

Ecclesiastes 7:1–29

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 7. I'll be reading verses 1 through 29. 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 the fools is in the house of mirth.

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 the thorns under a pot, so 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.

[1 : 20] 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. The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity, be joyful. In the day of adversity, consider, God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

In my vain life, I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand. For the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

[2 : 31] Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom.

I said, I will be wise, but it is far from me. That which has been is far off and deep, very deep. Who can find it out? I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

And I find something more bitter than death. A woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things. My soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

See, this alone I found. That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[3 : 41] You may be seated. Praise God. We welcome you again to Christ Church Chicago and add my word of welcome.

We're glad you're here as we consider and continue in our series, Ecclesiastes Making Sense of Life.

Maybe some of you remember, there was a TV game show called Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?

The whole premise was simple. Grown adults, lawyers, teachers, engineers, would sit under bright lights sweating, trying to answer elementary school questions with elementary school kids as fellow

contestants.

The shock wasn't that the questions were hard. Shock was that the answers were simple and you'd see supremely confident adults freeze on questions like, what are the three branches of government?

[5 : 07] Spell conscience. What is the past participle of the word bring? Brung. Wait, is it brung?

No, brought? No, maybe brought? Meanwhile, they would look over at a 10-year-old with a juice box who locks in the answer in half a second.

And the answer is brought, by the way. Didn't want to leave you hanging. This is why the show worked. The show worked because nothing expresses our overconfidence faster than a question we thought we knew.

One minute you feel brilliant, the next you're nervously asking a 10-year-old for help. The truth is, we love to show how wise we are.

Dropping nuggets of wisdom, using quotes that sound neat, tidy, and motivational. Like a daily proverb you can post on social media and move on from.

[6 : 23] Why? Because it makes us feel and look smart without actually having to change our lives.

Honestly, by the time we get to Ecclesiastes chapter 7 today, if you've been following along in our series, you might be tempted to feel like a contestant on the show who's made it successfully through a few rounds.

You think, I'm actually getting the hang of this. Certainly, the preacher has talked about wisdom before. We've walked with him through vanity, meaninglessness, chasing the wind.

We've heard him talk about work, pleasure, money, time, even God's sovereignty. We might think, okay, brother preacher, I get it. Life is short.

Reverence God enjoys gifts. We were going along just fine. Maybe feeling like we're starting to understand a little bit about this strange book called Ecclesiastes.

[7 : 39] And then, the preacher today says something like, death is better than birth.

Don't be too righteous and don't be too wicked. Or like verse 28, yeah, I heard Jeremy read it just like you did.

One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Lord Jesus.

I mean, is he trying to pick a fight? Obviously, the preacher has never been to my house because that line would never work.

We'll come back to this because the preacher often speaks provocatively from his experience in order to emphasize a point. But the critical point here today that I need you to get from chapter seven is we come, as we walk through this chapter, to the realization that maybe, just maybe, we're not as wise as we think.

[8 : 53] That's the point. Maybe we're not quite as wise as we think. The preacher doesn't give us cute mug or t-shirt wisdom.

He gives us what really appears at first glance to be upside down counterintuitive wisdom. It's as if the preacher steps back into the classroom, erases the board, and says, you thought you understood wisdom?

Let me show you what real wisdom looks like. In our text this morning, this isn't wisdom that trends on TikTok. It is wisdom that confronts us, corrects us, reshapes us.

Today, we step into the preacher's school of wisdom for some advanced lessons. Lessons where pain teaches, character matures, and humility anchors us in the fear of God.

Here at the preacher's graduate school, he lays out really three advanced lessons. These lessons I'd like to lift this morning.

[10 : 12] The first lesson is the lesson of wisdom through death and discomfort. The second is the lesson of wisdom cultivated by character.

And lastly, is the wisdom through humility and the fear of God. as this battleground and the struggle between wisdom and foolishness, folly unfolds, the preacher begins his masterclass in proverbial fashion.

You'll notice how the first 13 verses are printed a little differently, like proverbs. He's firing off one-liners that declare one thing is better than another.

He starts, however, in a surprising place. not in the banquet hall, not at the celebration, not at the graduation party.

He begins in the house of mourning. After the preacher sets the foundation in verse one by basically saying a good reputation is much better than money, my mother would say all money ain't good money, especially if it costs you your name.

[11 : 31] He then, in unconventional fashion, walks into the party, turns down the music, and says, hey, let's talk about funerals. For the next several verses, he launches into this initial seemingly dark lesson.

Death is better than birth. Mourning is better than feasting. Sorrow is better than laughter. The heart of the wise mourns while the heart of the fool rejoices.

Sadness makes the heart glad. death. Why? Well, first, the preacher is acknowledging what we all must acknowledge, that death is inevitable.

Death is coming to us all. Even Ben Franklin once famously said, in this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes.

So the question is, how do we live in light of that fact? The preacher aims to show us how.

[12 : 43] If you are to be wise, you should take this undeniable fact to heart and live your life with the end in mind. The certainty of death should give us a weightiness to our choices in our actions.

Now, I know this is not a message that anyone hears at a baby shower. And nobody leaves the party saying, boy, I sure do need to change my life. But people often do leave funerals saying, I need to get my priorities straight.

When we stand near loss, our plans feel small. our days feel numbered, which Psalms tells us is what we should do anyway to gain a heart of wisdom.

It sharpens sight. It turns us from quick thrills to steady faith. It makes us listen. It makes us pray.

Sorrow teaches what laughter cannot, and funerals teach what feasts forget.

Funerals make you think about eternity. Funerals make you think about legacy. And now, verse 1 makes even more sense because it causes you to think about your reputation and how you will be known when you're gone.

[14 : 15] Funerals make you think about what really matters and take stock of your life. It gives us all a sense of our mortality, reminding us that our lives do have an end.

I attended a funeral once a few years ago. A relatively young guy who was the assistant manager at the grocery store we used to go to.

I just wanted to stop by the service and pay my respects. Thinking there probably wouldn't be many people in attendance, I pulled into the parking lot of the church and there was nowhere to park.

I finally got inside and it was standing room only. Person after person came up to share how much this guy had impacted their lives.

Then one of the last people to walk up was a guy in a postal delivery uniform. uniform. He said, I just had to deviate from my route to come in here and tell you how much this guy meant to me and how he changed my life every single day.

[15 : 34] This guy's mailman just came to speak at his funeral. funeral. I said right then, God, help me to live my life in such a way that that could be said of me when I'm gone.

Grief pushes us to look past our days with clear eyes and put weight back on what counts. Even the day we most fear can hold a strange kind of gift.

gift. It can make us ready to live the rest of our days with care and even enjoyment, yearning to fulfill our callings and responsibilities faithful to God.

The path is not loud. It does not rush. It does not reach for the first fix. It sits with pain and asks what really matters here.

It looks at a grave and says, I will live my life with care before I reach mine. It looks at a hospital bed and says, I will keep short accounts.

[16 : 55] I will forgive. I will be brave enough to say hard words like I'm sorry and I was wrong and tender enough to speak kind words to others while I can.

Now to be sure, there's a time to enjoy the beauty of new life. We do that quite often here at Christ Church Chicago. There is also a time to party like it's 1999.

The preacher said in earlier verses, there's a time for everything under the sun, but he warns us in today's text that we're fools because we fear death, we avoid listening to its instruction.

We avoid it by keeping ourselves distracted and entertained in houses of mirth, living for the weekend, going from one party to the next.

For the wise discover that essential springs of life and lasting joy flow from what we learn in these houses of mourning. Sometimes the deepest lessons come from the hardest classrooms.

[18 : 16] Hard classrooms don't just teach better thinking, they also shape better living. That's where the preacher takes us next.

He moves to the lesson of carefully cultivated character, patience, restraint, self-control, integrity. After warning that we need to be able to receive correction from those who are wise and ignore the noise from the foolish, the preacher now in verses 7 through 14 instructs in how one's character advances wisdom.

He starts by warning us about chasing after the quick fix, compromising in order to get ahead, maintaining our integrity.

He further teaches us that we're wise to listen carefully not only to what death has to teach us in verse 1, but to what every significant ending has to teach us.

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, verse 8. He says this is not only because every significant ending in our lives carries the echo of death's message, but also because the end of a thing reveals what the beginning conceals.

[19 : 39] Whereas a beginning makes us hopeful by promising a better future, we discover only in the end whether the promise or the promise maker was truly worthy of the hope we had.

the end often reveals the true spiritual state of our hearts, what we truly trust in, what we truly hope in, what we truly treasure.

When those endings uncover what we truly trust and treasure, they also expose how we respond. We respond with humble patience or wounded pride. Patience, the preacher goes on to say, is always better than pride.

Slow down and take a beat. Why? Because anger is constantly lurking around the heart, waiting to jump out.

[20 : 42] So be careful how quickly you jump into anger. Church, this is a mirror, a reality check, because how you respond in anger might also show you that you might not be as distinctive from the world as you may think you are.

I remember once I was driving with my youngest daughter, Haley, in the back seat. She couldn't have been more than five or six.

we were driving along and suddenly a guy swerved in front of us, cut us off, slam on the brakes. Haley, in the back seat, bangs on the window. He says, really? Is that what we're doing? Better be glad I'm in my car seat.

I said, where did you get that from? She said, Papa, I just said it before you did. It caused me to evaluate how I respond.

[22 : 07] church, wisdom isn't just what you know. Wisdom is how you respond. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is pause, pray, and hold your tongue.

This wisdom is not just about controlling your reactions in a single moment. It's also about how we process seasons of our lives.

For those of us just a little bit older, do you ever think sometimes, I wish we could go back to the good old days?

Maybe not as far back as Pastor Helm, but back to the good old days. The preacher says, wait, not so fast.

Verse 10, it's not from wisdom that you ask this. Remember, we're not as wise as we think we are. Were the good old days really that good? One author wrote, the good old days are really a combination of good imagination and a bad memory.

[23 : 26] Pining for the past doesn't solve any problems in the present. Most importantly, it overlooks the fact that God is still as involved today as much as he was in 976 B.C.

or 1956 A.D. or 2026. We tend to airbrush the past, glorify the past, and that causes us to miss the opportunity to bring God glory in the present.

And that's exactly where the preacher turns next, away from nostalgia, out the past and towards a clear vision of God's work in the present.

after reminding us that even a good inheritance can destroy us without wisdom, the preacher shifts our focus to the true source of that wisdom.

Verse 13, consider the work of God. Whether crooked or straight, whether up or down, whether prosperity or adversity, God made it all and God is in control of it all.

[24 : 41] Wise people see God's hand, God's purpose, God's direction in both blessing and hardship. God is sovereign and the children said he's got the whole world in his hands.

I may not be the wisest person, but this I know, he who began a good work in me will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Or Milton, the way we grew up, we just say I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me. So we move to our final lesson in the preacher's school of wisdom.

It's the lesson of wisdom through humility and the fear of God. The preacher says, look, y'all, I've seen everything.

I've seen some righteous people who we call good die young being righteous. And I've seen some wicked people who live a long time being wicked.

[25 : 50] wicked. So I have some advice and here it comes. It's controversial, but here it is, these two alarming verses. So don't be overly righteous or overly wicked.

wicked. So wait, you can be too righteous? No, better yet, does this mean I can be just a little wicked?

As long as I don't overdo it? Well, no, remember, you're not as wise as you think you are. The preacher is warning against swollen puffed up version of righteousness that turns showy, harsh, self-invented, self-righteous.

It's that version of righteousness that takes God's good words and bends them into a ladder for their own ego. On the other side is this wicked, reckless living that shrugs and treats folly as freedom. freedom. It's that path that eats up days and shortens life and acts like because it hasn't caught up to me yet, I must be good to just keep on doing it.

[27 : 17] The preacher says, let me tell you how to avoid both of these extremes. Don't try to live by your prideful righteousness that turns into pretense or a show.

don't try to live according to your wicked wisdom, drifting into careless sin. Instead, live by true wisdom, which is characterized by the fear of the Lord.

So what then is the fear of the Lord? I'm so glad you asked. The fear of the Lord is not terror. fear. It first begins with recognizing and acknowledging your helplessness, your hopelessness, and your guilt before the almighty God.

It's taking seriously who he is and who you are. It means entrusting yourself to the Lord, realizing that God is the righteous judge of all the earth, and though you stand condemned before him, you trust his promises of his mercy and love sealed for us in Christ Jesus.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the Bible says. Wisdom that gives strength, verse 19.

[28 : 39] Wisdom that walks in humility and remembers none of us are perfectly righteous, verse 20. Wisdom that causes you to realize that as much as you think you know, as much as you try to know, God's ways are not your ways and his thoughts are not your thoughts.

This is the wisdom that will keep you from trying to find satisfaction and looking for love in all the wrong places in too many faces, falling into one trap after another over and over again and still coming up empty, which may be more likely the context of verse 28.

ultimately, the preacher discovers and relays to us that the real issue, the real problem, the real dilemma is not God's design.

It's our sin. That truth crushes pride and reminds us that wisdom is not about proving ourselves right.

It's about recognizing our need for God. So here's the truth, church. Wisdom isn't proving you're smart.

[30 : 05] It's not about winning arguments or looking spiritual. sorrow. It's bowing your heart before God. It's letting sorrow shape you, letting character steady you, and letting humility save you from yourself.

Ecclesiastes chapter 7 doesn't call us to impress people with wisdom. It calls us to fear the Lord and trust the one who is wisdom.

So stop trying to play the game and pass the test on your own. Surrender, fear God, cling to Christ who is your strength.

Because real wisdom doesn't start when you have all the answers. It begins when you finally admit you're not as wise as you think.

and you need Jesus who is the answer. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your perfect wisdom.

[31 : 18] May we cling more closely to you, realize what we don't know, and look to you who knows all things.

Give us continued grace and clarity as we walk our lives. Let us learn from moments of sorrow as well as moments of triumph that you are God and you are in control of it all.

We rest in you. We lean on you. It's in your son's precious mighty name. We do pray. Amen. Amen. Thank you.