

Ecclesiastes 9:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

Analysis

For the living know that they shall die (כִּי הַחַיִּים יוֹדְעִים שְׁמָתוֹ)—the certainty of death is the one piece of knowledge all conscious humans share. In stark contrast, **the dead know not any thing** (הַמֵּתִים אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים מְאוּמָּה)—those in Sheol, the shadowy realm of the departed, have no consciousness of earthly affairs. The phrase **neither have they any more a reward** (אֵין-עוֹד לָהֶם שָׂכָר) doesn't deny eternal reward but earthly recompense—the dead cannot earn wages, receive honor, or accumulate wealth "under the sun."

The finality is devastating: **for the memory of them is forgotten** (כִּי נִשְׁכַּח זִכְרָם). The Hebrew *zecher* (זִכָּר, remembrance) emphasizes how quickly human memory fades—even the famous become obscure with time. From an "under the sun" perspective, death eliminates advantage, consciousness, and legacy. This grim realism drives the Preacher's urgent exhortation to enjoy life as God's gift while alive (9:7-9). The New Testament transforms this despair: Christ's resurrection defeats death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57), and believers who die in Christ are not unconscious but with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23).

Historical Context

Old Testament theology developed gradually regarding the afterlife. Early texts portrayed Sheol as a shadowy existence of all the dead—righteous and wicked alike descended there (Genesis 37:35; Job 14:13). This isn't soul sleep or

annihilation but a conscious yet diminished state without the vibrant life of embodied existence. Only late OT texts like Daniel 12:2 clearly teach bodily resurrection. Ecclesiastes, written from "under the sun" perspective (earthly viewpoint without full revelation), reflects early understanding: death ends earthly consciousness and participation. The Preacher writes phenomenologically—describing observed reality rather than revealing heavenly mysteries. Jesus later pulled back the veil: the dead are conscious (Luke 16:19-31), and resurrection awaits (John 5:28-29). The Reformers emphasized that OT saints were saved by faith in God's promises, though they lacked full clarity about resurrection that Christ would bring.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does the certainty of death affect your priorities, and are you living as if you have unlimited time or with sober awareness of life's brevity?
2. What legacy are you building that will outlast human memory—eternal investment rather than earthly monuments?

Interlinear Text

יְכִי	הַחַיִּים	יֹדְעִים	וְהַמֵּתִים	וְהַמֵּתִים	אֵינָם	יֹדְעִים
H3588	For the living	know	but the dead	but the dead	H369	know
	H2416	H3045	H4191	H4191		H3045
לֹא	מָה וְאֵין	עֹד	לָהֶם	שָׁכָר		יְכִי
	not any thing	H369	H5750	neither have they any more a reward		H3588
	H3972		H0	H7939		
	נִשְׁכַּח		זִכְרָם:			
	of them is forgotten		for the memory			
	H7911		H2143			

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 26:14 (Parallel theme): They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased, they shall not rise: therefore hast thou visited and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish.

Ecclesiastes 1:11 (Parallel theme): There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

Psalms 6:5 (Parallel theme): For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

Job 14:21 (Parallel theme): His sons come to honour, and he knoweth it not; and they are brought low, but he perceiveth it not of them.

Hebrews 9:27 (Parallel theme): And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:

Ecclesiastes 2:16 (Parallel theme): For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.

Psalms 109:15 (Parallel theme): Let them be before the LORD continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth.

Ecclesiastes 8:10 (Parallel theme): And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity.

Isaiah 63:16 (Parallel theme): Doubtless thou art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O LORD, art our father, our redeemer; thy name is from everlasting.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 (Parallel theme): It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.