

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

Life Lessons

I've had a few rough days this week, but it has been beneficial. I accidentally hurt someone emotionally and when I found out I was taught a hard lesson. Troubles can purify you. Tough days can show you who you are and who you are not. Some situations can bring you to the end of your physical, emotional and intellectual strength. And so these situations cause you to pray. They make you go hard to God's Word.

Painful days make you cry out to the Lord Jesus Christ, because you realize that even after all these years, after all the Bible knowledge you know, you still need a Savior. The apostle Peter wrote that when you go through tough times it is so,

that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ
(1 Peter 1:7)

No one likes tough times or difficult situations or to face up to certain realities. But Solomon tells us that dealing with these matters are not always the worst thing that can happen. They can be life lessons.

A good name *is* better than precious ointment,
And the day of death than the day of one's birth;
(Ecclesiastes 7:1)

In ancient Israel people put scented oil and ointments on their bodies before they went to a feast or party. The biggest events called for the best ointments, and then out you went for a good time. We do the same thing today with colognes and perfumes. And some people just go through life looking for one good time after another. We want to have as much fun as we can before it is too late.

But I think Solomon would say that God is not so much concerned about your short term happiness as He is about the quality of our character. What matters is having a good reputation a good name and not so much a good ointment time. God wants us to be more like the Lord Jesus Christ who has the name above all names.

But how is the day of my death related to the first part of this verse and better than the day of my birth? That is a startling statement. It is the reverse of what we would normally think. I think Solomon is saying the day of our death is better than the day of our birth, because when we die there are no more chances for us to live thoughtlessly and foolishly and sinfully and so ruin our reputation.

On the day of our death we stop sinning. That sobering fact should cause us all to say with the psalmist "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."¹ I know—you don't like the sermon so far. I didn't like working on it. So many of my flaws were exposed!

Better to go to the house of mourning
Than to go to the house of feasting,
For that *is* the end of all men;
And the living will take *it* to heart.
³ Sorrow *is* better than laughter,
For by a sad countenance the heart is made better.
(Ecclesiastes 7:2, 3)

Plenty of people in our world are living like there's no tomorrow. They are having a good time thinking about what they want to think about and doing what they want to do. There's nothing wrong with having a good time. But their lives are so wrapped up in play time and activities that they never come to grips with the deep needs of their hearts. The Preacher says it is better to go to a funeral than to party, because you see where you will one day end up.

A wise person sobers up at a funeral. It changes something inside of you. You know, I could go to a bar or to a gym and preach a sermon, but most people won't hear it. They are too busy drinking and laughing or exercising to listen. But I've taught God's Word at several funerals and when I do I have everyone's full attention.

Why can sorrow be better than laughter? The reason is that laughter keeps you from facing reality. The party hound is not learning anything about the meaning and purpose of life. He or she is pretending that the part, the career, the cloths, the money, the drugs are making him or her whole—it's not. Our highest purpose in life is not just to enjoy life but to know and enjoy God. Too often we are not impressed by truth and doctrine, but a knock in the head will often get our attention.

¹ Psalm 90:12

The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning,
But the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.
(Ecclesiastes 7:4)

Solomon was certainly not a morose man who lived in a dark, gloomy room. After all he also wrote Proverbs 17:22 that says, "A merry heart does good like a medicine." But again Solomon reverses our normal likes and dislikes. And the point is a fool is always looking for the next party, the next fun activity. But the reality of death in a funeral home teaches us to treasure our days and to treasure and cherish other people.

At a funeral we are reminded to live each day as best we can. Why do we ask this question "What would you do if you knew you only had one more month or one more day to live?"? We ask that question because it forces us to think clearly about our lives.

*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise
Than for a man to hear the song of fools.
For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool.
This also is vanity.
(Ecclesiastes 7:5, 6)*

I do not like to be reprov'd. I don't like having my faults pointed out to me. It is not enjoyable. But it has been done and it was painful. But those painful experiences have made me a better man, I hope. Now I could laugh off the rebuke like a fool. But like burning thorns that flare up, crackle and pop and then are gone, my foolish laughter will be short lived and I will have learned nothing.

Surely oppression destroys a wise *man's* reason,
And a bribe debases the heart.
(Ecclesiastes 7:7)

The Hebrew text behind this verse is difficult to translate. If you leave the translation as it stands here in the New King James Version it means that if you hang out with corrupt people it will lead to the corruption of your character. As 1 Corinthians 15:33 states, "Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits."

The end of a thing *is* better than its beginning;
The patient in spirit *is* better than the proud in spirit.
(Ecclesiastes 7:8)

Is this really true? Can we really say the end of something is better than the beginning? In one sense, yes we can. Here is what I mean. Let's say you are at a wedding. The wedding is the beginning of someone's marriage. Weddings are fun. It is a celebration of love with friends and family and food and wine. Everyone congratulates the new husband and wife. We tell them how handsome and beautiful they are. And it is good for the couple to start out with a party and kind words.

But let's check back with them 30 or 40 years later after they have worked hard, raised kids, hurt each other and cried from serious troubles—need I say more? If they are still together at the end there is no fluff there anymore. But their love is stronger, their laughter is sweeter, their compassion for others just starting out is deeper.

The same is true for babies. In the beginning there is a lot of goo-goo and ga-ga and giggles. But in the end if you can say he or she grew into a noble, good, kind, courageous, loving person, then the end is better than the beginning.

And the same is true for being a Christian. In the beginning it all seems so easy and wonderful. But then you realize the ward between your old sin nature and your new nature in Christ. At times living like a believer is a real struggle. But if at the end you can say with the apostle Paul,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith. ⁸ Finally, there is laid up for me the
crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous
Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only
but also to all who have loved His appearing.
(2 Timothy 4:7, 8)

then the end will be better than the beginning. The patient in spirit win in the end, because they persist and grow in grace.

Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry,
For anger rests in the bosom of fools.
(Ecclesiastes 7:9)

Some people are always angry. They are angry with people, angry at life and angry with God. Fools are not patient. They quickly explode. When things do not go their way they let you know it. Anger, says Solomon, rests in the bosom. Some people let their vexation make a home in their hearts. They nourish it and let it grow until it erupts.

How do you change this? Only God can change the heart. So you must humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. And cast all of your care and concerns upon God, because He cares for you.² And you must feed your heart and mind with Scripture so your life can be transformed.

Do not say,
“Why were the former days better than these?”
For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.
(Ecclesiastes 7:10)

We all long for the good old days, don't we? We complain and ask “Why isn't God doing now what He did last month or even years ago?” I don't know, you don't know and we never will this side of the kingdom of God. So do your best now, enjoy what is now, walk with God the best you can now.

Some day we will not just see the tangled threads of the back side of the back side of the tapestry of life. We will see the whole picture. And we will understand the truth of Romans 8:28: “...all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.” I know—it's hard. Hang in there.

Wisdom *is* good with an inheritance,
And profitable to those who see the sun.
¹²For wisdom *is* a defense as money *is* a defense,
But the excellence of knowledge *is that* wisdom gives
life to those who have it.
(Ecclesiastes 7:11, 12)

The beginning of verse 11 should read “Wisdom is as good as an inheritance.” In ancient Israel an inheritance usually meant land. And land meant food, security and stability. In the same way wisdom brings security in life. You are not easily deceived or blown one way and then another. Wisdom like money used wisely can protect and safeguard what you have. Wisdom gives life. Proverbs 3 declares,

Happy is the man who finds wisdom...her proceeds
are better than the profits of silver...she is a tree of life
to those who take hold of her...your foot will not stumble
for Yahweh will be your confidence.
(Proverbs 3: 13, 14, 18, 23, 26)

Finally,

² 1 Peter 5:6, 7

Consider the work of God;
For who can make straight what He has made crooked?
¹⁴In the day of prosperity be joyful,
But in the day of adversity consider:
Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other,
So that man can find out nothing *that will come* after him.
(Ecclesiastes 7:13, 14)

Do you remember this prayer? “God give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.” God balances our lives by giving us enough blessings to keep us happy and enough burdens to keep us humble. God does this to keep us from thinking that we are gods ourselves.

We do not know what tomorrow holds. But we know the One who holds tomorrow. Therefore,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
⁶In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.
(Proverbs 3:5, 6)

Enough said—amen.