

Dead Serious

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14 October 9, 2024

What's your idea of an ideal weekend? Maybe some relaxing, have a nice meal, go to a concert or movie, look through some old photos to reminisce on the good times you had back when you were first dating your spouse?

The Teacher has a different idea. He says, "You know what would be a *really* good use of our time? If we crashed a funeral or two. Maybe we could find a wise man to point out a bunch of things we've done wrong."

Ecclesiastes wants you to think about life but *especially* through the lens of your certain, unstoppable, impending death.¹ The Teacher's words are often unpleasant, but remember: *That's the point*. We talked about this in our first study but haven't reminded ourselves recently: The Teacher's message to us is *supposed* to be like a sharp goad - a cattle prod - to shepherd us toward God and the ultimate meaning and purpose He wants for our lives.

Tonight's goads are: Consider adversity. Consider the fact that you're going to die. Consider that your life is a part of the amazing, sovereign work of God. And through that consideration, we can put death and suffering and the wrinkles of life into proper perspective.

As chapter 6 closed, he asked a rhetorical question: Who knows what's good? What is the *advantage* for human beings? Tonight, he'll use the word "better" eight times in these verses. He's answering his question with a series of proverbs.

In many ways, these verses are similar to many we would read one book to the left, *also* written by Solomon. But we'll find that *these* proverbs feel very different. There is a gloom to them. The Teacher doesn't talk about wisdom the way he does in Proverbs. That's because in *this* book, he's talking to us from the earthly perspective. He doesn't weigh eternal life as he measures these things out. So when he speaks about 'wisdom,' he means earthly knowledge and ingenuity, not the heavenly wisdom of righteousness.

But even from the Teacher's limited perspective, we are able to glean many helpful principles as we seek to live a life that matters and that makes a lasting difference.

Ecclesiastes 7:1 - A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.

At the time, perfume was more than a nicety, it was a royal treasure - a decadent luxury that few had access to.² But the Teacher tells us character is of *much* more lasting value than cologne.

¹ Roland Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23a: Ecclesiastes*

² Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation With Introduction And Commentary*

But, it takes a lot more time to distill a good name than it does a bottle of perfume. It takes a life of consistent, careful choices both small and large. These ingredients aren't always easy to acquire.

Next, the Teacher says that your deathday is better than birthday. We know he's in a very depressed frame of mind, but the truth is he's *right* - at least when it comes to us Christians. The day we die is going to be much better than the day we were born. Paul said it outright: "To die is gain!"³ He said he longed to go and be with Christ. But, even though we look forward to that arrival, we know that God has given us *this* life on earth on purpose, with purpose. We are to follow Him until it's done.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 - ²It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, since that is the end of all mankind, and the living should take it to heart.

Did you know that less than 47% of people want a funeral when they die.⁴ That's not a good thing. It's a bad trend for society. *We need* funerals. At funerals, we are confronted with the one reality that most people refuse to face - and that's the fact that one day *they* will be buried.

If you're a Christian, have a funeral service. Your family doesn't need to go bankrupt putting one on. But that hour may be the most spiritually impactful event of your life. It is at that funeral that your faith, your testimony, your love for Christ is put on display for your family and friends and coworkers and community to see. None of them will try to shut you up or jeer you down. Instead, the Gospel can be *directly* preached to them as they stare their own deaths in the face.

And it's good to *attend* funerals. They provide us an opportunity to calibrate and put what matters into perspective. To consider the work of God in a person's life and His faithfulness to them.

Feasts are the opposite. Feasting isn't bad in and of itself - the Teacher tells us to enjoy life, to enjoy meals, that these things are a gift from God - but feasting is meant to *distract*. It's meant to keep us from serious thought. But life requires serious thought so that it doesn't just happen to us. So that we are making the most of this incredible gift God has given to us for specific reasons.

Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 - ³Grief is better than laughter, for when a face is sad, a heart may be glad. ⁴The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in a house of pleasure.

Busy with laughter and pleasure, the fool forgets to ask the question: What's going to happen when time runs out? What's going to happen when the good times stop rolling? When the money is gone? When the beauty fades? When my health breaks down? What is my life adding up to?

The party life is all about "You only live once," right? That mindset ignores the hard stop at the end. All sense, no substance. The Teacher never lets us get far without reminding us, "Death is coming."

³ Philippians 1:21

⁴ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/half-of-people-no-longer-want-a-funeral-its-a-worrying-trend/16832.article>

Moses, in his Psalm (90), wrote this important line:

Psalm 90:12 - ¹²Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts.

The average American will live a little more than 27,700 days. How many have you lived so far? Almost everyone in here has lived at least 5,000 days. I've lived 15,219. The Bible doesn't present this to us to scare us - although some people need to have a little shock treatment. But your life matters. Your days matter. And the reality of this fallen world is that the outer man is perishing. We have an appointment with death. That is a very important appointment to prepare for.

Ecclesiastes 7:5-6 - ⁵It is better to listen to rebuke from a wise person than to listen to the song of fools, ⁶for like the crackling of burning thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This too is futile.

To the young party animal, the wise man is just a stuffed-shirt - a wet blanket. But the Teacher really is trying to help people *not* make the same mistakes he did. He speaks from a place of expert disappointment. His whole goal is that we avoid the dead ends he ran into again and again.

Think of all the pop songs about how *tonight is the night!* Oh, the things we're going to experience! We're going to feel so alive! The number one song on *Billboard's Top 100* right now is a song I've never heard of from a band I've never heard of. It's called "A Bar Song," and it's all about how the singer should just drink till they pass out then wake up and drink some more. There's no point in working. There's no point in worrying about the problems of life. There's a party downtown, let's go and drink all night and that's it. Number one song filling the airwaves.

The problem is, it's just (as some translate it), "Nettles under the kettle."⁵ The song doesn't last. There's no heat, just noise. It's *hevel*.

It's *better* to listen to a rebuke from a wise person. Rebuke means when someone points out to you that you've messed up.⁶ None of us *like* being rebuked, but it can be a very helpful thing. One commentary writes that a rebuke "heals and strengthens even while it wounds."⁷

Ecclesiastes 7:7 - ⁷Surely, the practice of extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the mind.

So far we've seen, "Ok, this is better than that. Funeral better than party. Rebuke better than Top 40." And we could think of it almost as shoppers looking at different products. But here there's a new significance. Because this is not just about what we might *choose*, but who we are *becoming*.

⁵ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

⁶ *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*

⁷ Smith

In verse 7 we see a wise person *turn into* a fool. How? Well, because they went down the road of loving money and valuing a life of pleasure and ease, they become people who extort and bribe to get what they want. Their minds become corrupted by the *hevel* of the world, and now *they* are the fools singing and laughing and dragging down the world around them.

But is this person in verse 7 going to have a good name on the day of their death? They've got shelves full of perfume and party favors and other treasures, but in the end their life will be a miscarriage like the Teacher talked about last time. There's a corruption of what should have been.

Ecclesiastes 7:8 - ⁸The end of a matter is better than its beginning; a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit.

We'll hang in there with a book or movie with a lackluster beginning. But when an author messes up the final chapter? That's unforgivable.

Christians *are* supposed to care about finishing well. Paul talked a lot about this. Acts 20. 1 Corinthians 9. Philippians 3. 2 Timothy 4. So many believers don't finish the race in the way they wanted to when they first started.

Now, of course, it is God Who completes the work He began in us. It is God accomplishing His purposes through His power. But we are able to slow to a crawl, or get lost in the woods, or disqualify ourselves from certain prizes in our walk with the Lord.

According to this proverb in verse 8, one way for us to aim toward finishing well is valuing patience over pride. As David Hubbard puts it, we should care about *length* rather than *height*.⁸ It's not about whether my Christianity leads to big numbers or great fame or fantastic feats of faith. Did I run the race the Lord gave me and did I finish well? Did I arrive at the destination He plotted?

Ecclesiastes 7:9 - ⁹Don't let your spirit rush to be angry, for anger abides in the heart of fools.

I like to think that *my* anger is justified - that it's always righteous indignation *just like Jesus had!* But that's almost never actually true. Instead, I should endeavor to be more conformed into the image of the Lord, Who is slow to anger and abounding in love. There's a time to be angry, but it's way less often than we like to think.

Hubbard again writes, "*Anger, which we all feel at times...will rarely improve our circumstances. It can, however, ruin our chance at any joy a can rain on the parades of everyone around us.*"⁹

⁸ David Hubbard *The Communicator's Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

⁹ Hubbard

What about injustice? What about wickedness? What about all the wrongs going on around us? Yes, that's real. We're not supposed to just ignore it. But "the wise man is neither naive nor cynical and embittered."¹⁰

Ecclesiastes 7:10 - ¹⁰ Don't say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this.

This is a very interesting proverb. There's *always* an idea that we could return to a *better* time in our past or our society's past and regain the good life. That's what nostalgia is.

Were the golden days better? Sure. Maybe. Sometimes in some ways. In other ways, not so much. We usually dismiss those parts from memory. But even if they *were* better, it doesn't matter. Because you're *here* and *now*. And *sometimes* nostalgia lies to us in very dangerous ways.

There were the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. "If *only* we could go back to the *good* old days in Egypt!" ...You mean where you were slaves?

Or the Jews with Ezra and Nehemiah. "If *only* this temple were as nice as the last temple." You mean when the kings of Israel and Judah were destroying the land with idolatry and immorality?

As Christians, we should know the past, learn from the past, even value much of the past, but we can't *live* in the past. Instead, we should always remind ourselves *the best is yet to come!*¹¹ Not in *this* life, but in the next. Heaven is coming. Eternity is coming. Freedom from sickness and sin and difficulty and death and sorrow and disappointments, it's all coming. It's wise for us to think on that.

Instead of living in the past, "How then should we live?" 1 Thessalonians 4 gives us principles for living as we hopefully await our coming future: To live in sanctification and holiness as the Lord shapes our lives. To love the brothers and sisters around you. To live a quiet life, working hard. And looking *forward*, not back.

Ecclesiastes 7:11-12 - ¹¹ Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, ¹² because wisdom is protection as silver is protection; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner.

Remember, when the Teacher talks about wisdom, he doesn't mean heaven's eternal wisdom. He means human wisdom.¹² We see the hint there: "Those who see the sun." So, he's talking about human know-how.

And human wisdom isn't always bad. In fact, it can really help out sometimes. Don't touch a downed power line. *That* human wisdom might preserve your life!

¹⁰ Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

¹¹ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

¹² Iain Provan *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. The NIV Application Commentary*

Human wisdom can be an advantage on a limited level, just like money can help out. But they cannot guarantee you anything. In fact, as we've seen, wealth might actually cost you your life. But, as you live, it's good to be thoughtful and rational and knowledgeable. It's generally going to help. But it can't guarantee you satisfaction or eternal life. We need over-the-sun wisdom for that.

Proverbs 12:28 - ²⁸ There is life in the path of righteousness, and in its path there is no death.

Ecclesiastes 7:13 - ¹³ Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked?

"Crooked" here is *not* referring to moral crookedness.¹³ Rather, the Teacher means when we look at life and it seems tangled - awkward - rough sailing. We get so wrapped up in ironing out our lives and trying to fix things that aren't to our liking. The Teacher invites us to stop and consider whether what is going on is *actually* the work of God in our lives.

What is God doing in your life right now? If we think, "I don't think He's really doing anything in my life right now." The Teacher would say, "Oh yes He is!" Maybe we're distracted from seeing His work because we're trying to cut a path when He wants us to turn along His road.

James Smith writes, "*Man should concentrate on reflecting on God's will and how he may bring his life into conformity with that divine will.*"¹⁴ The Teacher would agree with that.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 - ¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that no one can discover anything that will come after him.

An overall theme of the last two passages has been: Prosperity isn't *always* good and adversity isn't *always* bad.¹⁵ They are both aspects of life that serve God's purposes as *He* accomplishes His plan in and through our lives. As we walk with God, we're going to encounter the full spectrum of experience in life. Rather than resist it, we should react as Christians who understand what's *really* going on in the world, what's really going on in history, and what God really wants for our lives.

We would be wise to *consider*, rather than constantly try to distract ourselves from things we'd rather not do or think about or confront ourselves with. That doesn't mean we're not allowed to have fun or embrace the *lighter* side of life. The Teacher *is* in a deep gloom in these chapters, but remember he commands us six times to *enjoy* life as a gift from God. But tonight the message is: Life is going to end. When it's over, what will our lives have been? We should give it serious thought because life is too precious and too important to waste.

¹³ Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance: The Message Of Ecclesiastes*

¹⁴ Smith

¹⁵ Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*