

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 (1984 NIV) ***Seeking God for Contentment***

Introduction

There was once a local TV series called “Extraordinary People”. The series told the stories of different individuals who demonstrated courage and resilience in their difficult times.

One story that would have inspired many must be that of a teenage girl by the name of Seow Geok Choo.

When Geok Choo was 8 months old, doctors told her mother that she would unlikely to live beyond 21 years.

- She was stricken sick by a rare blood disorder called thalassemia, and would need blood transfusion every month in order to stay alive.
- When Geok Choo was featured in the “Extraordinary People” series, she won the hearts of many people because ...
 - Of her courage to live life to the full in spite of her illness.
 - Of her resilience in managing her responsibilities—caring for her younger sister like a mother and mentor since their parents were separated, cooking, house cleaning, as well as studying hard as a student.

Geok Choo died on 30 June 1996, just 10 days after her 16th birthday. When news of her death was announced on TV, there was a brief review of something she said in the “Extraordinary People” episode—“I know I will not live long. But I intend to live life to the best I can.”

Indeed, many would fondly remember Geok Choo as one who not only had the courage and resilience to live her life to the full, but also the contentment to live the life she had. She had that sense of contentment in her inner being in spite of the adverse circumstances she had to face. She had learnt to come to terms with these realities without being fatalistic. To her, it is not “whatever will be, will be”; but it is “whatever will be, I will live life to the full”.

Looking at our text today (Ecc. 9:1-12), the writer seems to be a very discontented person on the surface. In fact in his prologue in 1:2, he says—“Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is meaningless.” And he repeats this pessimism many times in Ecc. He seems so negative towards life here on earth.

However, when we take a deeper look at the text, we will discover that the writer is actually very positive about life in spite of its adversities here on earth.

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- Throughout his writing, he is actually trying to drive home this point—“Life in this world is subject to much adversities. But we can still accept our circumstances and find strength in God to live life as it comes and to the full.”
- The writer is challenging us to come to terms with certain realities in life without being fatalistic; he is challenging us to keep living well in life no matter what—living life to the full and be content.
- That’s why he is able to conclude so positively in his last two verses in Ecc. 12:13-14 with these words—“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

Yes, all earthly pursuits in this life will end up meaningless in the sense that we begin them here and we end them here. We cannot expect to continue with them when we are dead in the grave, and there is no need to continue with them in heaven. But in spite of this sense of meaningless in life here on earth, we are ...

- To come to terms with certain adverse realities in this world.
- To be content so that we can go on living well no matter what.
- To fear God and keep His commandments.

To so live here on earth is to recognise that we must give an account to God one day of how we live our lives in our earthly existence. This is why the writer exhorts us in 12:13-14—“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

Now, there has been some debate as to who the writer is. I do not intend to delve into such a debate, but suffice to say that I believe there are strong evidence in the book itself to point to Solomon as the writer, probably penning down his words of wisdom in his advanced years.

- Solomon was kind of looking back, and out of his own wisdom and experiences, he wrote this book to teach us that the world does not have the key to answer life’s many problems.
- Solomon wrote to tell us that this key would only be found in God.
 - That true contentment is by way of a God-centred lifestyle.
 - That life here, good or bad, has significance only when we remember our Creator God.

To seek true contentment in life, Ecc. 9:1-12 teaches us to come to terms with certain realities in life, adverse these may be.

And one such reality is that ...

I. Life's events may not be kind, but we are to entrust everything in God's hands (vv. 1-6, 11-12).

Solomon says in v. 1:

1 So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.

Here we see a wicked irony in life.

- Though we are to be always righteous and wise in God, we don't always receive good for doing good; conversely, those who do evil do not always receive evil.
- So in the light of this reality, Solomon is exhorting us to accept both the good and bad in life—life is a mix of both the up's and down's.
- In fact, we cannot use good or bad events as criteria to decide whether God loves us or not.

One false assumption we need to correct is the belief that if one does good, then God will always allow events in life to be kind to that person. This can bind people to a false sense of guilt in themselves.

This was what Job's friends were trying to instil in him, perhaps unintentionally. They were saying to Job—"Do you know why you have lost all your possessions and children? Do you know why you are inflicted with sores on your body? It is because you have sinned; you have not been good before God."

Of course, we know this is not true because Scripture endorses Job in Job 1:1 as a man who "was righteous and upright; feared God and shunned evil". In fact, Scripture in Job gives us the answer to Job's misfortune—i.e. what happened to Job was God's way of defeating the boast of Satan who claimed that Job's faithfulness would disappear if God would stop blessing him and take away all that he had.

This false assumption of believing that if one does good, then God will always allow events in life to be kind to that person is also very real today. We say to ourselves:

- "Why am I not enjoying success in my career? Perhaps, I have sinned against God because I have not worked hard enough. I better put in 15 hours of work each day from now on."
- "Why am I not blessed with smart kids? Perhaps, I have sinned against God because I have not been a responsible parent. I better add more pressure to my kids before it is too late."
- "Why am I not having a fairy-tale marriage? Perhaps, I have sinned against God by refusing to be single. No point trying to save the marriage because that will be continuing to go against God's will for me."

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- “Why am I not communicating well with my parents? Perhaps, I have sinned against God by offending my parents with my honesty and openness in what I have said. I better not share my struggles and thoughts with them before the situation gets worse.”

Indeed, this false sense of guilt can cause us to pick up all the wrong signals and do all the wrong things. Little wonder we become less and less contented in ourselves and in life. The ironic reality in this life is that the good can suffer evil, and the evil can enjoy good. As the people of God, we are exhorted not to be tired of doing good, yet accept the reality that events in our lives will always be a mix of good and bad. Yes, we are to see both happiness and heartaches as part and parcel of being human in this fallen world.

Solomon tells us here that the good will not always reap good, and also, the able will not always win. He says in v. 11:

11 I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Solomon is here telling us that the fastest, the strongest, the smartest, and the most skillful don't always win. Our abilities are no guarantee of success. Yes, in normal circumstances, our abilities should give us the winning edge. But in life, there is this thing called the “unexpected” (or “unforeseen”) that can happen to us, catch us off-guard, and trip us. Thus, Solomon goes on to warn us in v. 12:

12 Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Indeed, the unexpected can fall upon us, and cancel out whatever winning edge we may have to succeed in life. So, we do well to remind ourselves that:

- The swift are not to be so certain that they will always win the race.
- The strong are not to be so certain that they will always win the battle.
- The wise, brilliant, and learned are not to be so certain that they will always receive food, wealth, and favour.

You and I are all vulnerable to the unexpected no matter how able we are.

- You and I may lose that job/promotion not because we are not able, but because of the unexpected.
- You and I may crash our business not because we are not able, but because of the unexpected.
- You and I may fail or not do well in that examination not because we are not able, but because of the unexpected.

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Often times, we get very frustrated and discontented because we believe in our own abilities, and yet we are not getting the kind of results/rewards we want. Solomon reminds us today in our text that while we thank God for whatever abilities we have, yet our abilities have no absolute control over the power of the unexpected.

Contentment comes when we are humble enough to accept our human limitations—i.e. though we can do the best we can with our abilities, we cannot be in total control over the power of the unexpected when it hits us. To overpower and over-rule the unexpected is very much God's work, and we need to work with a sense of this humble dependence on Him, even as we work to the best of our abilities. We need to learn to manage the daily events that come to all alike—the good and the bad. The most able among us are not so able that they do not need to depend on God anymore and for anything.

Contentment comes when we accept this and live the present to the full.

- We are to be purposefully looking at and working out what God has for us to do and to be in His present season for us.
- We are not to give up no matter what with this searching question—"In what way am I to accept my circumstances, good or bad, and move on from where I am to where God is leading me?"
- Though we are to exercise our abilities to the best we can, we are also to do so with the awareness that the unexpected can knock us down.
- So, we are not to run purely in our own strength, but allowing our strength to be ordered by God.
- This means that if something bad should unexpectedly fall upon us in spite of all our good effort, we can say the words of Solomon in 9:1—"Whether love or hate awaits me, I know what I do is in God's hands."

To be content is to know that even though life's events may not always be kind to us, what we do is always in God's hands. That means to recognise that some things in life will come our way, even if these are bad. And instead of screaming with cries of discontentment, we are to face them squarely and to anticipate God using them as stepping stones to higher things for us.

- To see a higher purpose beyond present happiness or heartache.
- To view present happiness or heartache not so much as an end in itself, but as a lesson that is teaching us a higher truth and leading us to a stronger faith.

The local newspapers once reported that an 18-year-old junior college student by the name of Adrian Lee was killed in a road accident. He was riding his bicycle and on his way for a training session in canoeing when he was knocked down by a car. He died almost 12 hours later without regaining consciousness.

Adrian was a bright student with a noble ambition—he scored eight distinctions in his “O” Levels; he had wanted to be a doctor to heal people and save lives. So, when Adrian became brain-dead, his father signed a form donating all his organs.

It was reported in the papers how Adrian’s friends who came for the funeral talked to his mother about the way he had encouraged them when they had problems. On hearing their stories, Adrian’s mother then responded, “I am now able to carry on because I know what has happened to my son is God’s will.”

I believe she was not saying that the death of her son was a kind event. When a bright, young, healthy, and helpful lad with a noble ambition died suddenly and unexpectedly, it is NOT a kind event. In fact, something unkind and bad has happened to a kind and good person. I believe Adrian’s mother was able to say what she had said because she was able to see beyond the tragic reality of her son’s death. By God’s grace, she was able to grasp the higher truth and grow stronger in faith even as this unkind, unexpected reality hit her.

- Even in death, her son could still contribute to healing people and saving lives with his donated organs.
- Even in death, her son had not lost his ambition to heal people and save lives, but rather, able to accomplish that wish he had always wanted to fulfil.

In this sense, the mother had learnt that though life’s events might not always be kind to her, she could still entrust everything—good or bad—in God’s hands.

(Source: “The New Paper”, 1 July 1996)

When the unexpected strikes, the good can die young and even die tragically. In fact, Solomon tells us in 9:2 that death is the common destiny of all people. Death comes to:

- The righteous and the wicked.
- The good and the bad.
- The clean and the unclean.
- The religious and the irreligious.
- The honest and the dishonest.

Indeed, all people have to die one day. So, Solomon is not saying that the good is different from the bad in that the good will always receive good, and the bad will always receive bad. Rather, Solomon is saying that the good is no different from the bad in that both the good and bad all have to die one day.

Of course some may question, “If death comes to both good and bad, why be good?” But Solomon is not addressing this question here. The question he is addressing here is this—“If good and bad must die one day, what then is the real purpose of living here on earth?”

I believe God through Solomon is pressing this point home to us—“Life’s events will not always be kind to us, but everything (good or bad) is in God’s hands—what we do is in God’s hands. So, we are to live here on earth with hope—i.e. not hope of living this life free from bad events, but hope of being fully fulfilled in all that God has for us to be and to do while time is still with us. So, we are not to let disappointment, heartache, failure, or even the unexpected stop us from living our lives fully and meaningfully. Seize every opportunity before us now rather than passively hoping for something better to happen in the future. This is because death will come one day, and even come unexpectedly, to end all our opportunities here in this life.”

We can be so entrapped in saying to ourselves:

- “I have tried and failed the last time, so maybe I should stop trying to make changes and just accept things as they are.”
- “I will wait and hope for things to get better. No need to hurry because after all, I have time on my side.”

When we are so entrapped, we can fail to live for “now” because we are either getting discouraged by the past, or becoming fearful of the future. And when we are so entrapped, the often-heard regret we utter when the expected hits us is this—“If only I have done this; if only I have done that.”

We often speak of the heat of competition but seldom the fire of contentment. I believe we need to have that fire of contentment so that we can say with conviction the prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr (American reformed theologian of an earlier era):

O God and Heavenly Father, grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed, courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

We are to come to terms with certain realities in life without being fatalistic. One reality is that life’s events may not be kind, but we are to entrust everything in God’s hands.

Scripture calls us to live well and to be content in life. And to seek contentment in this life, we are to come to terms with yet another reality, and that is ...

II. Life's fortunes may not grant us what we want, but we are to enjoy what God has already given (vv. 7-10).

7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. 8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. 9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

In these verses, we are called to:

- “Eat your food with goodness.”
- “Drink your wine with a joyful heart.”
- “Be clothed in white.”
- “Anoint your head.”
- “Enjoy life with your wife.”

There are some who consider sayings like “eat, drink, and be merry” and “enjoy life here on earth” as worldly, pleasure-seeking, and unspiritual. But here, we are called to do just that—“Get up and live! God has given you good gifts in life. So, enjoy them!”

Contentment does not come when we keep wishing that we have this or that. But there is contentment when we go ahead and enjoy what we already have in our hands.

- If you can afford Sri Lanka crabs and Bluefin tuna, good for you.
- If you can't afford these, then just enjoy what you have on the table, even if these are only tiny shrimps and “ikan bilis”.
- Better to be fed with tiny shrimps and “ikan bilis” than to go hungry wishing for Sri Lanka crabs and Bluefin tuna.

Not only are we called to eat and drink with gladness, but we are also to “always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil” (v. 8). Exactly what this means is debatable. One possible way to understand it is to regard the putting on of white clothes and the anointing of the head as dressing up to celebrate some special religious occasions.

“Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.”

- It seems we are here called to make every occasion a special occasion to rejoice, to celebrate, and to enjoy in the goodness of what God has already given us (food or otherwise).
- It seems we are called to make even the ordinary and routine as a reason for rejoicing, celebrating, and enjoying.

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- It seems Ecc. 9:8 is telling us that the norm for us in this life is to rejoice in God's gifts to us, and to enjoy/employ them for His glory.

Thus, we are to live and enjoy life to the full with what God has given us.

- The assumption here is that we are doing all this in a way pleasing to God—"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do" (v. 7).
 - Drinking wine with a joyful heart of gratitude and thanksgiving will find favour with God.
 - Drinking wine in a debaucherous manner till you drop down in a drunken stupor will not find favour with God.
- We are even called to "enjoy life with your wife" (v. 9).
 - This seems to be one evidence pointing to Solomon as the writer.
 - Perhaps, he was looking back and saw his folly of having too many foreign wives, and how they had led him to allow pagan worship in Israel.
 - It seems he was saying from hindsight—"Nothing like sharing life with the one wife you have. If God has already given her to you, then enjoy life with her, love her, and don't look for another one! One man, one wife. More wives can only lead to more problems ... because the man cannot handle it well!"

Looking now at v. 10, we read that we are also to enjoy our work.

10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

We don't need to do the extraordinary in order to do God's will, or to gain His approval. We don't need to wait till we become the Prime Minister/President before we can do great things for God. Rather, we are called to do with all our might whatever our hand finds to do now. We are to do our best while we still have the time and strength. In fact, the work that God has already given us to do now is His gift for us now.

- We are to give it our best shot, never mind if it is not that lucrative or prestigious.
- We are to live and enjoy to the full in ways pleasing to God, even in our work, because a time will come when we can work and enjoy no more—i.e. when death takes us away to the grave.

However, we must not work so hard for a living that we neglect how to live.

- We can be so busy working for the future that we neglect to live for the present.
- We can be enduring so much for the future that we neglect to enjoy the present.

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Yes, God knows well that our human tendency is to mismanage our work-life balance. Thus, we are called to live and enjoy this life to the full with ALL the gifts that God has already given us. We are not to let these gifts (that include our work and material possessions) so enslaved us that we lose the freedom to enjoy them, and even more sadly, lose all the opportunities to enjoy them when death strikes and takes us to the grave.

We are called to eat, drink, and be joyful—to live and enjoy all that God has already given us as our expression of gratitude and thanksgiving. One way we can do this is to celebrate, even the little victories in life. Indeed, not only our own victories, but also that of others.

- Celebration helps us to be affirming people—we affirm not only ourselves, but also others.
- Life here on earth has been much competition, but too little celebration.
- Competition breeds contention—we are competing because we are fighting for what we want; what we don't have.
- Celebration promotes contentment—we are celebrating because we are happy with what we already have.
- Yes, competition pulls people apart—we compete to be one-up above others, not to be one with them. Conversely, celebration brings people together.

A young lady by the name of Hasena Banu became an orphan at the age of 15. Her mother died of cancer when she was 9; her father died of the same illness when she was 15.

She was left alone without a family, home, or money. She had to give tuition to pay the rent of the room she had shared with her parents when they were still alive. Besides studying, she had to give tuition, do marketing, cooking, and cleaning. Hasena said that she would get angry when she saw other teens with parents, money, and clothes.

But she also added—"I don't take hardship badly. I believe in going on." Indeed, she persevered and finally completed her polytechnic education with a gold certificate for outstanding leadership.

When talking about her future after graduation, she said that she would plan to work and save up enough to study part-time for a degree. And in her own words, to be able to say, "Bingo! I did it!"

This is the true story of young one who did not allow herself to be knocked down by what she had lost or didn't have. Rather, she made the best of what she had and went on to live life to the full and with hope for the future.

Life's fortunes may not always grant us what we want, but we are to enjoy what God has already given.

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- We can never be contented if we keep griping, wishing, and pining for what we don't have, or what we want more.
- The better alternative is to learn to live and enjoy what God has already given us—big or small, much or little, grand or humble. Only then can we experience contentment.

Conclusion

Two realities we have to come to terms with if we are to find contentment; to have this sense of satisfaction and adequacy in our inner being regardless of our circumstances.

- One, life's events may not be kind, but we are to entrust everything in God's hands
- Two, life's fortunes may not grant us what we want, but we are to enjoy what God has already given.

I don't know what you are having for dinner this evening. As for me, I am not having Sri Lanka crabs or Bluefin tuna, or even anything close to that. But I am asking God to help me be thankful and enjoy the simple meal before me this evening. He has blessed and given, and so I want to celebrate and enjoy in His grace and goodness.

Life here on earth brings us contentment only when we learn to celebrate what our Creator God has given, not complaining what we created beings are griping. Thus, let's seek God to help us find contentment in Him as the Giver and in the gifts He has already blessed us with in life.

Amen!