

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14 | A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death than the day of birth.

² It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

⁵ It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.

⁶ For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools;
this also is vanity.

⁷ Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁸ Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

⁹ Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the heart of fools.

¹⁰ Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

¹¹ Wisdom is good with an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.

¹² For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

¹³ Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked?

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

Ecclesiastes 6-7 | Death & Wisdom

I read this week Peter Leithart's description of the wisdom literature of Solomon that I found helpful. Proverbs is grapes. Ecclesiastes is mashed up grapes. Song of Songs is wine. This means that Ecclesiastes is in part the wisdom to be gained from death. Death is an inevitable part of all of our stories. It is necessary precursor of resurrection, but also the final enemy to be destroyed. Tolkien sees death as central to any human story.

"Human stories are practically always about one thing, really, aren't they? Death. The inevitability of death. . . 'There is no such thing as a natural death. Nothing that ever happens to man is natural, since his presence calls the whole world into question. All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident, and even if he knows it he would sense to it an unjustifiable violation.' Well, you may agree with the words or not, but those are the key spring of The Lord Of The Rings"

There is wisdom to be gained here amidst the backdrop of death and Solomon will guide us into it this morning. Although this section of Ecclesiastes is varied there is a thematic unity of death.

1. Wickedness & Death

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 | There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil.

It is one thing to long for what you don't have and suffer for lack. This can at least entertain a hope of future gain. It can be a plague of envy but at least the envy can produce an intoxicating drive. There is another evil Solomon recognizes, the man who has received all of his desires but from whom God has withheld the power to enjoy.

Enjoyment is a separate gift of the Lord. It is not that there are simply enjoyable things and if you have them then you have joy. You must also receive the gift of the ability to enjoy. It's not as easy as it sounds. To enjoy good things requires incredible trust in the Lord and loving of the types of things that God loves. We must receive what Jeremiah Burroughs names, the rare jewel of Christian contentment. Written during that gloriously fruitful decade of Christian teaching the 1640s. It is the quality which allows us to receive the life we have been given from the Lord with gratitude and trust. Without it we can be amused, but we cannot enjoy life's good things.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 | If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

Two of the contemporary commentaries I read said that in Jewish culture lots of children and long life were considered good things. To which I say, lol modern commentaries. These *are* good things. If our soul is not satisfied with life's good things then our life is worse off than a stillborn child. We must learn to love and enjoy life's good things. Children, health, prosperity, friends, food, music, books, hiking trails with waterfalls at the end, the change of seasons, laughter. Our ability to enjoy these is a gift of the Lord. And part of our reception of this gift is recognition of them as a gift. The question is not, "why don't I have what they have." But, "How could a rebellious creature from the dirt like me get to have a child who loves me, a home to put in order, the smell of rain."

You might think, if you can't like this then you need something more like-able. But it is better said, if you can't like this what makes you think you'll have the strength to love heaven? One means to gain this joyful wisdom is understanding death.

7:1 | A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.

Covering our ordinary repulsive odors draws people in instead of repelling them. But a good name has these qualities even more than that. It is better. Nice helpful proverb, but did you forget we're reading Ecclesiastes. Here is another thing that is better, the day of death than the day of birth. Didn't he just say we ought to enjoy life's good things? We'll he goes on to show us how past this initial shock.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-3 | It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. ³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

The house of mourning and day of death are better because they instruct mankind on what we neglect. This life will end in death. This draws us to the sorrow which unlike laughter makes the heart glad. It reorients your priorities and reminds you of life's good things. You learn who you want to be at a funeral. I remember moving out of Maegan and I's first home and looking at our spec of a backyard and thinking I just should have played with JT in it more. Tears are a path to joy. One of the ways God gives his gift of joy. When else do you sit around and talk about a loved one? A funeral turns their stories from the category of news to legend. And legends...

2. At least wisdom works.

The high praise of wisdom in the proverbs is mashed down to its pragmatic component parts in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 7:9 | Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.

Anger quickly arrived is long released. The fool is quickly angered, and then finds himself in terrible situations of his own making, worse than what initially angered him.

Ecclesiastes 7:10 | Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

Do not think the day of mourning as an opportunity for mere nostalgia. Solomon is not giving us blanket cliché's he is walking us down a narrow way. We must visit them as the warning and calling they are, but not visit them as though the answer were in the past. God has yet to repeat himself with history and he will not begin to do so. The wise understand this and move forward towards death with the lessons of death in tow.

Ecclesiastes 7:12 | For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

It's not the hymn to lady wisdom we receive in the proverbs. Wisdom is like money, it solves a lot of problems and preserves your life. You should try to get both and manage them well.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 | In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

Notice the asymmetry. In prosperity be joyful. In adversity consider. God made both. This is not an answer its a question whose meditation drives you to the mystery of God. This is related to his next insight.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-17 | In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. ¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

Here is the point. Everything happens. You can literally what-about any situation. And how strange this advice. Be not overly righteous or wise. And be not overly wicked or foolish. You get what he means, there is no rescue in either hyper religiosity or hyper frivolity. Neither are useful paths. The wisdom here is a self-made wisdom. There is not too much true righteousness, or too much true wisdom, but there is too much thinking oneself wise. Or abandoning oneself to foolishness. If you find yourself Jesus juking, then you're too wise in this sense. The Jesus juke sounds like this. "I can't wait for my upcoming vacation." "Well you should be satisfied in Jesus no matter where you are." Hearing that will make you want to go on vacation and be a belligerent drunk, but this is also bad.

Ecclesiastes 7:29 | See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Solomon has not found the wise. Not truly, he has added up one thing to another and found wisdom incredibly rare. But he concludes this, God made man upright but they have sought out many schemes. This is the story of man. God made us upright, but we fell away from him in our schemes.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 | For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

