

Eccl. 8:16-9:18, The Impotence of Man
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A. Overview

This section has two parts, and a transition to the next section. Each of the two parts is chiastically structured.

1. *Man cannot know.* Everything is "the work of God," so neither wisdom nor labor can enable us to understand (much less control) the world around us.
2. *Man cannot do.* As a result, the conventional platitudes about diligence and success are flawed, and we should be content with what God gives us now.
3. Transition to next section: wisdom does have value, but often the wise man does not benefit from it.

B. 8:16-9:1, Man Cannot Know

8:16,17 are arranged chiastically, in wisdom and labor. 9:1 repeats the conclusion, for emphasis.

1. 8:16, Object of his investigation:
 - a) to know wisdom (academic world)
 - b) and to see the travail (business world)
 - 1) that is done on the earth
 - 2) as illustrated by the sleepless toil of men
2. 8:17, Outcome of his investigation: God has made men unable to figure out the world.

"I saw all the work of God, namely, man's inability to find out that which is done on the earth,"

 - a) either by labor
 - b) or by wisdom.
 - c) Ref's to MC): 3:11; 7:14, 24, 26, 27(2x), 28(3x), 29; 8:17(3x); 9:10, 15; 11:1; 12:10.
3. 9:1, Repetition of the conclusion:
 - a) God determines the work of the righteous and the wise (NB: not the wicked; they suffer guilt for their own sin)
 - b) Man knows not whether he will love or hate.
 - c) All the possibilities are open, depending on how God directs him.

C. 9:2-12, Man Cannot Do

Also chiastic, on a larger scale: two outer sections about the irrelevance of individual merit in view of the common end of all men, with a central exhortation to enjoy what God gives now.

1. 9:2-6, First "You Can't Make a Difference" Section

Since everything is determined by God, men are powerless to alter their own destiny.

- a) 9:2, Irrelevance of Individual Merit.
The distinctions identified here are moral and religious, in contrast with the practical ones in v.11.
 - 1) Righteous vs. wicked--most general moral comparison
 - 2) Good-clean vs. unclean--more ceremonial than moral. Jews went to considerable effort to avoid defilement, and they should, for that was God's command.
 - 3) Sacrificer vs. non-sacrificer--heart of the ceremonial law. Certain sacrifices everyone had to bring.
 - 4) Good vs. sinner--back to moral
 - 5) Swear (falsely) vs. fear and honor an oath. Order reversed at the end of a list.

- b) 9:3-6, The Common End of All Men
Extraction going on here. 9:3 identifies three things that all men, regardless of the distinctions of v.2, have in common, and 4-6 amplify one of these.

- 1) 9:3 identifies it--three things pointed out:
 - a> Fallen nature: their heart is full of evil;
 - b> Immediate consequence: madness is in their heart;
 - c> Ultimate consequence: they end up dead.
- 2) 4-6 expands the idea of death.
 - a> 4: Benefits of life:
 - 1> Still offers hope
 - 2> Better than position
 - b> 5a: Condition of the dead:
NB: In understanding what is said here, we must recognize that 5b-6 is the explanation (introduced by KY), and that its points are amplified chiastically in that explanation.
 - 1> Know nothing
 - 2> No reward
 - c> 5b-6, Amplification of 5a:
 - 1> No reward: no memory; no portion in what is done under the sun.
 - 2> No knowledge: that is, with respect to their earthly life. Their loves, hatreds, jealousies are ended.

2. 9:7-10, Enjoy Life Now

Three admonitions, each with a motive.

- a) 7, Food: re. ourselves.
 - 1) Exhortation: Eat and drink joyfully
 - 2) Motive: God has already (not "now") accepted your works. As a saint, you are "in good standing" with God, and should relax before him.
- b) 8,9, Family relations: re. other people close to us.
 - 1) Three specific exhortations:

- a> White clothing--washed, not mourning. Contrast 2 Sam. 19:24.
- b> Oil on head--2 Sam. 12:20, not done in mourning. Better: 2 Sam. 14:2. Dan. 10:2,3.
- c> "Enjoy life with a wife whom you love," obliquely rejecting celibacy.

2) Motive: that is your portion (cf. v.9, "which he has given you").

- c) 10, Labor: re. God and society at large. This item is *extremely* important. It is what keeps the whole section from being nihilistic.
 - 1) Exhortation: work with diligence and energy here.
 - 2) Motive: this is the only time when you can work. (Implied: God has given you this work to do.) If you don't work now, you are as good as dead already, since no work is the character of the grave!

3. 9:11-12, Second "You Can't Make a Difference" Section

Now we return to the same two points introduced in 9:2-6, the irrelevance of individual merit and the common end of all men.

- a) 9:11a, The Irrelevance of Individual Merit. In contrast with 9:2, the contrasts here are temporal rather than spiritual, but the conclusion is the same: they don't make a difference.
 - 1) The swift doesn't always win the race, 2 Sam. 2:18
 - 2) The strong in the battle (Great Britain in the revolutionary war);
 - 3) Wise man may starve, because others use his wisdom without paying him (university syndrome);
 - 4) Understanding and poverty often come together;
 - 5) The skillful, who ought to enjoy the favor of their superiors, often do not receive it.
- b) 9:11b,12, The Common End of All Men
 - 1) 11b, time and chance. We are limited by the clock, and by events that we cannot control.
 - 2) 12, merges time and chance together, to confront us with "unexpected occasions." Suggests that "time and chance" may be a hendiadys. Death is the ultimate manifestation of "time and chance" in this way.

D. 9:13-16, Transition to Wisdom and Folly section.

Ch. 9 has the overall theme that "you can't make a difference," but this is still a "wisdom" book, basically favoring the life of wisdom, and the next section moves back to promote wisdom and condemn folly. This transition reconciles the two: wisdom saves the city, but the wise man himself does not profit from it. Thus we see God's reasons for advocating wisdom, and also the futility of trying to use it selfishly. Only the one who is content with the benefit of others can enjoy wisdom.