

## Chapter 8: Seeing Good in the Day of Adversity

*Ecclesiastes 7:1–14*

Ecclesiastes 7, the beginning of the second half of the book, is set up by one of the closing questions of the first half of the book: “For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?” (Eccl. 6:12).<sup>1</sup> There, the Preacher identified the fact that human beings struggle to identify what is truly good, especially in light of our few and fleeting days before death. To counter these problems, the Preacher instructs us, using the word “good” eleven times in the first fourteen verses of this chapter. Rather than directing us toward seeking out good in prosperity, ease, and feasting, the Preacher encourages us to look for good by being mindful through sorrow, adversity, and death.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Shaw explains the new “tone” beginning in chapter 7 this way: “Solomon has already established his foundation: live your brief life in the fear of God, enjoying the blessings of this life as God gives you the opportunity and the ability to do so. Now he begins to give practical advice, setting out what a life lived in the fear of God looks like. He does not begin where the reader of Proverbs might expect, but at a point that would not surprise the reader of Ecclesiastes: *the constant reminder of death*.”<sup>3</sup> To start this new section of the book, the Preacher first tells us that *God alone knows what is good*.

### Dying Well (Eccl. 7:1–6)

The Preacher opens on a seemingly straightforward point: “A good name is better than precious [lit., “good”] ointment.” As commentators have pointed out, this verse is beautifully alliterated: “טוֹב טוֹב מִשְׁמֵן טוֹב” (*tób šēm miššemen tób*).<sup>4</sup> As a “good name,” we should distinguish the Preacher’s meaning from what a “great name” would be—that is, the Preacher is not promoting doing great deeds to make a name for yourself, but to live a life that makes a solid reputation among those around you.<sup>5</sup> Again, this point is seemingly straightforward; however, as Derek Kidner writes, “Nothing in the first half of verse 1 prepares us for the body-blow of the second half.”<sup>6</sup> The Preacher abruptly states, “and the day of death than the day of birth”—that is, the day of death is *better* than the day of birth. While some see no connection between the two halves of this verse, I think Michael Eaton is on the right track by suggesting interpreting the verse to mean “As a name is better than oil,

---

<sup>1</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 131.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 64.

so the day of death is better than the day of birth.”<sup>7</sup> As for what makes the day of death better than the day of birth, the Preacher noted in the previous chapter that it would be better to be a stillborn child, never seeing the grievous evil and vanity of this cruel world (Eccl. 6:3–6).<sup>8</sup> Through the next several verses, however, the Preacher will continue to provide some explanation for this shocking principle.

So, the Preacher writes, “It is better [i.e., “more good”] 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” (v. 2). The Preacher commends funerals because funerals remind us of our end, that we too will die one day, no matter how many years we see before our deaths: “Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?” (Eccl. 6:6). This means that funerals force us to grapple with true wisdom, where we evaluate our short lives in view of our quickly approaching deaths. Because a birth is so celebratory and full of promise, the grim facts of death are hard to fix in our hearts, but at a funeral those facts are inescapable.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the Preacher does not say this because he is a misanthrope; he wants to remind us of our impending deaths so that we may properly enjoy life as a *good* gift from God’s hand.<sup>10</sup> As Duane Garrett observes, “Herein the *carpe diem* of the Teacher differs from that of the libertine, for whom death is either a subject to be avoided or an incentive to party all the more furiously.”<sup>11</sup>

Doubling down on this point, the Preacher writes, “Sorrow is better [i.e., “more good”] than laughter, for by sadness of face [lit., “in evil of face”] the heart is made glad [lit., “made good”]” (v. 3). The phrase “evil of face” (ESV: “sadness of face”) has been variously translated, but a good illustration of the meaning comes in Genesis 40:7, when Joseph asked Pharaoh’s Cupbearer and Baker in prison what was wrong, since they had “faces of evil.”<sup>12</sup> That is, they were visibly disturbed and agitated. Nevertheless, the Preacher says that such agitation is better than laughter so that, again, we have the paradox that has run throughout Ecclesiastes, that “what appears to be bad turns out to be good and vice versa.”<sup>13</sup> More than this, v. 3 also reminds us of the transformative work that adversity can have on us when we “lay it to heart” (v. 2). Benjamin Shaw writes, “The reader needs to remember that ‘heart’ as referred to in the Old Testament is not the seat of emotion (though it has that sense occasionally); primarily it refers to the seat of the intellect. Thus, things and events that cause an evil countenance make us think. They improve our minds, our understanding.”<sup>14</sup> By improving our understanding, we will wisely redirect ourselves away from chasing after what will ultimately bring us only more misery.

This approach is primarily what distinguishes the wise from the fool, as the Preacher notes next: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (v.

---

<sup>7</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 124.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 121–22.

<sup>11</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 318–19.

<sup>12</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

4). The wise will “soberly ponder these paradoxes; fools seek after only pleasant and pleasurable realities.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, if one’s goal is simply to stop pain, then the seemingly direct route to do so would lead to the house of mirth. True satisfaction comes only to those who realize, however, that the house of mirth can only temporarily dull the pain, and that true *good* can only come by wrestling with the deepest questions of life. Nothing under the sun can lead to true happiness, and only the clarity that comes from taking seriously the “house of mourning” will lead us to the kind of wisdom that seeks answers that rise above the sun.

It is not only death, however, that can prompt the reflection necessary for this kind of wisdom. The Preacher continues: “It is better [i.e., “more good”] for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity” (v. 5–6). No one likes to be rebuked, but the wise prefer to be rebuked by the wise, rather than to find shallow pleasure in the song of fools. As D. B. Murphy writes, “Their ‘song’ (שִׁיר *sîr*, v 5) is like the crackling of thistles (סִרִּים *sîrîm*) under a pot (סִיר *sîr*). Like thorns used for fuel, they generate more noise than heat.”<sup>16</sup> The Moffatt Translation captured the wordplay of the phrase in v. 6 well: “Like nettles crackling under kettles....”<sup>17</sup> The wise seek wisdom; fools seek noisy, worthless pleasure.

### Living Well (Eccl. 7:7–13)

In the first six verses of this chapter, the Preacher has argued that wisdom is better attained by taking to heart tragedy, suffering, and adversity, than by chasing unthinkingly after pleasure. What, though, is the content of the wisdom that the wise are seeking? That is, what should our reflections lead us to recognize? This is the focus of the preacher in the next section of this passage. He begins with an observation about public life: “Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart” (v. 7). In part, this proverb warns the wise against being corrupted, whether from bribery or anything else.<sup>18</sup> Oppression, however, is not something that even the wise can necessarily avoid. Thus, the Preacher’s point is less about what to do and what not to do, and more a warning about how the wise should approach life in an oppressing and corrupt world: namely, we should be prepared to find oppression and corruption, which certainly lessens some of its sting when we encounter it.<sup>19</sup>

Next, the Preacher writes, “Better [i.e., “more good”] is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better [i.e., “more good”] than the proud in spirit” (v. 8). The idea that an end is better than the beginning seems to echo the points that the Preacher made earlier, especially in v. 1a: “...the day of death [is better than] the day of birth.” The Preacher is not now saying that the end of a thing is more pleasurable than the beginning, but that the end of a thing does not share the blinding optimism about that thing’s future. Rather, the end of a thing soberly reminds us of the end

<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 319.

of all things—including our own end in death. Relatedly, then, to be *patient* in spirit (by not expecting too much, too soon out of life under the sun) is better than to be *proud* in spirit (by carrying too much confidence about what we are capable of accomplishing). Literally, the language in this line describes patience in terms of *length* of spirit, and pride in terms of *height* of spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Then, the Preacher warns, “Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools” (v. 9). Anger is considered to be a responsive, secondary emotion. That is, we are don’t feel anger primarily and directly; rather, we feel anger in response to feeling sad, disappointed, afraid, or embarrassed. The anger arises as a secondary emotion in response to the fact that what we are experiencing (and feeling as a result of that experience) does not line up with our expectations. The fool expects much out of life in this world, so he is easily angered by the vast number of disappointments he experiences out of life. The wise man, however, have sober expectations for this world, so that “he is not much surprised by the inequities and injustices of the world. They are part of a fallen universe, and function, at least in part, to make us long for a perfected world.”<sup>21</sup>

After this, the Preacher writes, “Say not, ‘Why were the former days better [i.e., ‘more good’] than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this” (v. 10). The French have a wise saying, “Oh, the good old days, when we were all so *unhappy!*”<sup>22</sup> Nostalgia leads us to look back on days gone by, and to pine for a romanticized, bleached version of what we experienced then. As Kidner writes, though, “To sigh for ‘the good old days’ is (we may reflect) doubly unrealistic: a substitute not only for action but for proper thought, since it almost invariably overlooks the evils that took a different form or vexed a different section of society in other times. The clear-eyed Qoheleth is the last person to be impressed by this golden haze around the past: he has already declared that one age is very much like another.”<sup>23</sup> Such complaining does not help the situation in the present, and the premise behind such complaints (namely, that the former days *were* better) is false.<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to translate v. 11, so we should read it in context with the next verse: “Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. 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” (v. 11–12). Miller summarizes the translation possibilities for v. 11 well: “Verse 11a has been translated in two main ways: (1) *wisdom is good with [‘im] an inheritance* (KJV, RSV), and (2) *wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing* (T/NIV, similarly NRSV).”<sup>25</sup> If the first translation is correct, then the Preacher is making the point that “Even the wise prefer prosperity to poverty. Those who possess both money and wisdom are under the protection of both.”<sup>26</sup> If the second translation, then “wisdom is being compared to an inheritance: it comes supremely from the LORD (cf. Deut. 4:21), is greatly to be desired (Prov. 3:13–18), and should be the inalienable possession of the people of

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> “Ah les bons vieux temps, où nous étions si malheureux!”

<sup>23</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> “Apart from the fact that such longing does no one any good, every period has its hardships and opportunities.” (Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 320.)

<sup>25</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 321.

God.”<sup>27</sup> I think the ESV has rightly translated this, according to the first definition, since the point of v. 12 is that both wisdom and money protect people in this life, but in different ways.

Nevertheless, it is right to remember, with Garrett, that money and wisdom do not protect equally: “The superiority of wisdom, however, is that it guides on through difficult times and thus preserves life. Money, to the contrary, often vanishes in hard times.”<sup>28</sup> This may be the thought behind the final verse of this section: “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (v. 13). Here, the Preacher is reminding us that nothing—neither money, nor wisdom—can protect us from the evil vanity of life under the sun. No amount of human ingenuity can overcome this problem, since God is the one who has “made crooked” creation. Of course, the Preacher is once again alluding to the “vanity” that God imposed upon creation as a due punishment for the sin of human beings. As we have discussed earlier, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) translation of the Hebrew word for “vanity” in Ecclesiastes shows up significantly in Romans 8: “For the creation was subjected to futility [i.e., “vanity”], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21). The wise will seek to live as well as possible under the sun, but they will live in such a way that constantly appraises creation as vain and crooked, without putting any hope for lasting satisfaction in anything in this world.

### Trusting God in Life and in Death (Eccl. 7:14)

The Preacher offers a summary in the final verse of this passage: “In the day of prosperity [lit., “good”] be joyful [lit., “in good”], and in the day of adversity [lit., “evil/disaster/calamity”] consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him” (v. 14). Notice that the final statement, “that man may not find out anything that will be after him,” echoes the second question in Ecclesiastes 6:12: “For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” Not only is the Preacher consider the question of “who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life” (Eccl. 6:12a), but also the uncertainty of what will come after we live out our few days on this earth (Eccl. 6:12b; 7:14b).

Here, in Ecclesiastes 7:14, the Preacher includes the word “good” twice, but he pairs “good” with the word “evil.” As we have talked about before, “evil” in the Old Testament can sometimes refer to moral evil, but it can also refer to disaster or calamity. The Preacher is not charging God with moral evil; rather, the Preacher is saying that God (who has subjected creation to vain futility in response to human sin) has not only created the day of good, but he has also created the day of calamity. God has made both, so that man may not find out what will come after him.

The wise, then, will recognize two fundamental truths of living well under the sun. First, the wise will realize that the day of good is not permanent in this life. So, the wise will not spend his short time on this earth living as though feasting and revelry were the most important things to do. Rather, the wise will instead seek to “lay it to heart” (v. 2) that he too must die, and he will order his days with a view toward the “day of death” (v. 1), which is the “end of a thing” (v. 8)—that is, the end of his life. Second, the wise will live with an understanding that *they* are not in control of what

---

<sup>27</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 128.

<sup>28</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 321.

comes with each passing day, but that *God* is in control. For those who look to God trustingly, by faith, in confidence that God will work all things together for their good (Rom. 8:28), then such a life can be lived expectantly of eternal good in the future—but with no expectation for good on any given day of this life. This is the wisdom that the Preacher commends to us.

## Discussion Questions

1) How can the Preacher say that the day of death is better than the day of birth (v. 1b)? Why does he say that it is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting (v. 2a)? What is the “end of all mankind,” and how are we supposed to “lay it to heart” (v. 2b)? In what sense is sorrow better than laughter, and how does a sad face make the heart good (v. 3)? Why do the wise dwelling the house of mourning, but fools in the house of mirth (v. 4)? How do we make sense of this?

2) How can a healthy appreciation of the impending nature of death prepare us for facing adversity, oppression, and corruption in the world (v. 7)? How does the kind of wisdom that the Preacher is talking about in this passage make us less angry? What kinds of things cause you to become angry? What factors in your own life can exacerbate the anger you feel? How does the wisdom the Preacher holds out lead us to patience of spirit?

3) Why should we not say that the former days were better than these (v. 10)? Why is it a perennial temptation to look back on “better days” in nostalgia? What is the truth about good and evil in the world throughout human history? What does the Preacher say about God’s role in all this (v. 13)? What does it mean to consider his work? What exactly has God “made crooked”? Why? What should be our response to this reality?

4) What should our general approach be to life, whether in times of prosperity or joy (v. 14)? What should we glean from the fact that God made both the good days and the hard days? Why has God given us good and bad days? How does meditating on the certainty of our coming death help us to understand God’s wisdom in the days he has appointed in this world? How does this lead us to trust him? How does this drive us to believe in Christ for our salvation?