

VIII. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“The Vitality of Wisdom and the Vanity of Folly”
Ecclesiastes 7
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In this study we will be in Ecclesiastes 7. I'd like to approach this text with two thoughts in mind. One is that I believe the book of Ecclesiastes is Solomonic and chapter 7 as much as any other chapter affirms this because it rings with Solomonic proverbs that you find in the book of Proverbs, which he also wrote. After making a good beginning, Solomon fell away under the influence of his wealth, power, immorality and then even dabbling in pagan idolatry because of the influence of the multiple wives that he had. Then he comes to his sense and the book of Ecclesiastes is his repentance and what God has taught him in the journey away from the Lord and how it is benefitting him coming back to wisdom, the proverbs. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

I'm not saying if you want to get really wise to ask God for wisdom but then walk away from the Lord and learn what you can from walking away from the Lord on your way back – this is not what I'm saying. Sin never profits us but God is so sovereign and so great that God in His grace can even take our falling away to bring us back but to teach us things about why we fell away and what it means to come back by grace for His glory with His glorious hand of blessing and providence upon us. When you do that you begin to get some wisdom.

I am a blessed man for many reasons and one of them was the father and grandfather I had. Have you noticed in some cases that your dad and granddad get a lot smarter the older they get? I really thought mine were dumb when I was a teenager but they sure got smarter when I got older and I don't know how that happened. I have thought about writing a book with each chapter a statement that my dad gave me, its relationship and roots in the Scripture, but its common practice in life. One statement he gave me has helped me in pastoral counseling for forty plus years. He said 'I don't care how flat the pancake is there is always two sides.' This is rooted in Proverbs 21:2 where every man seems right until you hear the other man speak. That's a basic common sense wisdom statement.

We will get a series of these proverbs from Ecclesiastes 7 which we will read first and then I'll divide it into three sections of sources of wisdom – where to learn wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 7:1–13 says [1] *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?*

The first section of wisdom is in Ecclesiastes 7:1–4 and I have titled it learning wisdom from life and death. Then in Ecclesiastes 7:5–6 I have titled this learning wisdom from constructive criticism. The third source of wisdom is from Ecclesiastes 7:7–10 and I’ve titled this section learning wisdom from God’s providence. Then there is a summation in Ecclesiastes 7:11–13. So we’ll go through each of these and then get back to a Gospel foundation. These are not just mere moralism or mere aphorisms and there’s nothing wrong with moral statements and aphorisms as long as we keep them connected to the work of the Gospel of grace in our life.

He starts us off with an introductory statement by telling us that we want a good name. Naming is a very significant thing in the Hebrew world and life view. To name something meant you had authority over it. Secondly, to name something was to define it and thirdly to name something was to own responsibility for it. For at times it’s just a way that we get each other’s attention but it’s really not for it’s more than that. In our baptism moments here at our church I will say ‘Father, name your child and the blessing.’ For that father the name means something and many times the blessing they give is attached to the name that was given.

I was blessed from my dad to give me his name and he bore his dad’s name. So we have had a Harry Lloyd Reeder Sr, a Harry Lloyd Reeder Jr, Harry Lloyd Reeder III (which is me) and I have passed this name onto my son, Harry Lloyd Reeder IV. There was a special time in my life when I moved from my nickname Ike to that name and I was glad when it was given to me. I knew when I received that name I got a lot with it. What came with that name did not simply come because of the name but because of the character and conduct of those who bore that name before me.

During the baptism time I will many times hear a Bible name, or a family name, or a name from someone that meant a lot to them or a name that had a particular meaning, but the reason that name becomes special is because of what has happened in the lives of those who had that name. Then when you give a name that has become special and respected to someone, what they do with it will determine what the next generation thinks about that name. So if you get a good name, somebody has been doing something that makes it a good name. Then when you receive that name you receive the capital that has been invested in the conduct and character of those who bore the name before you. Now what will you do with that name? Will it be a good name after you have carried it into life as you come to the end of your life? So there is this desire that the name that has been given is enhanced by the character and the conduct.

Ecclesiastes 7:1a says *[1a] A good name is **better than** precious ointment...* Many proverbs are set up this way and do you remember when Mary broke the jar of precious ointment on Jesus’ feet? Precious ointment is usually a year’s worth of finances and when Mary did this it got Judas all upset because he thought ‘what a waste of money’ yet she anointed Jesus for His death as she washed His feet with it. To have a vile of precious ointment was like having gold in the bank. That ointment, an exotic perfume, would be something that was extremely, overwhelmingly valuable. Here a good name is better than that.

Whenever you see ‘better than’ in the proverbs they are not saying the other thing is bad, they are saying that the thing that is being elevated is better than something that is considered good. I’m sure you all remember from 10th grade English when you learned about the normative, comparative and the superlative. In this case ‘good’ would be the normative, ‘better’

would be the comparative and 'best' would be the superlative. So when someone is saying that something is better than something then what they are comparing it to is at least good. It may in a sense be better than some other good. He is not saying precious ointments, exotic perfumes are bad but he is saying that a good name is better than what this world values so much in that amoral thing called perfume. Therefore we want a good name.

What does that mean for us? Why do we want a good name? It's not for us. We want a good name for two reasons. One is to honor those who made it a good name when it was given to us. Secondly, is to honor the One whose name we bear with our name and that is Christ, who saves us by the power of His Name.

So if I want a good name how will wisdom lead me to that? Wisdom leads me to that from this first series of where I can learn from that. One of the places I can learn wisdom from is from life and death. This comes from when he says in Ecclesiastes 7:1b, *[1b] ... the day of death than the day of birth*. Is that some kind of empty nihilistic statement? No, for he explains this more in the text. The next part of the verse 2 says *[2a] It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting...*

In other words, he is not talking about your day of death is better than your day of birth. He is saying that for wisdom to lead you to a good name so that your name honors the name of Christ you learn wisdom more on the day of death and funerals, in the house of mourning, than you do at a day of birth or a house of feasting. He isn't saying that you can't learn anything from the day of birth. He is saying someone else's death becomes the occasion for you to learn wisdom more than their day of birth. There is a wealth more wisdom at the day of someone's death than the day of someone's birth. The same goes for a feasting party but you learn more when you go into a house of mourning. You will learn more when you see people deal with the issue of death.

This is something I became very aware of very early on in my life in two ways. I was converted, not in the celebration of someone's birth but I came to Christ on a day when someone died. I'll never forget the phone call I received. I was in the span of life where I had to go to church if I was going to date Cindy so we went to church. The phone call was from the pastor of the church who told me an elder who was 40 years old and his wife was 39 years old with four daughters, on Christmas Day his wife has a cerebral hemorrhage. The girls want me and Cindy to come over and stay with them while he goes to the hospital with his wife. You never know who is watching you in a worship service. They had been watching us. We did go over and his wife died.

As I sat to hear from Jim, who had just lost his wife, he said 'Harry I wouldn't bring my wife back if I could and there are three reasons why. One, do you know all that she has now? Why would I be that selfish? Secondly, God never promised me that all things are good but He did promise that all things work together for good so I'm trusting Him, not that this is a good thing, but that my God is doing something good through this. We will know more and more now than ultimately in eternity. Thirdly, it won't be that much longer until I'll be there with her. Praise the Lord.' Do you know how much wisdom came to me as an unconverted man in that day? I was overwhelmed at his response. I had never seen anything like that. I had only been around two funerals in my life and people were all to pieces at them.

I thought this husband was on some kind of medication to be able to respond like that. I thought they might have been having marital problems but I was told by my spiritual father that his wife's fingerprints were all over that church. He told me I was seeing the victory of Christ and that flag flies over death just like everything else. That's when I knew I didn't have

anything close to that in my life and the emptiness in my journey of sin needed to stop. I walked into a hallway, got on my knees and was converted in the day of death and in that day of death I came to life.

Secondly, I've learned this source of wisdom in my first pastorate. There were more elderly in this church in Miami I was in than anyone and I knew in one good flu season I might be out of a job. The average age was about 69. When we had a church dinner they always ate dessert first just in case. At the time I only knew about the 50 plus people that were in my church. This area was very much 'unchurched' so I went to the funeral home and told them that if people came there and needed a preacher that I would be willing to do any services needed. I learned so much about evangelism and giving comfort without giving false assurance in that context. There were a number of people that ended up at the church because of that funeral home calling me. I learned so much from dealing with people who were dealing with death and the life they came to because of it. I also learned a lot about the emptiness of the lives of people who didn't have a pastor, but it was because they didn't have Jesus and didn't care to have a pastor or a church.

It is so important to have family and church in your life in the day of crisis and here I had met people who had neither of these. I learned a lot more there than I did at wine-tasting parties or any other place. So the day of mourning and death is a day of extraordinary blessing. It is a day you can gain much wisdom and yes you can still learn from the day of birth or at a party but see what you can find out when people are dealing with the issues of life such as death, separation, loss of dreams, loss of anticipation and the loss of relationships. I always tell our pastors to never see funerals as a bother due to this.

I was visiting with a man the other day who told me he doesn't do funerals in his church and he lets other people handle that. I'm not saying people ought to call on me to do funerals for I'm grateful for the relationships people have with other pastors but I'm saying I don't see doing funerals as an intrusion or a bother because I learn so much from them and get to see how much they learn as they go through it. Pastors should not see funerals as a bother because it's a teaching moment for the lost to learn about Jesus and for the saved to get the comfort of Jesus. It is not just to get a body in the ground for this is an unbelievable moment where you get to deal with things that nobody else will deal with. Why?

We live in a society that doesn't want to face the reality of death so we warehouse the people that are about to die so that we don't have to look at them. I'm not speaking negatively about retirement homes here, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm just saying that some families just pack people away. I understand some folks need special care that we can't give and that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm referring to those who want to get the old away from us and don't want to see them or have anything to do with them. Our children miss so much wisdom when they don't get to visit a father, mother, grandmother, aunt, uncle or grandfather who are about to meet the Lord. I understand you have to deal with age appropriateness but I'm speaking pastorally to you. When the age appropriateness is there, there is a teaching moment when you deal with death in your family or in the lives of others.

When people die it's not just a matter of paying your respect which is appropriate but funerals are learning moments for you. Help bury the dead and help the people who are burying the dead. Remember Jesus' warning. Don't put that ahead of Jesus but do cease that moment to learn about Jesus. Help comfort those who have lost someone. Those are days of learning extraordinary wisdom from others. Those are moments that need to be ceased.

I have no idea what caused me to stay with that family after the wife was taken to the hospital. The husband came home shortly after she had died to make the funeral arrangements and my wife and I left. I then called the senior pastor to tell him I'd be willing to help this man in any way and then even went back to the husband and said I'd help him in any way and I had no idea what caused me to do that. Yet this day I praise God I did because I learned about Jesus, the power of God's grace, the power over sin, death, hell and the grave and I came from darkness into light.

Go help bury the dead. You might be thinking 'well I'm already saved' so go help bury the dead and maybe you'll get a chance to talk to someone there who is not saved. By the way there is still some more for you to learn in moments like that, that you'll never know until you cease those moments. So go into the house of mourning, don't avoid it or isolate it but go and help. While you're there, walk away from that day, and write down in your journal what you learned from the going to the house of mourning or on the day of death.

I shared my testimony of conversion 15 years after it happened in a church I was preaching at in February 1983. I had gone to Charlotte, North Carolina to plant a church and there I shared my testimony in greater detail than here that first Sunday night. I noticed some young ladies sitting in the back and one in particular was hiding so when the service was over I made a beeline to go see her. I tend to do this when I preach and notice something like this or when someone is folding their arms while I'm preaching. I love to talk to people who act like they don't want to listen. I found out the girls were those daughters my wife and I looked after when their mother died of the cerebral hemorrhage.

They told me 'we now have heard what our daddy said that God was doing a good thing for we have found at least one good thing. You were converted and your marriage was established. God has called you in the ministry and God is using you. Now we know our mother's death was not in vain.' They became vital parts of that church plant in Charlotte, North Carolina. There are so much we learn in those moments so cease those moments. Everyone faces death so don't avoid it but make it a learning moment. Death is an enemy, not a friend. Death is an obscene intruder but Jesus has won the victory over it.

Let's look further now in the text. Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 says [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.* Again, it's not that you can't learn in moments of laughter but you learn much more in a moment of sorrow. I know we can feel uncomfortable during those moments of death and sorrow but when people are going through this we need to be there with them and for them. Now don't feel like you need to give them lessons while they are mourning, you just go and be there. If there is something to say that you know to say then say it, but basically it's your presence they need for the ministry of presence is overwhelming. Then start thinking about what you're learning in these times of mourning. Sometimes joviality is filled with a lot of triviality but when people are weeping there is depth of the soul. It's a learning moment that we cease.

Now we see a second place to learn in Ecclesiastes 7:5-6 which says [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.* In several places in Proverbs it talks about there being wisdom in many counselors and that's good but I think the assumption is that you have enough sense to get wise counselors. Seek thoughtful people and give them the green light to give you constructive critique in your life. One might think it would be usurious to their self-esteem and sure it is because we all feel that but turn your self-esteem

over to Jesus and then get wisdom so that you begin to find what is biblically derived self-respect in Jesus. You can get that from hearing the rebuke of the wise. So the second place to learn wisdom is from the thoughtful counselor.

So do I want the vitality of wisdom? I love laughter, jokes and wits yet my wife says it's sarcasm but I would say it's dry wit. This isn't saying laughter is wrong but it's saying we can get caught up in laughter and go through life in the triviality that comes with jokes. There is a place for that for we all need the relief of laughter but seek out the people with sobriety that will give you wisdom. That means you give your dad, granddad, mom, grandmother and the older people at church, in the community and in your family, a voice in your life. Don't be guilty of what C.S. Lewis calls 'chronological snobbery.' Don't engage in the arrogance of modernity those who have spoken to you and those who will speak to you. In fact, don't dismiss them but seek them out and take them out to get their wisdom. I would say have three or four questions that you can go ask them, then let them talk and learn from them. Receive thoughtful, wise, constructive criticism and counsel in your life, and more than that seek it with your life.

The third source of wisdom comes from Ecclesiastes 7:7–10 which says [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.*

The third source of wisdom is to be patient for God's Providence to show you what He is doing. Most of us live our life either in the rising of a wave of God's Providence in a generation or the ebbing of a wave of God's Providence. Everything doesn't happen in social media soundbites. God is doing things over periods of time. Be patient for God's Providence to work out. Did anyone think in a manger in Bethlehem with animals that the greatest empire King had just been born? Yet 50 years later in Europe they were saying that this King was turning the world upside down.

Don't make immediate judgments for what you think might not be much of anything just wait until you see what God's Providence is doing. When they came back from Babylon and built Zerubbabel's temple the old man said 'What in the world is this? You call this the temple? We remember the days of Solomon's temple.' The Prophet said inspired by the Lord, 'Do not despise the day of small things for the glory of this temple will be greater than the Solomonic temple.' (Zechariah 4) When did the Shekinah glory go into the Zerubbabel temple? Never, then came 400 hundred years of silence. Then the carpenter with his wife traveled seven miles to Bethlehem and they walked into that temple. That day the glory of Immanuel came into that temple. Don't declare the end at the beginning, only God can do that. Wait to see what God is going to do.

Also don't say things like 'nothing can be done with a man's life or this family or this church' etc. because you don't know what God's plans are yet. Wait. I will give you my best illustration on this. Have you ever tried to take a coat hanger apart because you locked your keys in your car and you want to use the hanger to try and unlock the door? Nowadays with all the electric stuff in cars it's hard to do that but I remember having to do that with a hanger and they weren't always good moments when I was doing that. Maybe you have straightened out a coat hanger to use to cook marshmallows over a fire. If you have, could you ever take that hanger and form it back to the way it was in order to hang up something with it later?

You cannot re-form a straightened coat hanger. The only thing I know that is more futile than trying to put back together a straightened out coat hanger to rehang something, is trying to

think of a name for your cat. God can not only make a straightened coat hanger back into a coat hanger and renew it so that it's better than before but He can take the broken coat hanger and make it do things that it could never do before. Our God can draw straight lines with crooked sticks. So don't determine the end from the moment, for God's not through yet. That is what wisdom teaches you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be in Your Word. Thank You O God for the glory and majesty of the insights of the Spirit of God granted to Solomon in his repentance, renewal of pursuit and his return to wisdom that begins with the respect, awe, and fear of the Lord in whom we place our trust for our salvation. Thank You for Your Word, its breadth, depth, height, width and length for we confess that we cannot give You counsel but we ask You from Your Word, by Your Spirit, through wisdom in the day of mourning, the day of death, from wise counselors, from the preaching of the Word, the singing of the Word, the meditation and reflection upon that Word, to teach us wisdom from above, in Jesus' Name, Amen.