

What is the meaning of Ecclesiastes 9:7-10?

By Bob Young

7 Go, eat your bread with 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. 10 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.

The author is summarizing a series of thoughts: all people have one fate after this life, experiencing one common event in death, after which present opportunities will be gone. The concern of the author is not to compare the moral conditions of various people. The concern of the author is to encourage the enjoyment of life with joy, refreshed hearts, appreciating God's blessings.

Bring into your experience a full awareness of what life and happiness is with the wife you love, through all of life, even in its seeming emptiness. Do not fail to gain what God has given you of all you are to enjoy here.

Verse 10 is often misunderstood. Consider the meaning of the verse in context.

The author says that joy comes when one does not come short in one's work and in one's life of any possibility that is within one's strength, straining with all one's capacity toward maximum accomplishment. Why is such activity and accomplishment so important? Because in the grave, there is no more doing and there is no more opportunity to plan and execute life's accomplishments. (In the context of Ecclesiastes, the best translation of Sheol is the grave. There was not a well-developed concept of the afterlife during that period of Israelite history.)

In the grave, practice and theory will have ended. The end of life on earth will mark the end of our doing, our reckoning (Eccl. 7:25) or reasoning, our learning, and our skill. The things that made possible meaningful work on the earth will not exist in the grave. The word knowledge (da'ath) is capable of many different meanings, depending on context, and in this verse is best translated as learning. The word wisdom (chokmah) is a reference to applying wisdom to skills or abilities.

It is a misreading of the text to suggest that the author is affirming that there is no consciousness in the grave or in the afterlife. Such a misunderstanding ignores the context and fails to honor the original message of the author.