

Ecclesiastes⁶ The Words of the Preacher

Lesson 4 Ecclesiastes Chapters 7

As chapter 7 continues with Solomon's proverbs, his cynicism blossoms into full bloom as he questions the wisdom of every aspect of life and draws godless proverbial conclusions. In chapters 7 and 8, Solomon struggles with what he has studied over the past 40 years by way of personal involvement and the proverbs are a reflection of his frustrations and fallacies.

The Proverbs of a Frustrated Man A Good Name and the Day of a Man's Death

Ecclesiastes 7:1 A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.

As Solomon continues his lament over the meaninglessness of life under the sun, he uses various proverbs to describe man's cynical opinion about the better things of life. "A good name is better than a good ointment." Both man and God will agree with this statement. But he concludes that "The day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth." Both man and God disagree with this statement. The day of a person's birth is the day of his beginning in this world. The life he lives is a blessed opportunity from the Lord to choose Him. It is also a blessed chance to do something good for someone who needs to see the Lord. Solomon has already established that, in his mind, there is nothing after death, so how can the day of one's death be better than his birth? To Solomon, ending the toil and struggle of life and going into obscurity is better than living on earth. It is a sad commentary on his search for wisdom.

Mourning is Better than Feasting

Ecclesiastes 7:2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart.

The thoughts of the worldly man make no sense at all. Repeatedly in the past chapters, he has concluded that man should eat, drink, and be merry for after this life there is nothing left but rotting in the grave. Yet, in this proverb, he states that it is better to go to the funeral of someone than to a party. Is death better than life in man's heart? Because death is the ultimate destiny of all men, attending a funeral is better than attending a party. In the first proverb, he shifts from birth to death, thinking death is better than birth. In this proverb, he shifts from a party to a funeral. The funeral is the reality check on the meaninglessness of life. He then moves from laughter to sorrow.

Sorrow is Better than Laughter

Ecclesiastes 7:3 Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.

The frustrated world does not want a person to be happy. This way of thinking about life is warped. Many cultures and many religions teach that man can find happiness only through sorrow. A man must experience

⁶ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled "The Ecclesiastes, the Words of the Preacher" are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

how bad life is before he can appreciate the few good things that come along from time to time. "For when a face is sad a heart may be happy." Once again, this belief is fostered in the life without God.

The Wise Mourn - The Fool Finds Pleasure

Ecclesiastes 7:4 The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.

Solomon then ties sorrow to the plight of wisdom, and pleasure to the plight of the simple-minded fool. Is the wise mind found in the house of mourning and the fool's mind found in the house of pleasure? In truth, it should be the other way around, but not in Solomon's frustrated mind. The fools accept death as part of life, celebrating the life of the dead person and continued to live their lives in celebration of each day given to them. The mind of the wise is stymied by the grave, questions every aspect of the event that causes mourning and, therefore, dreads every part of life. Frustrated, he says, "This life is not going to end well so, why bother?"

The Wise and the Fool

Ecclesiastes 7:5 It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the song of fools.

Solomon's cynicism is also seen in this proverb. Solomon has been granted wisdom from the Lord and that gift has brought nothing but pain. He has searched for everything under the sun and he knows the results of each choice. He compares the rebuke of a wise man with the song of a fool. The song of the fool is easier to accept. It does not warn of the future but gives soothing words for the moment. Conversely, a wise man will take every opportunity as a teaching/learning process so that the person who accepts the rebuke will not make the same mistakes again. Solomon's frustration is evident because many have come to hear his wisdom, but, evidently, few have followed his counsel.⁷ Solomon believes that the one who listens to the song of the fool will continue to make the same mistakes over and over until the hard reality of the mistakes rears its ugly head, when it is too late to correct and when the damage is done, all the while enjoying the song of the fool.

The Fire under the Pot

Ecclesiastes 7:6 For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool, And this too is futility.

Solomon's frustration likens the laughter of the fool to that of the crackling thorn bushes which usually have small stems and branches. Even the thorny trunk of the native Texas Mesquite tree rarely grows larger than an inch in diameter and the branches seldom grow bigger than a pencil. When placed in a fire, they quickly pop and burn away, creating a hot fire that lasts only a few minutes. So is the laughter of the fool. It is alive like the fire of a thorn bush under a pot, but it last only for a few minutes. Without additional fuel, the fire will soon die out, and so it is with the song of the fool. It will die out unless fuel is added. The fire is meaningless. The laugh of the fool is meaningless, bringing no lasting worth.

Oppression and Bribe

Ecclesiastes 7:7 For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁷ **1 Kings 10:24** All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart.

Oppression is everywhere. Does it make the wise man mad? Of course it does. The wise man knows and understands when true injustice is committed. He hates oppression. He hates every aspect of oppression, both his own and that of the poor. Moreover, the wise man understands that a bribe can corrupt a man's heart. Many a good man has found himself chasing the allurement of a bribe. A person who is not satisfied with the provisions of God in his life is tempted by the lure of position, money, notoriety, gifts, or whatever else someone uses to bribe them into decisions they would not normally make. It is another one of Solomon's frustrations with the better things of life. The fool is not made mad with oppression. It is a curse for the wise man.

The End and Beginning

Ecclesiastes 7:8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.

Out of context, this statement seems true. "The end of a matter is better than its beginning." However, in the context of this book, the end is better than the beginning because it all ends in emptiness and death which is better than life. In real life, for those of us who love living, the opposite is usually true, "the beginning is better than the end." Think of how many marriages start great but end badly. Most of us are great at starting, yet we sometimes grow weary and seldom finish. Most barrel down a road until we hit a snag. When we do not know what to do, we abandon that road and take a detour, repeating the process again and again. The writer of this book believes that life is hopeless and the end is better than the beginning.

Solomon compares patience and haughtiness of spirit. He says the first is better than the last, but the context of this passage is about patience to wait for the end to finally come so the good and the bad will be over. Haughtiness looks into the future, longing for the meaninglessness of life to be over.

Anger

Ecclesiastes 7:9 Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools.

The song of the foolish is meaningless. Coupled with this statement, Solomon says that being eager to be angry is part of the heart of the fool and resides in his bosom. There is no sense in anger. It is worthless. Anger is fleeting, and so it is in the heart of fool. In Ecclesiastes 7:7, Solomon indicates that madness is continual, and so it is in the heart of the wise. Anger, therefore, frustrates Solomon.

The Advantage of Knowledge

Ecclesiastes 7:10 Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this. ¹¹ Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. ¹² For wisdom is protection *just as* money is protection. But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.

We often hear someone speaking of the "good old days." All of us have lived through experiences that cause us to cherish them as "the good old days." Yet, were they the good days? They were part of our past and belong to no one else. Were they the good days when bathing occurred once a week and the wash was hung on the line in the backyard? Were they the good days when the water had to be heated on the stove for the bath and the wash? Were they the good days when soap was made in a 55 gallon drum over a fire in the backyard? Were they the good days when schools were air-conditioned by opening a window and running a fan? Were they the good days when firewood had to be cut in order to warm the house? Were they good days when beds were passed down from generation to generation regardless of their condition?

Using wisdom is an advantage to those under the sun according to Solomon, but is it the wisdom of the old days and his past remembrances? We build on the past! His statement seems true, but it is encased in a context of false thoughts. He continues to say that wisdom and money provide protection. How false can that be? Wisdom does keep us from making the same mistakes expecting a different result, but money cannot protect us from those mistakes. Money can make the road a little easier to navigate but, in the end, it will not protect us from harm. To say that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessor is very compelling. But in the context of this passage, it is a false statement. Solomon has not used his wisdom correctly and he will prove it in the last two chapters of this message.⁸

Wisdom Does Not Help when it Comes to God

Ecclesiastes 7:13 Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent?

Solomon's frustrations continue in this verse. Here he asks if anyone can straighten out what God has bent. The conclusion brings a "no" answer. It is correct in the context that of meaningless. In the writer's mind, the future is set and we can do nothing about it. Therefore, it makes no sense to try to better our lives and work. We should just be happy with where we are, especially when it comes to the things of God.

Be Happy Where You Are

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider- God has made the one as well as the other So that man may not discover anything *that will be* after him.

Both adversity and prosperity come from God and we cannot change our station in life. Because of this, man cannot avoid adversity or prosperity according to Solomon.

Don't Be Excessively Righteous or Wicked

Ecclesiastes 7:15 I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness. ¹⁶ Do not be excessively righteous, and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? ¹⁷ Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

Beginning in verse 15 and running to verse 29, Solomon speaks of his frustrations with the bitterness of life. Since he sees all life as meaningless, his conclusion is that a little righteousness and a little wickedness are all right, but we should not ruin ourselves, as if true righteousness could ruin people. He tells us not to be fools and die before the right time. Here, Solomon contradicts his own statements in chapter 3 in which he concludes that there is a "time to die," implying that people cannot shorten or lengthen their lives if they desired. He concludes verse 18 by saying that if we fear God, then we will have a little of both, righteousness and wickedness.

The Wise Man Lets Things Roll off Their Back

Ecclesiastes 7:19 Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. ²⁰ Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. ²¹ Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, lest you hear your servant cursing you. ²² For you also have

⁸ Ecclesiastes 11 & 12

realized that you likewise have many times cursed others. ²³I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

To the author, "wisdom strengthens" a wise man. But how did the wise man become wise? Are fools always fools or can they become wise? It is true that there is no righteous man on earth who does not sin at some time during every day of his life. The wise man is to learn not to take seriously everything he hears. He is to let most things roll off his back. The servants of the wise man will not always agree with his decisions. Yes, they will one day realize that they need him, but today they are cursing him. We are all guilty of the same sins, so we should strive to become wise. Solomon's frustration brings bitterness because as wise as he is, he cannot obtain the wisdom needed in this situation.

The Wisdom Test

Ecclesiastes 7:24 What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? ²⁵I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. ²⁶And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her.

According to the opening chapter, the author was going to seek wisdom and discover all he could about it. Here he is now judging everything according to his wisdom. In his wisdom, he was seeking to become wise, but he could not achieve it. Why? Because he could not discover the answers he wanted. His discovery led him to a woman who was worse than death and only God could help him escape from her. But for the sinner, God will not help him escape this woman. Is the writer changing his mind? Is God not just up in His lofty heavens just watching us? Does God intervene in the lives of his creation? In the past chapters the writer concluded God did not intervene. But here he seems to change his mind. Perhaps he is growing in his wisdom about God and realizing that God will help the sinner who turns to him to escape from the snare, net and chains of the wrong woman for his life. It is a bitter frustration.

The Only Thing He Has Learned So Far

Ecclesiastes 7:27 "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation, ²⁸which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. ²⁹"Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices."

By placing precept upon precept to find the answer to his questions, Solomon has failed. Yet he has found one man among a thousand. Who is this man? Who is he who has helped with Solomon's discoveries and knowledge? We do not know who he is. Yet there has not been one woman to help him in his search. With all said and done, Solomon can only conclude that God made man to stand on his two legs for some reason and man has sought his own devices. He has constructed an engine that will allow him to manufacture his own intentions and schemes, another bitter frustration in Solomon's attempt to seek wisdom.