

“Ancient Wisdom for Modern Living”

Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

Take your Bible and be finding your place in Ecclesiastes 7. We are continuing in our study of the book written by King Solomon of Israel and its overall theme of how satisfaction isn't found under the sun but in God. As we come to this seventh chapter, Solomon now turns from the subject of wealth and money to the importance of wisdom. From here to the end of the book, he uses the words 'wise' and 'wisdom' some 35 times, which is more than twice as many times as it is found in the first six chapters.

Ecclesiastes is found in a section of the Old Testament that is known as the 'wisdom' literature that is also comprised of Job, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon. Not everything in these books is, strictly speaking, concerned with wisdom but they do relate wisdom in general.

What is wisdom from a biblical point of view? It is more than mere knowledge. A very good definition is that it is the ability to apply God's truth to life's situations. The Bible has much to say about our need for wisdom.

Proverbs 2:6-8—“For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of His saints.”

Proverbs 4:5-7—“Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.”

I have heard it said that foresight is better than hindsight, but insight is the best. We need true insight in order to be successful in life. In the NT, James

distinguishes between two types of wisdom. There is worldly wisdom, and then there is heavenly wisdom. The wisdom of the world is not the same thing as the wisdom of God. The kind of wisdom that is necessary for a solid foundation in life is not the kind of wisdom that the world can provide. Instead, it is the wisdom that comes from God alone.

Never have we needed true wisdom any more than we do today!

At first glance, much of what Solomon says in chapter 7 seems to run counter to everything that we tend to believe. The reason for this is that divine wisdom often doesn't make sense strictly from a human perspective. Fallen humanity lacks the true wisdom of God.

One of the most important factors in our growth in wisdom is the perspective we have. The world makes decisions from a limited and time bound perspective. And because it ignores eternity, it is very shortsighted. God's wisdom, on the other hand, views life from God's unique perspective as revealed in His Word. It always keeps eternity at the forefront of one's thinking. The key verse in chapter 7 could very well be verse 11:

“Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.”

The wisdom that is on display in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is that which keeps eternity in mind. The wisdom that one finds under the sun is insufficient for life's most pressing issues. I need wisdom from another world, wisdom from the very throne of God! This is what the Preacher of Ecclesiastes provides for us, and that is why I am calling it ancient wisdom for modern living. There are three considerations:

1. The ABSURDITIES of wisdom (7:1-4)

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better 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.
Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the
house of mirth.”*

You will notice that a key word in these verses is the word ‘better’ which is used seven times through verse 10. He is writing in a proverbial style whereby he gives brief, simple statements that offer insightful principles for handling life. Very often, proverbs in Scripture come to us in a form of couplets. When they do, they usually appear in one of three ways:

- Contrastive couplets—connected by the terms ‘but’ or ‘nevertheless’

Proverbs 13:1—“A wise son accepts his father’s discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.”

Proverbs 15:1—“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

- Completive couplets—connected by the terms ‘and’ or ‘so’

Proverbs 9:10—“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

- Comparative couplets—connected by the terms ‘better/than’ or ‘like/so’

Proverbs 16:32—“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

Proverbs 25:24—“It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”

You will notice that Solomon gives at least seven of these comparative proverbs where he mentions that certain things are ‘better than’ others. At first glance, the

things that he says are better don't make sense to us. Yet these seemingly absurd statements stop us in our tracks and really get our attention.

A good name is better than precious ointment (v. 1a)

Remember that the original language of the Old Testament is Hebrew, and Hebrew scholars point out that Solomon is using a play on words in the original language. It is a literary device much like what we'd call a 'tongue twister.'

“Name”—*the Hebrew word is 'shem'*

“Ointment”—*the Hebrew word is 'shemen'*

The modern equivalent would be, “Fair fame is better than fine fumes.” It is a play on words designed to get the Hebrew reader's attention and be memorable.

The word 'ointment' there can be translated as perfume or an aromatic fragrance. It is the idea of a sweet aroma that one breathes in. Think of walking past the Bath & Body Works store when you go to a mall, or better yet, the fresh smell of Krispi Kreme when the Hot and Ready sign is all lit up. Some of you ladies might think of scented oils. Anita has gotten into that stuff. I give her a hard time about it. She's experimenting with these essential oils and the smell they give off in a diffuser. I told her that just two or three centuries ago, she would have burned at the stake for it...

When Solomon refers to a 'good name,' he is speaking of that which has influence and character. He is saying that a fine reputation is better than a sweet smelling fragrance. No matter how expensive the fragrance, nothing is more valuable to an individual than the character behind his or her name.

Consider the thoughts that come to mind when you hear these names:

- Paul the Apostle

- George Washington
- Lottie Moon

Now, what about these:

- Judas Iscariot
- Benedict Arnold
- Adolph Hitler

A good name is that which has influence and character. It is trustworthy because of its proven track record. That is not only true of people, but it is true of restaurants and stores and products we purchase. When we choose what is referred to as a 'name-brand' product, it is because the name has come to stand for quality.

The Preacher is calling us to put on the cologne of good character. Be careful how you live, for your name is on the line! When your name comes up in conversation, what thoughts or character traits come to mind? Does your name give off the fragrant aroma of Christ?

- Are you known for being cheerful or critical?
- Do you have the reputation of honesty or dishonesty?
- Are you thought of as being generous or selfish?

What God knows about you is more important than what others say, but character is as character does. Sooner or later, we will be known by the character we truly possess.

The day of death is better than the day of birth (v. 1b)

Solomon says in verse 1, “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” Surely, this is an absurd statement if ever there was one, right? We can understand that a good name is better than precious ointment. You can buy perfume, but you can’t buy a good name. It is harder for us to understand how the day of one’s death is better than the day of his birth. No one would ever think that a funeral is better than a birthday. Common sense tells us that death-days are filled with sadness, while birthdays are filled with joy.

But rather than making a negative pessimistic statement, Solomon is actually making a very positive one. Keep in mind what he has already said:

4:2—“And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.”

His reasoning is that the dead are better off because they no longer have to witness the pain and tears of life. In a similar way, he says here that the day of death is better than the day of birth because birth is the beginning of a lifetime of pain and disappointment in a fallen world. Yet we know that death isn’t the end for the child of God.

Just as a good name is better than a fine perfume, the day of death is better than the day of birth because it represents the culmination of my life’s hope as a believer. When you view this verse through gospel lens, you are able to see how the good name of Jesus has been credited to your account through faith and thus gives you hope even in the face of death.

Paul expressed this truth from a Roman prison cell:

Philippians 1:21-23—“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall

choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

He's saying, "I long to go be with Jesus! I'll be in glory, enjoying His presence." The day that a Christian dies is the best day of his life because it is the day when faith becomes sight. It is our entrance into glory, what Spurgeon described as the day in which we believers "reach our port, all danger over, and come to our desired haven."

We believers view death very differently than the rest of the world around us does.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14—“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

Only those who know the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal and intimate way can make such a statement in the face of death. We have hope in a better resurrection.

The house of mourning is better than feasting (v. 2)

The next couple of statements that Solomon makes are closely related to what he says in verse 1. The day of death is most often associated with mourning and sorrow. The 'house of mourning' is where family gathers to grieve. It would be our modern equivalent of gathering together for a viewing at the local funeral home where friends and family come to pay their respects to the one who has died.

This is the Preacher's way of telling us that death has a lot to teach us about life. A stroll through a local cemetery will do you more good than a weekend at Disney World. It will do us a whole lot more good to attend a funeral than to go

to a party. Funerals have a way of teaching us to be wise in the way we live and prepare for our own.

When we're young, we think we're invincible. We have all of these plans and we have life by the tail. But you need to take a walk among the tombstones. It reminds me of an epitaph that I read about on a grave marker somewhere:

*Remember, Man, as you go by,
as you are now so once was I;
As I am now, so shall you be,
Prepare yourself to follow me.*

An unknown passerby read those words and replied:

*To follow you I'm not content,
Until I know which way you went!*

I think you get the point. A funeral does more for your soul than a party because death has a way of reminding you of your own mortality. It provokes sober-minded thinking. We all know that unless the Lord return in our lifetime, we will die someday. Yet we often try to avoid the thought of it at all costs. So when we pass a funeral procession, or read an obituary, or lose a loved one—it serves as a sobering reminder of what is on the horizon.

The Preacher says verse 2:

“...for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.”

I heard about a certain practice that was observed by an order Trappist monks who lived in rural France. They'd all dig a grave together. Each day as part of their routine, they would go out to the gravesite, look over the edge, and ponder their own mortality. Whenever one of their number would die, they'd lower him

into the grave and cover him over with dirt. They would then dig a new grave and start the ritual all over again, never knowing who would occupy it next.

Psalm 90:12—“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

To ‘number your days’ is to live in light of eternity.

Sorrow is better than laughter (v. 3-4)

A good name is better than fine perfume, the day of death is better than the day of birth, and the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. He then says that sorrow is better than laughter because it is through sadness that the heart is made glad. It is ‘better’ because of the end result. It is what God does with our sorrow in the end that makes it better than momentary laughter.

All of us love a good laugh. Elsewhere, Solomon has said that it is even good for the soul.

Proverbs 17:22—“A joyful heart is good medicine.”

So when he refers to laughter here, he is not saying that it is bad. He’s not throwing off on the enjoyment that he has told us is a good thing.

“Laughter”—*means frivolous and careless behavior*

He’s referring to the laughter of fools, the party life that never considers how fragile life is, nor does it take into consideration thoughts of the eternal. Fools with a frivolous and carefree attitude don’t learn from the experiences of life. Real wisdom is forged in the fires of trouble and difficulty. It is in this sense that sorrow is better than laughter because of what it produces in the heart of those who are truly wise.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. In other words, we gain better perspective through the experience of sorrow. The things that the world around says are important will always fade in importance when we view them against the backdrop of death and eternity.

Death has a way of re-shuffling our values. Wisdom!

2. The ADMONITIONS of wisdom (7:5-10)

“It is better 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. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools. Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.”

Pay close attention to how the Preacher’s ancient wisdom admonishes and instructs us here.

Rebuke is better than flattery (v. 5-6)

“It is better 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 fools; this also is vanity.”

The idea is that wisdom’s rebuke is better than folly’s praise. No one wants to be rebuked, but when someone wiser than us rebukes us, it is better than ten thousand people who line up to flatter us with only what we want to hear. The song and dance of the fool is short-lived. Solomon says that it is like thorns in a fire, a fitting picture. There may be a lot of smoke, but no real fire.

Proverbs 27:6—“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

The end is better than the beginning (v. 7-8a)

“Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning...”

I think what Solomon is saying here is that you and I can expect adversity in this life. Without a proper perspective, we can give in to despair. However, he says the end of a thing is always better than the beginning. When a bomb goes off in my life, I have a hard time seeing how it could ever be a good thing.

David Jeremiah—*“During World War II, a man in Sussex, England, sent some money to the Scripture Gift Mission. He enclosed a letter saying that he longed to give more, but the harvest on his farm had been very disappointing because of a lack of water. He was also fearful because German bombs were being dropped in the area, and his family and farm were at risk. He asked the workers of Scripture Gift Mission to pray that no bombs would fall on his land. Mr. Ashley Baker wrote back from the mission and said that while he didn’t feel led to pray that exact prayer, he had prayed that God’s will for their lives would prevail. Shortly after, a huge German missile crashed down on the farm. None of the man’s family or livestock were harmed, but the bombshell went so far into the ground that it liberated a submerged stream. The stream yielded enough water to irrigate the man’s farm as well as neighboring farms. The next year, due to a bountiful harvest, the man was able to send a large offering to the mission.”*

The end of a thing is better than the beginning, and there are times when even bombs turn out to be blessings. Once we reach the end, we know the whole story, and that is always better than the beginning of a matter when we don’t yet have all the facts.

Patience is better angry response (v. 8b-9)

“...and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.”

When those bombs begin to fall in our lives, our initial reaction is to speak rashly. Sometimes we get angry when things don't happen the way we thought they should have, and we can easily fly off the handle. Solomon knew that anger and foolishness often go hand in hand. He said:

Proverbs 14:17—“A man of quick temper acts foolishly.”

Proverbs 14:29—“He who has a hasty temper exalts folly.”

In the New Testament, James says something similar:

James 1:19-20—“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Today is better than yesterday (v. 10)

“Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.”

Ancient wisdom instructs us to heed rebuke, think with the end in mind, and live with patience. Solomon also tells us to not relish in the ‘good old days.’ Wisdom knows that you cannot move forward while looking in the rear view mirror.

When we find ourselves in the midst of life's hard realities, we think back to a time when things were not as difficult. We forget, however, that today is today and the past can never be recreated. We must be faithful in the present and realize that each day provides us with present opportunities to serve the Lord. He is forever relevant, and He will always be able to sustain us in tough times.

3. The **ADVANTAGES** of wisdom (7:11-12)

“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.”

In all of these various proverbs, Solomon is teaching us to look at life from the right perspective. He ends by restating the value of wisdom and the advantages it brings to the one who has it.

In what way is wisdom an advantage? For starters, the Preacher says that wisdom is good like an inheritance. He says that wisdom serves as an insurance against the challenges we face in life, much like money in the bank is helpful when an unforeseen bill comes due.

And then, notice that Solomon says that wisdom preserves the life of the one who has it.

“Preserves”—*means to be made and kept alive*

Have you ever heard the expression, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” That’s about the dumbest thing that I have ever heard. For instance, what if you don’t know that water is a conductor of electricity, and you decide to shower and curl your hair at the same time. Your hair will be curled, all right. What you don’t know can kill you.

Wisdom is protection for the soul. As he’s already shown, it helps us grapple with the reality of death. It guards us against saying what we ought not when we hurt. It helps us consider the end of a matter more than the beginning.

The wisdom of God is ours to possess as believers, given to us in Christ.

Listen carefully to what Paul said about God’s wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31...

To know Jesus Christ personally is to possess the wisdom of God personally because He has become to us wisdom from God. Jesus Christ is the wisdom that saves our souls! Because of His death and resurrection, He is able to give us a better name than the one we could ever achieve for ourselves. He is the One who makes the day of my death better than the day of my birth because to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. He is the wisdom that preserves my soul, guards my steps. It's only because of Him that the end of a thing is better than the beginning.

Romans 8:28—“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

Jesus is wisdom for the One who trusts in Him. I love a song by Keith and Kristen Getty that expresses this truth all so well:

*The perfect wisdom of our God,
revealed in all the universe:
All things created by His hand,
and held together by His command.
He knows the mysteries of the seas,
the secrets of the stars are His;
He guides the planets on their way,
and turns the earth through another day.*

*The matchless wisdom of His ways,
that mark the path of righteousness;
His word a lamp unto my feet,
His Spirit teaching and guiding me.
And O, the mystery of the cross,
that God should suffer for the lost
So that the fool might shame the wise,
and all the glory might go to Christ!*

*O, grant me wisdom from above,
to pray for peace and cling to love,*

*And teach me humbly to receive
the sun and rain of Your sovereignty.
Each strand of sorrow has a place
within this tapestry of grace;
So through the trials I choose to say,
'Your perfect will in Your perfect way.'*