

Wisdom for Living in Adversity

Ecclesiastes 6:10 - 7:14

Context: In previous weeks we've seen that:

- "Two are better than one" so we should seek to increase our social capital (4:1-16).
- "We should guard our steps when we go to the house of God" and therefore we should worship God rightly (5:1-7).
- "Wealth will never satisfy" so we should enjoy life as a gift from God (5:8-6:9).

With 6:10 and following we've come to the middle of the Book of Ecclesiastes (according to Masoretic marginal notation), so if you're thinking, "we're in Ecclesiastes again," take heart it's also downhill from here and we'll be finished in no time. I do hope though that as you think on the text each week you're able to see the value in preaching through a book of the Bible, that you're seeing themes that the writer continues to weave throughout the book. While we're going to continue to see consistent themes, the Preacher leaves his explicit search for meaning and focuses on advice and commentary about the future. 6:10-12 really lays out the agenda for this passage today and a specific question that the Preacher seeks to answer.

The Point: Seek the sovereign God for wisdom to live rightly in times of adversity.

Read 6:10-12

I. Embrace these hard realities about life (6:10-12)

1. You are not sovereign, God is (6:10-11).

- You can't alter the way in which you and the world were made. These things are already *made* and *known* which is another way to say, they owe their being to the command of God and this command now includes the sentence passed at Adam's fall.
- This is why it doesn't do good to dispute or argue with God about this:

"Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?" (Isaiah 45:9b).

- God has already named all things and to name something is to exercise authority over it (see Gen. 1:26-28; 2:19-20).
- Since God rules over all things, it would be foolish for mankind to dispute with God's sovereign ordaining of the world; to do so would only produce more words and more vanity. We find it easier to harp on the way things ought to have been than to face the truth of what they are. Job is a great example here.

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6).

- Wisdom for life begins with understanding the difference between you and God. You are not God, he is and he has the right to determine the meaning of life.

2. Life is short and meaningless (6:12).

- If we combine all of this together, the problem of life is that it's short and it's meaningless and this isn't changing and you can't do anything about it.
- This leads the Preacher to two questions:
 - Is there anything good to live for? Any absolute values? Anything worthwhile?
 - Who knows what will happen in the future?
- The proverbs in 7:1-12 are an attempt to give a partial answer to these questions.

Read 7:1-14

II. Receive these words of wisdom (7:1-12).

A few observations:

- Better-than formula throughout ties this with 6:12 in seeking to show what is “good” for man to do while living under the sun.
- These proverbs are full of irony (death vs. birth; laughter vs. sorrow; end vs. beginning). We even see the Preacher's frustration with this wisdom.
- This could be a commentary on 3:1-15 and the different “times” of life.

1. Pursue a reputation that makes much of God's name (1a).

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold” (Prov. 22:1).

- A precious ointment was a costly luxury in ancient Israel (Ps. 45:7; Matt. 6:17; 26:7).
- Why is a good reputation better? Oil can spill and it could spoil. A reputation is something that stays with you, even till death. You shouldn't sacrifice your reputation for the pursuit of wealth.
- This meaning though is minimized in 1b. A reputation evaporates after death and doesn't last. So, we see the Preacher's exasperation (sarcasm) evident early on.
- It's not our name that we're ultimately to live for. Whose name are you living for? Whose name are you making much of in your life?

“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (Ps. 29:1-2).

“May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed” (Ps. 72:17)!

“In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul” (Isa. 26:8).

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

2. Learn life lessons from death (1b – 4).

- An ironic twist: How is the day of death better than the day of birth? How many of you would rather go to a funeral than to a party for a newborn baby?
 - **Reference child dedication Sunday**
- We could leap forward to the NT and see that “to depart and be with Christ is far better than to go on living here” (Phil. 1:21-23). But, the Preacher answers this dilemma for us in the following verses: “for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (2).
 - House of mourning: the mourner’s home, where family and friends would gather to mourn the death of a person.
 - House of feasting: a banquet hall or simply a home in which a celebration is taking place.
- The main truth: Death, while painful, is a more effective prod to growth in spiritual wisdom and maturity than the elation one feels over a newborn child. It has more to teach us than the day of birth.
 - Birth (and all festive and happy occasions): the mood is excited and expansive. It is no time for dwelling on life’s brevity or on human limitations. We let our hopes run high.
 - Death (and at the house of mourning): the mood is thoughtful and the facts are plain. There’s no better chance of facing them than in these situations. If we shrug them off, it’s our own fault. A funeral reminds you to live in light of your own mortality. No one will escape death, the final destiny of all.
- This type of contemplation “makes the heart glad” (7:3). Irony: if the end of laughter and joy is suffering and grief, then sorrow and sadness are preferable because they should lead to laughter and joy. The reality of death should teach you to number your days (Ps. 90:12). NT: 2 Cor. 6:10 – sorrowful but always rejoicing; blessed are those who mourn (Mt. 5:4) and weep (Lk. 6:21). James 1:2-5: whenever you face trials, count it pure *joy*...
- We try to avoid this morbid topic. We would rather live in denial. Those who are wise contemplate their ultimate death, while fools are those who live as if there is no end in sight.
- Conclude this section with a word on death: it is unavoidable. We will all face it. Are we just left in **despair**?

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment’” (John 5:24-25, 28-29).

3. Love the rebuke of the wise (5-6).

- There is a switch from the theme of death to the theme of wisdom and folly at the end of v. 4. The contrast here is between a wise rebuke and foolish songs. Most of us like songs but hate rebuke.
- “crackling of thorns under a pot” = Thistles provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise. The point seems to be that a fool’s laughter has no connection with reality and is irritating.

“Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster” (Prov. 1:29-33).

“The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise” (Prov. 15:31).

“A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool” (Prov. 17:10).

- What is your first response when someone rebukes you? Do you offer an excuse? Do you wonder who ratted on you? I don't like criticism. I'd rather be commended than corrected, praised rather than rebuked. I'd rather judge and rebuke someone else than receive it. Why do we hate it? “We defend that which we deem of great value” (The Cross and Criticism). We deem our name, our reputation of great value. Do you just surround yourself with people who never challenge, advise, or criticize you.
- Being teachable, able and willing to receive correction, is a mark of the wise.
- Implications from the gospel: You are a sinner. You have been forgiven by faith, not by works.
 - “By agreeing with *God's* criticism of me in Christ's cross, I can face any criticism man may lay against me. In other words, *no one can criticize me more than the cross has*” (The Cross and Criticism).
- How should we go about giving criticism (from the Cross and Criticism):
 - See your brother/sister as one for whom Christ died.
 - Come as an equal who is also a sinner.
 - Prepare your heart lest you speak out of wrong motives.
 - Examine your own life and confess your sin first.
 - Be patient and stay in it for the long haul.
 - Seek not to condemn by debating points but rather to build up through constructive criticism.
 - Correct and rebuke gently, in the hope that God will grant your brother/sister the grace of repentance even as you yourself repent only through his grace.
- ILLS: share how God used rebuke in my life during college from my mentor

4. Beware, the wise are not immune from corruption (7:7).

- Wisdom can be weakened by extortion on the one hand and bribery on the other.
 - Extortion/Oppression: requires the payment from someone in return for silence
 - Bribery: the receipt of money from someone in return for some desired action
- We see the essence of this law: “All power tends to corrupt...”
- A corrupt official takes a bribe and doesn't act with reference to the merits of a case. He has made himself look like a fool.
- This verse uncovers the effect of a bribe on one's judgment – even a wise person can be made a fool when money becomes involved. Money talks.
- One of the goals of this verse is to show that even wisdom is not foolproof. Even if the wise are relatively superior to fools, they are still susceptible to corruption.

- This links back to v. 5 – if even a wise person can be made foolish by oppression, then it is *not* always better to listen to the rebuke of such a person. One such instance subverts the traditional wisdom of v. 5. Again we see the frustration of the preacher.
- How does this usually work in church life? You have a big giver...
- Reflect back, wealth will not satisfy.

5. Pursue patience, not anger (7:8-9).

- There is a link with the overall theme of death (end) vs. birth (beginning).
- How is the beginning and end connected to anger and patience?
- Self-control is needed to carry through any project. No one can know the outcome of anything until it is completed, so patience, not pride, is needed. Anger arises because of impatience.
- Better translation: “better long patience than soaring pride” (Longman). The literal translation is “length of spirit” and “height of spirit”
- The basic line of reasoning: since anger is a characteristic of fools, if you are angry, then it labels you as a fool.
- V. 5 is an example here: the rebuke of a wise person may be unpleasant (at first), but its end or result may be good.

“Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly” (Prov. 14:29).

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19).

6. Don’t let the past blind you of the present (7:10).

- Do you ever sigh for the “good ole days”? ILLS: The Glory Days.
- Doing this is unrealistic because it overlooks the evils that took a different form or irritated a different section of society in other times. There really is nothing new under the sun (see 1:9; 2:16; 3:15). In light of his view that history keeps repeating itself, such a question would be senseless.
- This longing for the past and dissatisfaction with the present re symptoms of the impatience and pride spoken of in v. 8.

7. Choose wisdom over riches (7:11-12).

- Wisdom is a good thing, especially when accompanied with money (an inheritance).
 - One would not have an inheritance from his father unless his father had the wisdom to manage his riches.
 - A fool squanders his birthright (Lk. 15:11-32) but wisdom is good with an inheritance and enables one to make good use of it.
- Wisdom is being treated on the same level as money, as an added insurance against the risks of life. Like money, it protects one from the hard realities of life.
 - As a general rule, living wisely receives God’s blessing, including long life, even if it cannot provide eternal life.

- An inheritance provided security. It meant that one could survive times of adversity. Land meant food. Land meant security. Land meant stability. The same with money. It can protect in times of famine, unemployment
- Wisdom is better though than money.

“for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her” (Prov. 8:11).

- The phrase in 11b, “an advantage to those who see the sun” could be a double-edged remark and a reminder that there is a time limit to the help that even wisdom can offer. It pays no dividends in the grave. Wisdom may keep a person alive, but it will not bring meaning or rest.
- The life that wisdom gives is not eternal life here. It will be centuries later when another wise teacher will teach us about eternal life.

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26).

III. Trust God’s Plan and Provision (7:13-14).

- Be attentive to the work of God in the world, not to change what God has done, but to go along with what God has done.
- The significance of God’s action is that no one can predict what is going to happen in the future. One does not know what to expect in the future. God does and as we look forward, we see that he has provided hope.
- If this is the broken nature of reality demonstrated by his analysis, then God must be the source of this absurdity and there is nothing we can do to straighten what he has made crooked. But don’t leave in despair!!!
- “...God *is* at work making straight what has been bent and broken” (Bartholomew).
- End with the gospel. Let’s not fool ourselves with righteous living. How is all of this connected to the gospel?