



When Bad Is Better!!

Introduction

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God endures forever." Well, my wife and I have several children and we have had children in our home through foster care at various times. One thing that we've learned about children is that you love them so much. Yet sometimes it can be frustrating to watch the way that they live their lives, because they don't always know what is good for them.

Sometimes, for example, children want to play rough and they're in a good mood and want to play rough, and they're excited about playing rough and the rough game escalates and you warn them by saying this is not going to end well. They play rough and suddenly someone gets a scratch or a bump and then the world is over. It seemed good at the moment, and yet it was a bad choice when they look back on it.

Sometimes the rule is you can't have dessert without eating the vegetables and they don't want to eat the vegetables. The vegetables don't seem good to them. So, they sit at the table and refuse to eat the vegetables, and then they are upset and can't fathom why they wouldn't get the dessert. It's hard to learn what is good in life.

Indeed, as I consider my own life, I'm still struggling with these basic lessons. I usually eat my vegetables, but I think of the fact that I want to grow in wisdom. The Bible is very clear about how to gain wisdom, about the good things to do to gain wisdom. So, I have to ask myself - Is my delight truly deeply from the soul in the law of the Lord? Do I meditate on God's word, day all the way through until night?

Or do I want to be someone who is characterized by peace? I want to be anxious for nothing. Again, the Bible tells us what is good, how to pursue that. But I have to ask myself - Is it true that in everything by prayer and supplication with Thanksgiving, I make my requests known to God? So, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard my heart and my mind in Christ Jesus. You see, even for what we know to be good, sometimes in the moment, we struggle to truly believe that it is in fact good.

The Bible tells us why this is; that there is a corruption deep in our souls that bends us or inclines us or orients us or distorts our perception in such a way so that we don't always see good for what it is. We don't recognize it for what it is and sometimes we call evil, good.

Well, how do we fight this? Well, fighting this begins by an acknowledgment of our ignorance; to say, I don't know what is good for me and I need to help. It begins also by a refusal to trust our own intuition to discern between good and evil. It requires us then to be quick to remind ourselves that God alone knows what is good. That's our big idea for today - that God alone knows what is good.¹

¹ Sermon Notes by Pastor Jacob Gerber entitled "Seeing Good in the Day of Adversity" found @<https://harvestpca.org/sermons/seeing-good-in-the-day-of-adversity-ecclesiastes-71-14/>

Open It

1. **Describe a time of adversity or trouble that served to be a great good for you at a later moment in life.**

Read It

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

Explore It

2. **List some of the things Solomon lists in this passage as being better when compared to something else?**
3. **Solomon counsels us not to be quick to what emotion?**
4. **What oft-used statement by the old should be refrained from using according to verse 10?**
5. **What tangible thing teaches us to be protective about wisdom?**
6. **What does Solomon tell us to do in both good and bad times?**

Apply It

Pursue a good reputation

Okay, you had decided this is an odd chapter. But now you feel like throwing the book against the wall. Death, better than birth? Come on. Just humor me for a moment (even if sorrow is better). It's not that Solomon is buying into the philosophy of despair. If that were true, he wouldn't tell us eight times in this book to enjoy life. I've underlined those passages in my Bible; it's clear that Solomon—and the Lord—are in favor of joyful and abundant living. In his book of Proverbs, I counted at least thirty verses emphasizing the goodness of enjoying life. A few examples:

A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken. (Proverbs 15:13)

All the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast. (Proverbs 15:15)

A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones. (Proverbs 17:22)

Solomon liked to have a good laugh, just like you and I do. So what's all this about preferring funerals? Warren Wiersbe has said that laughter is medicine for a broken heart, but sorrow is a hearty meal for the soul.

There are two phrases in verse 1, and the first explains the second: "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death is better than the day of one's birth." This was originally written in the Hebrew language, and Hebrew scholars tell us something interesting about this verse. The word "name" in Hebrew is shem, and the word "ointment" in Hebrew is shemen. So Solomon is saying a shem is better than a shemen. He gets a Hebrew reader's attention with a play on words. There are two days in our lives when our name is prominent: the day we receive our name at birth, and the day our name appears in the obituary column. What happens between those two determines whether our name is a lovely ointment (a shemen) or a foul stench.²

7. Solomon's purpose for writing this book is so that others after him might be able to live the good life, which he says is only possible when we experience both good and bad times. How do bad times allow us to experience "The Good Life"?

8. Solomon shares the value of a good name. Growing up, what did you want to be known for? How about now?

² Jeremiah, David . Searching for Heaven on Earth (pp. 162-163). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

9. Why is a good name vital in a Christian's life? How can actively following the commands of the Scriptures enable a good reputation even with non-believers?

Go to lots of funerals

One practice I have enlisted each time I attend a visitation or funeral is to think about my own future funeral. This allows the reality of my death to inform the daily decisions and activities of my present life. It serves as an opportunity for an evaluation to be done. Questions that form this are: What will I be remembered for? What legacy am I leaving in this world? Will what I spent my life on matter the day I'm buried? Now, don't let this lead you to despair, but rejoicing as you thank God that He has given you the gift of life. There are genuinely good things in this life to enjoy well to the glory of Christ. This is indeed "Living life backward."

10. How does being aware of death help us live life? How does one strike a proper balance between sober thinking and unhealthy morbid curiosity?

11. Why is a funeral considered a better place to grow in wisdom and think about our life than a feast or a party? What effect does a house of mourning have on those that are still living?

Receive constructive criticism

King Solomon compared the praise of fools to the burning thorns in a campfire: You hear a lot of noise, but you don't get much lasting good. (Again, Solomon used a play on words. In the Hebrew, "song" is shir, "pot" is sir, and "thorns" is sirim.) If we allow it, a wise person's rebuke will accomplish far more in our lives than will the flattery of fools. Solomon may have learned this truth from his father (Ps. 141:5), and he certainly emphasized it when he wrote the book of Proverbs (10:17; 12:1; 15:5; 17:10; 25:12; 27:5, 17; 29:1, 15).³

12. What can an apt word of criticism do that words of flattery can't?

13. How do you respond to criticism and rebukes? What causes this response?

14. How can listening to too many voices hinder you? What voices do you listen to most?

³ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Satisfied (Ecclesiastes): Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life: OT Commentary: Ecclesiastes (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 102). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

Forget the good Ole Days

Seeing the full scope of God's plan also helps us to avoid another error—one the Preacher warns about in verse 10: "Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this" (Ecclesiastes 7:10). If the temptation in verse 8 was pessimism about the future, the temptation here is nostalgia for the past. Some people like to talk about "the good old days." They want to go back to the way things were (possibly because they forget how bad some things were back then). Rather than looking forward, they always seem to be looking backward. Some Israelites made this mistake when the temple was being rebuilt in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The old-timers said that the Second Temple was not nearly as beautiful as the one that Solomon built (see Ezra 3:12–13; Haggai 2:3). But the Solomon who wrote Ecclesiastes would have told them to let bygones be bygones. Instead of longing for better days, we should look to the future. God is still working his plan, and therefore the best is yet to come. This was true for the people of God in the days of the Second Temple as they waited for Christ to come—the living temple (see John 1:14; 2:19–22). It is true for us as we wait for Jesus to come again and make all things new. We should be looking forward, not backward, because our "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11).⁴

15. Why is it easy for the older amongst us to reminisce about the "Good Ole Days"? How can such talk about the past discourage younger generations?

16. Why is such talk about the past dishonest? How can statements about the past show ingratitude to God's providence?

⁴ Ryken, Philip Graham. Ecclesiastes (Preaching the Word) (pp. 157-158). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

Remember God

As we have seen, providence is God's supervision of all creation, ensuring that all His plans work out. It means that things will come to pass in our lives that only He understands. You may be trying to fill in a certain picture with your life, such as the picture of yourself as an entrepreneur who owns his own business; or yourself as courting and marrying a certain candidate. God may be (and usually is) filling in a completely different picture, a vaster and more comprehensive one involving any number of people and having implications that might be played out in coming centuries. So you might not understand why God didn't allow you to start your own business or marry that specific person, but He has His reasons. And they are always reasons we would heartily approve if we were only wise enough. "See the way God does things and fall into line" reads The Living Bible. "Enjoy prosperity whenever you can, and when hard times strike, realize that God gives one as well as the other."⁵

- 17. How does seeing life from God's perspective help us in both the peaks and valleys of life? Look back at our text this week, how might having God's perspective change our approach to the different moments of life listed?**

- 18. Where do you need a fresh dose of God's wisdom and perspective in your life? What needs to change so that you can see every detail of life through His eyes and not your own?**

⁵ Jeremiah, David . Searching for Heaven on Earth (pp. 197-198). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

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