “A Common Destiny For All”, which is taken from 9: 2 - 3: “The same destiny overtakes all”.

We can look at this same matter from a different angle, namely the petition: “Your will be done”. Millions suffer horribly and die a terrible death: can that truly be *the will of God*? When we consider this petition from the Lord’s Prayer, we are to keep in mind that God’s *revealed* will is first meant. God has commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and we must give ourselves fully to that calling.

I noted that the Preacher has hinted at a common destiny before. Perhaps you can check that out for yourself, for example, in 3: 19: people share the same fate as animals, all come from the dust, to dust all return. But then and elsewhere it was more indirect, while here in chapter 9 it is the main focus.

### **You will die**

*We all will die.* It does not matter how you have lived or what you have done, you will die. You may be strong or weak, swift or slow, wise or foolish, but you will one day die. And often evil times and the day of death come unexpectedly. On one day you may have a clean bill of health, but the next

day you are diagnosed with an incurable illness. The question is: how do we deal with this obvious truth that one day we will die and have to leave this earth?

*The LORD teaches us to face the power of death in this life under the sun. Death is*

- 1) *inescapable,*
- 2) *irreversible,*
- 3) *impartial.*

We believe that there is the resurrection of the dead and the life eternal. We will enjoy perfect, glorious, eternal life. This is a great comfort for all believers. But we have to deal first with the power of death. How do you face the reality that one day you will die? There is no escaping that day.

I am not speaking now about those who will be alive when Christ returns. They will not die but will be changed in an instant. Paul writes about this in connection with the great rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4. Generally speaking, however, most of us will have to face death. How will we face it?

### **Ignore death?**

The way that many people follow –and often we probably, too- is simply to *ignore* it. Just pretend that it is not there. Death always happens to someone else, not to us. It is better not to think about it, because then you cannot function. Shove the reality of dying far from you. Focus on living and not on dying. Someone may say, “I will take that hurdle when it comes, but I will not let this affect my life”.

That’s fine, but it is essentially a *worldly* way of dealing with an inescapable reality. The Preacher calls death an *evil*, something bad, and it is manifest in everything that happens under the sun: the same destiny overtakes all. You can be a good or a bad person, rich or poor, strong or weak, learned or illiterate, but in the end it makes no difference: you will die. The *same* destiny overtakes all.

Notice the verb “overtakes.” It is like death is following you around, getting closer all the time. You can run from it, and maybe postpone it for a while, but eventually it simply overtakes you and overpowers you. You cannot escape it. Look at 9: 12 for a moment.

### **No rhyme or reason?**

There seems to be no rhyme or reason to it: “As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times

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that fall unexpectedly upon them.” Millions of fish are swimming in the ocean, and suddenly, as per chance, a net descends and sweeps them away, just like that. No warning, no prior indication, just a silent net that suddenly ensnares.

The “evil times” (and this means those times that end in death) just come, and you cannot avoid them.

Some explainers struggle with the next sentence, “the hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterwards they join the dead.” It is a very abrupt ending, also in the original: they join the dead. But what is meant by this “madness”?

People who are “mad” are in a sense *obsessed*. They relentlessly pursue a goal. For them, the end often justifies the means. Elsewhere, in a similar context, the Preacher speaks about darkness, frustration, affliction, and anger (5:17). In a sense we are all *driven* people. What is it that drives us? This “madness” is the need to survive, to be successful, to enjoy what we can before we die. We are *obsessed* with this life and all it has to offer, and because the hearts of men are “full of evil”, this pursuit of folly is often undertaken without moral restraint.

### ***Evil and obsessed***

We are evil and obsessed. To put that together: we are obsessed with evil. This takes place throughout our life. It ends only when we die. Driven by the fear of death, we can and will do anything to find satisfaction. There is a line in Psalm 49 that is quite revealing in this respect, “...into Sheol like sheep they headlong run, their shepherd, Death, stands by to urge them on...” (rhymed version, *Book of Praise*). Death is the shepherd of many people, and this shepherd leads and urges them to eternal ruin.

Perhaps you have seen on the silver screen how Indians used to chase a herd of buffalo right into a ravine and over a cliff. The animals are just running, being herded along at a feverish pitch until they all unexpectedly fall headlong into death. They never know the danger until they were flying through the air...and then it is too late to turn back.

“Their shepherd, death...” How blessed are the people who instead can sing, “The LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23), because He leads us to life, to the Father’s house, where we may dwell forever.

### ***Forever young?***

Still, death is inescapable. Even the youth are warned by the Preacher that the evil days will come. Despite the sentiment voiced in a popular song, you cannot be forever young. That is why you have to remember your

Creator in the days of your youth. No one will escape. Not me, not you. And let us understand that death is also *irreversible*.

In our text there is the remarkable element that everyone who is among the living has *hope*. I wondered a lot about that fragment. What kind of hope? And then follows the cryptic statement, "Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion."

You might know that the lion was considered also in the Preacher's days to be the king of beasts. It was not Walt Disney who discovered the Lion King. By contrast, a dog was considered to be the lowest of animals, a scavenger, whom everyone kicked and snarled at. Yet we read that a dead lion is just a rotting corpse, and a living dog is better off. Why?

Look at 9: 5: "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing." This passage was used (among others) in a conflict in our Dutch sister-churches to demonstrate that the dead have no consciousness. Some said that our soul does not immediately go to Christ, its head. But that is a wrong application of this passage.

### ***The decision falls in this life***

When it says that the dead know nothing, this means simply that the decision falls *in this life*. From the perspective of this life, the dead know nothing.

Anyone who is among the living has hope. What hope do the living have? It is the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. The living can still focus on the LORD God and his grace. But once you have died, there is no change to be made. In that sense, it says: that the dead know nothing. They cannot reverse what has happened during their life. Death is irreversible. You cannot come back to make amends and to ask for forgiveness. The important decisions fall *here and now* in this life under the sun. There is no return, no reincarnation, and no second chance.

The next passages bear this out. The dead have no further reward. Nothing can be gained or lost anymore. All they stood for, lived for, and fought for is gone. See 9: 6: "Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun." Time is up. You cannot go back in time, for you are dead. You cannot rectify anything, because the dead know nothing, can change nothing, and can take nothing along. All you have done and built will go by the wayside.

### ***Death is irreversible***

Death is irreversible in this sense: you cannot redo your life. You only live once, not twice, as famed fictional spy James Bond was thinking. "You

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only live twice” is actually a Japanese saying: twice means *once* during life and *once* before your death when your whole life flashes before your eyes. But most of us have forgotten a lot of what happened during our lives. You only live once and then you die, and it is irreversible.

Death is also impartial towards all. There is a very clear line in the book of Ecclesiastes that indicates earthly distinctions under the sun have no meaning after this life. What the Preacher means is clear and simple. Here you may have gotten away with a lot. This will apply to the privileged, the rich, the learned, and the nobility.

Life here is governed by all kinds of outward factors, but not when we are dead. Death is impartial and cuts through everything. You leave everything behind, your earthly status, your wisdom, your wealth, your love, your hate, and your jealousy. All the things you fought for and cherished so much have no bearing on yonder side of the great divide. You came with nothing and you leave with nothing. In death *we are all the same*. Death reduces everyone to the same common denominator.

### ***Facing the power of death***

Well, not quite. Not all the dead are in the same place or situation. But that is determined by factors from beyond, not under, the sun. Death is impartial in this sense: it takes all, places all on the same scale, and judges all on the same basis.

We have to face the power of death. The Preacher faced it, and it is written so that we will face it. Face it now, while you are still living before it is too late.

Let this determine our priority and our morality. Let us come to grips with death in Jesus Christ, who has given us the incomparable victory of Life. While there is life, there is hope. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Let us live in hope, die unto sin, and finally enter into the glory of our Lord.

AMEN.