

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 9

9.1. "The hand of God." To see the hand of God means to observe His providing, His providence. It is good to be able to see His providence, but another matter altogether to interpret it. The interpretation of His ways on a daily basis is only revealed as a gift of His wisdom, and is very often withheld.

"For all this" is an expression which conveys the significance "nevertheless." Though men's activities (8.16) are too numerous to discover; though "all the work of God" (8.17) be observable and its extent is too vast to take in; still, it is good to declare all this, to draw attention for our consideration that we may glorify God and justify Him in all His governing ways towards us. The righteous and the wise are in the hand of God. Though this refers partly to the self-righteous and the worldly wise, for the ways of all are in the Lord's hands, it most especially refers at its highest and kindest level to the believer, saved by Christ's righteousness through the blood of Calvary.

It would be good to read Psalm 19 at this point. It is a psalm of two halves; one part declaring the revelation of God's glory through the created order; the other (from verse 7) the revelation of God's glory through the scriptures. Now if all we had was creation and its wonders, with no scriptures, we could not tell from nature what God Himself feels about us or intends towards us. In other words, "no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them." The elect will view creation from the standpoint of eternal salvation; the natural man does not have this guide to interpret happenings.

9.2-3. Ultimately, the one thing that happens to all, which none escapes, is death. Death is the key which applies throughout these verses. Is there one event to the righteous and to the wicked? Yes, death. Is there one event to the good and to the clean and to the unclean? Yes, death. And so on, throughout verses 2 and 3. But there are many other things which mankind has in common. The need to eat and drink; to wash and be toileted; to breathe and to exercise; to walk and to run. All this is from God. But what leads to death is the Lord's curse upon the sin which we inherit from Adam. "All have sinned" (Romans 3.23). So to whatever extent it reveals itself in each individual "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live." "And after that they go to the dead." What a vigorous, but haunting, expression! "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly

pardon” (Isaiah 55.6-7). “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3.16).

9.4-6. Continual sin can become unbearable and drive a person to despair. The gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the antidote for our own sin and shows us also how to handle the sin that is in the world without our going out of it (1 Corinthians 5.10). It is better to be alive than dead and the balance of our mind is disturbed to think otherwise.

The dead are aware. The dead are tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20.10,15). But the expression, “the dead know not anything” is like the expression, “before I go hence and be no more” in Psalm 39.13. The Psalmist doesn’t mean that he will exist no more, for David is eternally saved. It means that he will have no further part to play on earth. So, “the dead know not anything” means that they have no further part to play on earth; more than that, as likely as not the memory of them is forgotten, certainly a generation or two along the line.

Psalm 49.10-20 is a commentary on the same theme. It is worth reading these verses at this juncture. “Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names...this their way is their folly” (Psalm 49.11,13), for they have no more “a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9.6).

9.7-10. The proper reaction to the sin of life and our inability to understand the complexities of the providences of God is to embrace the life which we do know within the orbit of our family and daily work. To affirm life is to honour the Lord who gives it. But there is this caveat, “for God now accepteth thy works.” We are not justified by works but by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2.16). The believer in Christ, who sees and understands more than any other, except God, the unmitigated disaster of sin in the world, may by faith have the most positive of all approaches to living in this world. “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1Thessalonians 5.18). “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5.20).

“Thou art my portion, O LORD” (Psalm 119.57). “The LORD’s portion is his people” (Deuteronomy 32.9). This mutual relationship is the highest portion of all. It activates and invigorates all other portions of our affairs. It is a marvellous thing that the Lord who owns His whole created order delights especially in the people saved by the blood of His Son’s sacrifice on Calvary. By contrast, believers who have access to God by faith (Romans 5.2) involve themselves, overmuch sometimes, in many insignificant portions of this world’s offerings. This passage of Ecclesiastes isolates the significant portions in which we may have justifiable interest:- food and clothing; family and work.

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” is always and everywhere true, a glorious generalisation applicable to all mankind; but nowhere more shiningly applicable than for a believer saved by grace. “Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6.20).

9.11-12. Returning to the subject of God's providential dealings, Solomon brings to our attention (in fulfilment of his avowed aim in verse 1 "to declare all this") other mysterious providences. Now, because God is perfect; perfectly wise, perfectly just; perfectly holy there is a reason for all things and God could give (He has no need to explain to anybody) a perfect explanation for every individual providence. But to each individual observing only those things that come to his own view and the view of his acquaintances, or the way of daily news bulletins it all seems inexplicable and complex. Chance, accident and luck are descriptions from the isolated point of view of a sinner. God orders all events and there is no chance, accident or luck with Him. We speak of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time and having an accident; and so it seems. But God who has purposes way beyond our understanding and an intricate fulfilment of a multitude of purposes affecting individuals, societies and nations has no vain, loose events and "all things work together for good to them that love God, who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8.28); while Christ is Head over all things to the church (Ephesians 1.22). "Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5.17).

The whole book of Job who pleased God and yet was caught up in massive damage to his goods and his person in order to prove to Satan that in the fiercest affliction men would not curse God but bless Him illustrates verse 12. Individuals may seem trapped in evil not entirely their own fault "when it falleth suddenly upon them" but every believer plays his/her part in resisting the evil of Satan and "filling up that which is behind" of Christ's sufferings (Colossians 1.24).

9.13-18. "Wisdom" or "wise" appear in every verse but one until the end of the chapter. It is important, it seemed great to Solomon, that we should expect that wisdom does not immediately seem to triumph or that men and nations do not take heed of the right way. Our little but valuable contribution may be overlooked but God sees and knows. We should not because of that become cynical, but rather always remember that "wisdom is better than strength." "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4.6). Gouge in his comment on Hebrews 13.7 says, "It is taxed as a foul blemish in that city which was delivered by wisdom of a poor wise man, that no man remembered that same poor man." Though Wisdom crieth in the streets, that is publicly, (Proverbs 1.20), fools will still hate knowledge. We say that the pen is mightier than the sword; if what is written is wise that is true, but the Bible puts it more extensively that "wisdom is better than weapons of war." One murderous act, one rape, one "accident" ruins a lifetime.