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Ecclesiastes 9:1–7, ESV

9 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. ² 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 the good one is, 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. 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. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ 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. ⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

A living dog.

Ecclesiastes is written from an earthly perspective, so much so that many have wondered how it ever made its way into Scripture. According to the text, the author is Qoheleth “ko-hell-eth”, which is not a person’s name. In Hebrew the word means “one who speaks to an assembly”, and it probably identifies the author as a teacher. The author also identifies himself as the son of King David, as well as a king himself, which would mean that the author would have to be King Solomon. As we have seen before, ancient writers often attributed works to

famous people to show respect or simply to give the work more weight, so we can't be sure who wrote it. But the writing in the book is perhaps the sort of writing we might expect of Solomon, given what we know of him. The book shows a scholarly knowledge of the Wisdom literature, and Solomon was closely associated with the works of the Sages. In the book, traditional, theologically based wisdom statements are juxtaposed with very theologically jaded, negative statements about his experiences in life. Ecclesiastes was written around 250 B.C. The book was clearly written over a period of years, and it is a sort of philosophical autobiography. The book tells the reader that morality should be unconditional and not based on any perceived rewards from God – but at times, the writer does not appear to believe that humans hold any exalted place in God's universal order, and he does not seem to believe that God will always punish evil. The theology in Ecclesiastes is difficult to comprehend. It is also filled with numerous divergent themes, making the logic of the Book hard to follow. One theme does come through clearly, though: it is hard to find purpose in human life, and so we should take life as it comes and not be anxious. God wants us to enjoy life and not be brought down by the chaos and corruption of our society.

In Chapter 9, the author is in the midst of a discussion about the limitations of human knowledge. We live in a state of darkness when it comes to

understanding God's ways. In our passage the author tells us that God may love us, God may hate us, and we just don't know which. Do keep in mind that the author is talking from the very limited perspective of a human, and this verse means that we don't know if God is about to express his love for us or his anger with us – and that anger can come in the form of what appears to be hate. It is a hatred, though, of what we have done, not of us. The author concludes that life is so uncertain that about the only thing we can be sure of in life is that we will die. That's what our author means in our quote today, when he writes: *²It 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.* This seems very jaded, of course, but the author is simply talking about physical death, not spiritual death. The author goes on to say that most people are evil, that we live in madness – and then we die. But it's very important to see how this passage ends: *⁷Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.* The world may be evil in many ways; there may be little that we can count on in life; but it is God's intention that we find joy in this world and in the life that we live on this planet.

My parents had very little. My father was raised by his mother after his father ran off when he was two, and they were poor. My mother's father was a

cobbler and she had very little as a child. Neither of them went to college. My father was a Marine in World War II. They met during the war, got married, and moved from Massachusetts to California. They were part of that hopeful, optimistic generation who saw evil destroyed and the saw only good things in front of them in life. But life didn't turn out to be golden: they struggled for decades, constantly fighting to keep us fed and to keep a roof over our head. But they did it. They succeeded. As a child, I was never worried about food or where we were going to live. I felt totally secure. My parents, who were very modest people, never asked for much in life. The one thing my father loved were dogs. He always had at least one dog, if not two or three. My mother liked dogs, too, but her preferences were more specific: she loved poodles, the tiny, yappy "toy" kind. I think I have mentioned before that she owned a series of three poodles, two black and one apricot, and that they were all named Suzy, despite the fact that only one of them was female. My father would bring home strays. Once, he followed a filthy, hungry dog to its home, and discovered that its owner had passed away in her home. The family was so grateful to my father for discovering the woman and for caring for the dog that they gave the dog to him. It turned out to be a valuable pedigree animal, but my father simply kept it as a pet. He was just too modest of a man to sell that animal that loved him. There was a story

about one of my father's dogs that my mother loved to tell. This happened before I was born, when my older brother, who is seven years older than me, was a toddler. My father brought home a German Shepherd one day. My mother didn't initially take to this dog. It was big and loud and liked to chew things up. But her feelings about this dog changed; I'll get back to this.

Consider verse 4b of our passage: *a living dog is better than a dead lion*. For some context, consider how dogs are used in the Bible. In biblical times, in Palestine, wild dogs roamed in packs and often lived on the outskirts of towns. There is strong evidence that they were sometimes kept as pets, with numerous pet graves having been found. But in the Bible, dogs are viewed in a negative light; they represent the despised, the unclean, the enemy devouring its innocent. There were dietary laws that said that any food unfit for humans should be fed to dogs. Dogs were scavengers in Israelite society. They ate garbage and unburied bodies. In Psalm 22 enemies of the Psalmist are described as dogs: ¹⁶ *For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me*.

What about lions in the Bible? In ancient times, the Asiatic Lion was common throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean, but it's been extinct in Palestine for centuries. Although in Judges, Samson successfully kills a lion with his bare hands, in the Old Testament, lions are usually the victors when they have

encounters with humans. Ancient kings would keep lions to show their power.

Almost all biblical references to lions are symbolic. In the Book of Numbers, Israel is referred to as a lion. In 2nd Samuel, a valiant warrior's heart is said to be a lion, and in Revelation, the Messiah is said to be the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

Solomon's throne and Solomon's temple hosted depictions of lions. What does the author of Ecclesiastes mean when he utters his proverb, "*a living dog is better than a dead lion?*" When it comes to respect paid by humans of the time, dogs and lions are at opposite ends of the spectrum. But that's how important life is: it's better to be a live dog than a dead lion. God wants life to be valuable to us.

Ecclesiastes is considered Wisdom literature, like the Proverbs. It's meant to be practical, something to help us with everyday life. Remember that God cares how we live in this world, and Wisdom literature gives us that sort of guidance. It is a long monologue of one man, not a dialogue between God and a man, as we often see in Scripture. It seems that the author, Qoheleth "ko-hell-eth", the teacher, who might be King Solomon, is trying to tell us that there isn't anything that can give true meaning to life. Even if we find some sort of self-satisfaction, even if we achieve something, death is waiting for us in the end. The message is that whatever we can accomplish in life, whatever gives us pleasure – none of it offers lasting satisfaction. But our lives are indeed gifts from God.

There is something subtle here that is very important. Yes, God, brings both good and bad into our lives – and both of them, not just the happy stuff, are gifts from God. It's good that the bad is there, that God does not bring us only joyful times and a nonstop sense of success. Consider what the author says in Ecclesiastes 7:14. The New Living Translation is easiest to understand: ¹⁴ *Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this life.* Everything in life comes from God, both bad and good. Nothing is certain in this life, and God makes sure that we remember this. We are to enjoy life as much as we can; but we are to live the way God wants us to live because in the end, this life is not what matters. If life was nonstop happiness, we would become selfish and drift away from God. We turn to God when we are in need. We hold onto our connection with God because we know that there are many times when we need God. And for us, as Christians, we know that living in a humble way is the best way to emulate Christ.

So, the lion and the dog? If we were lions, we would be majestic and powerful. We would be kings in this land. But what we can do in this world is an illusion. It's not real. It is so temporary compared to eternity that we are very foolish to value it at the expense of forgetting about our God. In a symbolic way, the powerful lion, the proud lion is dead. Maybe we are dogs. But if we

remember that, if we are humble, modest, and if we value our eternal lives with God, well, as living dogs, we have God alive within us.

Remember my parents' German Shepherd? This is how my mother told me the story, many years after it happened. She was not happy with the dog that my father brought home. It ate a sofa, clawed up the screen to their sliding glass door, and refused to be housebroken. They didn't have the money to repair and replace things. But my brother was two or three years old, and one day, he was out in front of the house playing. A man came up to him and tried to grab him. But the German Shepherd was out there. My mother was just inside the house; but for a brief moment she hadn't had her eyes on my brother. When the man tried to carry him away, the German Shepherd, a female my father named Gerda, which means "strong as a spear", started barking like hell. It growled and barked and jumped at the man. My mother, hearing this, ran out of the house. The man dropped my brother and ran off. He was never caught. According to my mother, when my father came home that night, he sat her down and started to apologize for all the damage Gerda had done. My mother interrupted him; she explained how the dog had protected my brother. She said that Gerda was a gift from God, that Gerda had been sent by God to protect her child. That dog ended up being my mother's prized and deeply loved pet.

My parents were both very humble people. Many people would consider them to be dogs, not lions. By the standards of our commercialized, worldly society, most of the people in the world are just dogs. But we are all living dogs and not dead lions. We are supposed to enjoy our lives, but to value our relationship with God. We are to treat all people with respect, not like they are dogs. We are to be forgiving and to accept the grace of God and then pass that grace on to others. The people who live like lions on Earth - those people have forgotten that they are made in God's image. We are of the highest importance to God. In fact, we are often surprised at the gifts that God will give us in our humble lives. A German Shepherd that seemed to be an annoying liability turned out to be quite a gift from God. That dog named Gerda was in truth a lion. Please pray with me.

God, thank you for the example of Jesus Christ, who taught us how to live in harmony and at peace in this world, and who taught us the joy of treating all people with dignity. We thank you for never letting us become so spoiled that we forget about you and begin treating others as if they were dogs. We thank you for all the gifts you give us: this world we live in, our families, friends, and fellow believers. Amen.