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MINISTRIES

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The End of All Mankind (Ecclesiastes 7:1-6)

Someday, you are going to die. It might be fifty years from now, or it might be in a car crash tomorrow. You can't escape it. Death comes for us all.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, a character called “the Preacher ” is introduced at the outset and delivers a speech that spans almost the entire book. The word translated “Preacher” comes from the Hebrew word Qohelet, meaning “one who convenes an assembly.” Traditionally, this character is associated with Solomon, but the book of Ecclesiastes itself merely calls him Qohelet, “the Preacher.” In his speech, this Preacher speaks about his struggle to find lasting meaning in life and highlights the inevitability of death as one of the reasons he considers labor, wealth, and pleasure to be ultimately futile. He describes how death and time erase everything you’ve ever accomplished under the sun. Therefore, he cries, “[All is vanity!](#)”

However, even though we’re all going to die, the Preacher consistently maintains his belief that wisdom is better than folly (Ecclesiastes 2:13; 4:14). And in Ecclesiastes 7:1-6, he drives this point home with several proverbs highlighting the “better” way to live in light of the reality of death. In this teaching, we examine six of these proverbs, and we explore how their wisdom applies today.

A Good Name

The preacher begins his series of proverbs by emphasizing the value of a good “name” or reputation. Here is what he says:

Ecclesiastes 7:1

[A good name is better than precious ointment...](#)

In ancient times, “precious ointment” was highly valued and sought-after; it is even mentioned among King Hezekiah’s treasures (2 Kings 20:13). However, despite the immense value of precious ointment, according to the Preacher, a good name is “better.” Why? The second part of the proverb provides a clue as to why a good name holds such significant worth:

Ecclesiastes 7:1

...and the day of death [is better] than the day of birth.”

So, just as a good reputation is better than expensive goods, the day of one’s death is better than the day of his birth. What is the Preacher’s point here? After you die, your reputation is the only thing about you that will live on. When you die, nobody is going to talk about your impressive possessions. The conversations of loved ones at your funeral will revolve around your qualities as a devoted parent, a loving spouse, or a cherished friend. You will not be remembered for what you had but for *who you were*.

Therefore, having a good reputation and character is better than having stuff. The stuff you acquired will not be remembered on your day of death. In fact, there may be another connection here to the precious ointment mentioned earlier. In biblical times, it was common practice to put ointment on corpses; this helped to cover up the smell (Matthew 26:12; Mark 16:1; See Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary on the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 174-175). With this background in mind, the Preacher may be saying that a good reputation makes your funeral more pleasant than good-smelling ointment does.

Now, there is another important point to consider here. And that is, while the second part of the proverb explains the first part, the first part of the proverb also qualifies the second part: the day of one’s death is indeed “better,” but *only* for the person who has a good name. If someone dies with a multitude of possessions but lacks a good reputation, that person’s death will *not* be better. Earlier in his speech, the Preacher reflected upon the great wealth and possessions he acquired in his life, but ultimately concluded that “[all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun](#)” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Again, that is because you cannot take your possessions with you when you die. So, it all means nothing in the end. Your wealth provides no real “gain” beyond this life.

On the other hand, the person who lives according to wisdom and prioritizes having a good reputation and character above wealth *will* take something with him when he dies, and that is his good name. He will focus on doing the things that will cause his loved ones to have fond memories of him. He will avoid investing so much time and energy into things that don’t truly last beyond death, and his good reputation will live on after him. For such a person, the day of death is better.

The House of Mourning

In his next proverb, the Preacher declares the following:

Ecclesiastes 7:2

[It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting...](#)

What do the phrases “house of mourning” and “house of feasting” refer to? The Preacher seems to be speaking of funerals and weddings. The house of mourning represents the place where mourners gather to grieve a loved one’s death, while the house of feasting denotes the venue for a wedding feast (C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (London: Doubleday, 2008), 245). Essentially, the Preacher claims that attending a funeral is preferable to attending a wedding. But why? He continues:

Ecclesiastes 7:2

[...for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.](#)

The end of all mankind is in the house of mourning. In other words, *everyone* will experience death eventually. The fact that all will face death is something “[the living will lay to heart](#).” That is, while we are alive, we ought to dwell upon the reality of death—it should impact our decisions in life. And that is the wisdom of this saying. When we come to grips with the fact that we are going to die, it leads to a more thoughtful approach to life. A person who reflects upon his imminent demise will invest his time and energy in the things of life that truly matter most, instead of wasting his time and energy on trivial matters.

How often do you think about the fact that you are going to die? Have you made plans so that your loved ones will be taken care of when you die? A wise person considers these things—he thinks ahead to a future without him. These thoughts force him to be less self-centered and more thoughtful toward the wellbeing of others.

Sorrow

The Preacher continues with yet another jarring statement:

Ecclesiastes 7:3

[Sorrow is better than laughter...](#)

Really? Sorrow is better than laughter? Such an idea is utterly counterintuitive! Sorrow is uncomfortable. In fact, we frequently approach sorrow as a problem to be resolved. When faced with someone mourning, we instinctively react by attempting to cheer them up. We want to help them escape the discomfort of their sorrow, and we want to escape it as well.

Despite these natural inclinations, the Preacher invites us to fully embrace sorrow. Sorrow is an opportunity to cultivate genuine connection with God and each other. This is why Scripture says to “[mourn with those who mourn](#)” (Romans 12:15). And as the Preacher goes on to say:

Ecclesiastes 7:3

[...for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.](#)

While sorrow is uncomfortable, according to the Preacher, it is “better” than putting on the mask of laughter as a distraction (or attempting to place the mask on someone else so that you feel more comfortable). Authenticity with God and others is good for your “heart,” that is, your *true self*, your character. Cultivating deep and meaningful connections requires moving past superficial interactions and embracing difficult emotions, including sadness.

What might this look like? When you’re feeling sad, don’t turn to alcohol to try to numb the pain or retreat to your phone to scroll TikTok for hours to distract yourself. Instead, reach out to a friend to talk about what you’re feeling. Maybe schedule time to meet with your pastor or a counselor. We cannot grow from our painful memories or feelings by running away from them. The heart is not made glad by avoiding sorrow; it is made glad by confronting it and working through it.

Additionally, sorrow is one of the ways God speaks to us about our behavior. Embracing sorrow can often lead to repentance if we come to realize that we have done wrong (2 Corinthians 7:10). Thus, sorrow provides yet another opportunity—the opportunity to engage in deep introspection and to acknowledge our mistakes and the gravity of our actions, leading us to making better choices. This is “better” than superficial laughter.

The Heart of the Wise

In his next proverb, the Preacher is explicit that the wise prefer sorrow while the foolish prefer trivial amusement:

Ecclesiastes 7:4

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

The fact that a wise person's heart is in the house of mourning suggests a profound acknowledgment of the seriousness of death. The wise person is focused upon his imminent demise, and this influences how he lives. As the Psalmist declared:

Psalm 90:12

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

The wise person, who realizes that his days are numbered, makes the most of his short time. He pursues things of eternal value (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). In contrast, the foolish person thinks about only the present moment. He never stops to consider that one day, he will die. He runs away from sorrow. His heart desires only fleeting pleasure. But this leads to a superficial and meaningless life.

At the end of time, when the Messiah returns and establishes his kingdom, there will be no more mourning or crying (Revelation 21:4). So, the sorrow we endure now is not only useful but also temporary. We need not fear that we are missing out on being happy because we will have eternity to be happy. This life is the only opportunity we have to gain wisdom through sorrow. Don't waste this opportunity.

The Rebuke of the Wise

The Preacher continues:

Ecclesiastes 7:5

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

This has been a hard message from the Preacher. It's hard to think about death and sorrow. Nevertheless, the Preacher admonishes us to heed the voice of wisdom, even though it is difficult and painful. As it says in the Book of Proverbs:

Proverbs 13:1

A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

The way of wisdom is "better" than attempting to suppress uncomfortable realities by listening only to the song of fools. It is often uncomfortable and scary to confront such realities, but it is worth it. In the next proverb, the Preacher explains why:

Ecclesiastes 7:6

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

What does the Preacher mean here? How is the laughter of fools like the crackling of thorns under a pot?

Thomas Krüger explains:

[T]heir laughing is as short-lived as the crackling of thorns that burn under the pot (v. 6a): like them, the fools destroy themselves through their enjoyment.

— Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 136

In other words, the fool's trivial song only serves to distract them from the reality of death, but it does not last. And their attempt to avoid uncomfortable realities through laughter prevents them from the opportunities those hard realities provide for growth and a more meaningful life. Instead of attempting to avoid the realities of death and sorrow, the wise person embraces them. He grows from them.

Conclusion

So, what do we learn from the Preacher's speech in Ecclesiastes 7:1-6? The Preacher taught us the "better" way to live in light of the reality of death, a reality we all will face sooner or later. He urges us to consider the worth of a good reputation, and how it surpasses material possessions. Why? Because your reputation endures after death while your possessions do not. Moreover, the Preacher admonishes us to embrace sorrow instead of trying to avoid it. Sorrow provides opportunities to cultivate authenticity and meaningful connection. It also provides the opportunity to reflect on our behavior, which can lead to repentance and a positive change in our character. Finally, the Preacher declares that the wise person values wisdom's rebuke—even though it is uncomfortable to hear. This is because accepting the rebuke of the wise leads to making better choices. The wisdom found in these proverbs is difficult to hear, yet those seeking a meaningful and fulfilling life would do well to hear and receive it.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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