

God Already Approves Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

PHBF 03.11.18 Chasing the Wind

People's opinions of us matter, don't they? Most psychologically healthy people care what others think of them. And most of us—likely all of us—have experienced the disappointment and shame that come from disapproval, criticism, or contempt.

Author Kevin Baker tells a painfully funny story about a situation he got himself into where he was expecting to receive approval but soon found himself facing a wave of dislike instead:

He had heard a local book club was going to be discussing his latest novel, so he decided to attend. "I was flattered. I thought I might condescend to stop by and ask if the club members had any questions, maybe soak up a little adoration." You can see where this is going, right? He showed up early but it didn't seem appropriate to identify himself while everyone was just milling around, so he decided instead to wait until the beginning of the meeting where everyone formally introduced themselves: "I'd identify myself then, quietly reveling in the murmurs of surprise and delight that were sure to follow when they discovered the great man himself was among them." Someone cleared his throat and identified himself as the moderator, but then immediately added: "I just didn't like this book that much, so it's fine with me if somebody else wants to lead." The first guy couldn't even introduce himself without giving the book a thumbs down! Same for the next person. And the next. It was a disaster! And now it was Kevin's turn. What could he say? He was embarrassed for himself, but also for them—how would they feel when they learned the author they had just dissed was right there? So he did the wisest thing he could think of: he gave them someone else's name. "I'm Richard Feeley," quickly adding, "and I rather liked the book." Nothing like a little white lie to make a bad situation better, right? Wrong! The remaining 20 people or so all said they liked the book. But how could he get their full adoration now? He couldn't go back and admit who he was! What followed was "one of the weirdest and funniest nights of my writing career, my experience of Tom Sawyer attending his own funeral." There were several more memorable moments, like when he cautiously identified the symbolic meaning of one character and someone else replied "No, this author is much more sophisticated than that!" Or the moment when the lady next to him noticed the author photo on the back and said, "You look just like him!" "I get that a lot." ...a whole night of awkward and painful moments, all set in motion by Kevin Baker's reaction to the disapproval of a few of his readers.

Others' opinions of us matter, don't it?

That's the subject the Preacher turns to in this morning's text in Ecclesiastes 9. But he's not concerned about the opinion of a small gathering at a local bookstore. He's not worried about the verdict we might receive on our lives in court of public opinion; he's worried about the court of heaven. The approval the Preacher is troubled by is God's. What if God doesn't approve of us?

v1 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.

The fate of us all is held in the hands of God. What we need to know is, are those the hands of Friend or Foe? The Preacher says, "No way to tell. Even the righteous and the wise can't be sure whether God has love or hate out awaiting him."

You might say, "Wait, I thought the whole point of the Bible was to explain how to know whether God is for you or not. Why is this guy saying this?" Good question! Let me remind you once again what we're dealing with in this unique book. The unnamed speaker in this chapter—the "I" of verses 1 & 11—is a guy called "the Preacher" (cf. 1:1, 12:8), and he's on a quest to discover the meaning of life: "What does man gain from all his toil under the sun?" (1:3) What's the point of it all? This book is the record of his quest to find that answer. But he goes about it in a completely surprising, sometimes confusing way. If you don't get this, you won't understand this book at all.

Throughout this book, the Preacher shows us a core identity and an assumed identity. In his core identity, he is a God-fearing, orthodox Jewish teacher. That's his true self, the core identity he can't change, which ever so often shines through the gloom. But ***for the purposes of this book, this Preacher is playing a part.*** He has assumed the identity of a person who believes that this life and this world is all there is. Nothing supernatural whatsoever. No word from God to explain life. No accountability to God to guide it. In philosophical terms, he's assumed the identity of a "secularist," and this book is the record of his attempt to see how far he can get in life that way.

In today's text, he turns his attention to ***the all-important question: How can we know what God thinks of us? Is God for us or against us?*** Remember, from the perspective he's assumed for his journey, the

Preacher is limited to what he sees in the world around him. In other words, he's just being honest about what he sees in life. Leave religious views out of it, "truth from the Bible" out of it. No Hallmark sentimentalism. No wishful thinking. No spin. Just take a hard look at life, and you tell me: "Does God love us? Or does He hate us?" It's hard to tell, isn't it?

The Preacher discovers two facts—the same two facts you've learned about life, if you've been paying attention: "1. Life is random. 2. Then you die." That's the TLDR of today's entry in his journal. Depressing but honest. Sad but true. Dismal but truthful.

Two facts the Preacher discovers: 1. Life is random. 2. Then you die. Thankfully, the Preacher won't leave us there. In his core identity, he knows too much about the way God really is. He sees more in life than random results and death; there's goodness and blessing, too. And here's the really important point: the Preacher takes these as pointers to the real answer about how God feels toward His human creatures. The Preacher has a hunch that the best things in life are gracious tokens and clear signs of the fact that we live under the smile of an incredibly good and lavishly gracious God. And the gospel tells us he's right. That's the good news. But first, the bad news...

Life is Random for Everybody

vv2-3a *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 is the good, 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.*

The word "all" thumps like a bass drum through this entire portion—9x in the ESV, 14x in Hebrew. The translators have eliminated the redundancy of v2, which literally reads: "all things come alike to all" (cf. KJV). His point is obvious: there's a universality to our experience in life that doesn't seem appropriate. It doesn't matter if you're righteous or wicked, good or evil, clean or unclean, religious or irreligious. That's weird, because these are the things that are supposed to matter most to God—being righteous, good, clean, offering sacrifices. But it turns out

them make no difference in the end. Shouldn't our behavior make some kind of difference in the outcome? Of course it should; that's why the Preacher says, "This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all" (v3).

He makes the same point at the end, in vv11-12:

vv11-12 *Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.*

He names five different situations where personal ability and merit ought to impact the outcome, but they just don't! The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, nor the strongest warrior the battle. Wisdom and intelligence don't guarantee wellbeing or prosperity. Time and chance take matters entirely out of our hands. Your life can change forever in a moment. How many investors have lost millions in a sudden shift in the market? How many good drivers have been victimized by a random disaster on the road? The hardest workers don't always get the promotion. The most devoted spouse doesn't always enjoy an intimate marriage. Contrary to William Ernest Henley's defiant poem, we are not "the master of our fate" or "the captain of our soul." If anything, we are fish randomly caught in a net and birds taken in a snare. And that's on our best days. The Preacher drives us to take a hard look at our lives at their worst. Life is random...

...And Then You Die

v3b *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.*

You don't believe the same things befall everyone? Here's a case in point: death.

v4 *But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.*

Death puts an end to all hope. In fact, this is one of its most dreaded effects—death is a thief, and it steals hopes, dreams, plans, and expectations. It doesn't matter what you *were*—once you're dead, none of the living dogs will even blink at the fact that you were an awesome lion. Isn't this true?! Everybody wants to trade lives with that famous

celebrity or millionaire... until she's dead. Then your anonymous little life doesn't look so bad, right? I mean, he's pushing up daisies and you're still here reading headlines. Whose got the better life now? But actually, it's not much of a consolation though because... (v5) you know your time is coming!

vv5-6 *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.*

Notice also verse 10:

v10 *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.* Death is the ultimate Terminator. With relentless efficiency, it ends all hope (v4), knowledge, reward, legacy (v5), passion, human experience (v6), work, thought, and wisdom (v10). Even the memory of the dead is forgotten (v6)!

You say, "No, people are remembered." Are they? "Sure! Do something important and history will remember you!" Really? How important would it have to be? How many Presidents can you name? Famous inventors other than Edison, Whitney, and Gutenberg (first names: Thomas, Eli, and Johannes)? Fortune 500 CEOs? Colorado's 7 representatives in Congress? Best selling authors from *this year*? Winners from any reality or elimination-based TV show from 2017? Gold medal winners from the winter Olympics? **Most of us can't answer these questions, yet these are the people whose faces are in the news and on the magazine covers.** These are the people in the limelight right now. And even most of them realize that they're enjoying their "15 minutes of fame" and that's it.

In 2-3 generations, 4 at the most, no one will remember a single thing about us. Nothing. Most people make the paper twice. Even your own descendants won't know your vocation, your accomplishments, your hobbies. Your grandchildren and maybe the occasional great-grandchild will pull out a story or two about your life, but after that, you will be history. What you liked and disliked, how you spent your free time, whether you were rich or poor, poet or engineer, attractive or homely, big house or small, Dem or Rep, couch potato or gym rat, bald or dread locks – nothing. Death will come, and it will sweep it all away.

It's devastating. And it's a massive problem, because all of this is from the hand of God (v1, cf. 8:17). If we're trying to read the signs from life as we know it, it doesn't look good for us about whether God approves of our little lives.

But the Preacher won't leave us there, because he has something he *really* wants to tell us... In fact, the structure of this text tells us THIS is what he's been wanting to say all along. Did you notice how I would read a few verses from the beginning of the text and then a few from the end?

This text is set up in what's called a chiasm—a literary device where a sequence of ideas is laid out in order and then repeated in reverse order. Symbolically, you might think of it as an ABBA pattern. A short simple chiasm is "By failing to prepare, you're preparing to fail." ABBA. This is his main point!! This is the thing he really wants to say, the truth to which he most wants to draw our attention. The rest of the text is like a funnel, drawing all our thought to this...

God does approve, and His gifts show it.

vv7-9 *Go, eat your bread in 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.*

Eat with joy! Drink with a merry heart! Get dressed for a party! Splash on some cologne! Enjoy life with your spouse!! The good things of life are shouting out to you, "God is kind, and He loves to bless His human creatures!"

That's the point of what he says in v7: "God has already approved what you do." Do you have the theological framework for a God who approves of your earthly pleasures? He's talking about God's attitude toward people here and now, in this life. God is benevolent, kind, gracious.

The Preacher is NOT saying, "God is perfectly pleased with everybody,

whether or not they honor Him. He approves of everything you do, whether right or wrong.” Rather, he’s saying, “God’s disposition toward everyone is benevolent, kind, good. Look at the blessings He’s given.”

It’s the same thing Jesus says:

Luke 6:35 *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.*

But what about eternity? What about the sense of guilt that we shouldn’t be treated with this kind of approval from God?

Romans 4:24-25 *It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

The resurrection of Jesus proves we have God’s approval. Isn’t Jesus’ death enough to satisfy the wrath of God and open the door to heaven for us? Even if Jesus doesn’t rise again – even if He has to go to hell forever – isn’t that enough for our forgiveness? No. The resurrection is utterly crucial because it is the confirmation that Jesus’ work was enough. By raising Jesus from the dead, the Father in effect was saying, “I approve of what my Son has done. His work is complete. There is no penalty left to pay. My wrath is satisfied. He does not need to stay dead. I hereby certify that my Son has done everything He needed to do for sin to be forgiven. My Son, Arise!”

The blessings are pointers, signs, beckoning you to come to God. Everything the Preacher names is taken up again in the gospel—eating bread, drinking wine, clean garments, oil poured on our head, even marriage. All symbols of the new life offered in Christ—resurrection life that can be yours if you trust Him.

Two applications:

1. Your baptism is the sign of God’s promise to you that He will raise you from the dead and save you eternally. Baptism doesn’t “make you saved,” any more than my wedding ring makes me married. But it is the tangible symbol of God’s covenant to you. (Rom 6:3-4)
2. Your enjoyment of all God’s good gifts is meant to lead you to Him. Don’t take them as ends in themselves. Let them be signs

along the way that point you to Him.

“The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and [present] an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bath or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.” C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 115

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