

What is Better?

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[0 : 00] Last week, if you were here, if you listened to what we said, we talked about, I introduced you to Foolish Freddy. You remember that Foolish Freddy is a Christian. He works in the city, in a big firm, in the numbers game.

Freddy has lots of other interests, but he really loves earning money and making profits and wealth, investing his money. He really loves it when he buys low, sells high and makes a killing.

Last week, we talked about how Foolish Freddy was because pursuing wealth was meaningless. That is, you can't hold on to it. You'll always be hungry for more.

Even if you can hold on to it, you won't enjoy it. We said there's more enjoyment in going out and getting an ice cream than all the net energy spent in chasing those big returns and things like that. But Foolish Freddy, as his name suggests, wasn't listening. And guess what? The pundits were correct. There was a bubble in the market. And this week, house prices fell nearly 40%.

[1 : 10] And along with his colleagues and thousands of other Aussies, Foolish Freddy got a charming phone call from his bank manager, who demanded that he top up his mortgage.

Of course, at the same time, the share market fell 60%. And hundreds and thousands of Aussies who work in the city lost their jobs.

The newspapers are calling it the COVID financial crisis. And Freddy is in big trouble. And Wisdom says, verse 10 in your passage, Wisdom says, the first verse there, Whatever exists has already been named.

And what humanity is, has been known. Put another way, there is nothing new under the sun. We've seen all of this before. Today, it's the COVID financial crisis.

In 2008, it was the global financial crisis. In 2001, it was the dot-com bubble. In 92, it was the recession we had to have.

[2 : 14] And in 1987, it was Black Monday on Wall Street. Whatever exists has already been named. That is, named by God. The idea, there's nothing new under the sun.

And of course, Freddy, he shakes his fists in rage at this. Because he thought God was only supposed to bless him. A crisis was not in Freddy's plans for his future.

He's like a clay jar, isn't he? Shouting at the potter, Why have you done this? Why have you made me like this? But shaking fists and flying off the handle, it hasn't given Freddy any answers.

Nor has it made his suffering any easier to deal with. Verse 10. No one can contend with someone who is stronger. God is the stronger someone.

And he is sovereign, remember? Back in chapter 3, he said there's a time for everything. A time for laughter and also a time for tears. A time to build up and a time to tear down.

[3 : 26] All the good times, but also the bad, have been known and named by him before. Verse 11. The more the words, the less the meaning.

That is, the more we rage against God and argue against his plans, the more futile, meaningless that that is. And how does that profit anyone?

And so that means, here is the question for today. It's in verse 12. For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow.

Which is nice and cheery, isn't it? A shadow is fleeting and temporary. It lacks substance. It leaves no evidence that it was there. Here one moment, gone.

The next. If chasing wealth and pleasure and toil are not a good use of our limited time, what is good for a person during the few and meaningless days we have?

[4 : 32] The answer? We don't know. Who knows? No one does. Only God. The next part of verse 12. Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they're gone?

No one. No one knows. That's the answer. Freddie was a finance man. His only job was to predict what the markets will do. He thought it was boom time forever.

He was wrong. In an uncertain world, who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who knows what is good for us? Therefore, in the meantime, in these days, not Freddie and not us.

Only God is the answer. And all of that is nice and pessimistic, isn't it? I'm shaking our fists in rage seems like the right thing to do.

But the preacher has made things like this to show us the value of wisdom. Showing us the value of wisdom. He outlines a series of wisdom proverbs to show us how to have a better life.

[5 : 37] That is, to make the best of this situation. He wants us to see the advantage of wisdom, even in an uncertain world. We can't force God into giving us an easy life.

No one can contend with someone stronger, remember? We can't change what tomorrow will bring. We don't know what will happen. But there's an advantage to being wise in the meantime.

It's a very good passage for our times. And so look at chapter 7, verse 1. And that first proverb makes quite a lot of sense.

A good name, better than fine perfume. You can buy Chanel No. 5, but you can't buy a good reputation. That all makes sense. But suddenly the proverbs go downhill, or at least upside down. Because they start talking about death. Verse 1, the day of death, better than the day of birth? Really? Really? If you had a choice between two houses, is the house of mourning better than the house of feasting?

[7 : 09] How can frustration, verse 3, be better than laughter? That doesn't make any sense. These proverbs seem to be upside down with how we view life.

But that's because wisdom is realistic about death. Wisdom knows there's a time to laugh, but also a time to mourn. So in verse 1, the day of death is better than the day of birth.

The reason why? Because the day of death means an end to our pain. The day of birth means we have a whole lifetime of oppression and disappointment and sadness to look forward to.

Would you rather be at the end of your pain or staring down a whole lifetime ahead of it? I would rather go to a house of feasting, in verse 2, personally, than go to a funeral parlor.

But the funeral is honest, isn't it? The funeral is honest about our own mortality. Verse 2, because death is the destiny of everyone.

[8 : 15] The living should take this to heart. Wise people go to funerals and they realize how short and precious life is. The same idea in verse 3, frustration and sad faces.

They are better than laughter. Because that's what you get at a funeral, sad faces. But sad times force us to treasure each day.

To make the most of these limited days we have. Days like a shadow. Hear one moment, then we're gone the next. In that way, sorrow, sad times, can be better than laughter and frivolity.

And I think that makes sense of verse 4. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. But the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. Wisdom accepts that God has included tears in this world. But foolish Freddie hopes that with enough parties, enough wealth, enough frivolity and feasting, that that will drown out the idea of consequences and the idea of death.

[9 : 27] Foolishness says this investment is too good to be true. But wisdom knows there's no such thing. Foolishness says I've never had a car accident all my life and tomorrow I won't either.

But wisdom says that there are no guarantees on Melbourne roads. Foolishness says we don't need to watch what we eat. But wisdom knows that only one donut is good.

We don't know what tomorrow will bring. God has allowed a time for everything. We don't know what is good for a person for each day.

We hope for the best. Wisdom plans for the worst. And obviously that sounds very pessimistic to our ears.

It'll be tempting to listen to the sweet sound of endless optimism. In the same way, a song sounds better than a rebuke. In times of trouble, would you rather listen to constructive criticism or your favorite song?

[10 : 34] Verse 5. It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. The rebuke of a wise person.

It hurts my ears because I hate feedback. I hate being told I'm wrong. But a rebuke is realistic about the world around us. Endless optimism sounds sweet like music.

But it's a song of no consequences. It's noisy and loud like verse 6. Like the crackling of thorns under a pot. Thorns, they disappear as quickly as they come.

That crackling noise might sound sweet like a song. But actually, it's a sound of the thorns own destruction. The thorns are not realistic about death, even when they're on fire.

That is foolishness. These endless glory days will never end. That is foolishness. Foolishness is simple and short-sighted.

[11 : 36] Wisdom is harder and requires humility and discipline. Foolishness is quick and easy. Wisdom requires patience and self-control.

Look at verse 7. Extortion turns a wise person into a fool and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of the matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride.

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools. Do not say, why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions. The preacher here, he contrasts impatience versus self-control.

He warns that quick and easy wins, like extortion or bribery, they will always be a temptation, but they are the mark of a fool. The mark of wisdom is patience and self-control.

Wisdom knows, verse 8, that the end of the matter is better than the beginning, which I think means wise people allow things to play out rather than rushing to judgment.

[12 : 45] It makes sense why verse 9 says, do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, which I think is anger. When adversity strikes, the fool flies off the handle, but wisdom waits to see the end of the matter and how things will play out.

And I don't know about you, but I feel that some of these proverbs about patience versus anger could have been written just about me. Would your loved ones say that you are calm and patient, that you're a wait and see type person?

Or would your loved ones say you're a fly off the handle, rush to judgment type instead? Freddie, sorry, the way to find out what type of person is to have a week like Freddie.

That is to have God's plans be totally opposite to your plans for one week. And that will expose whether you're a wait and see or a rush to judgment in anger type person.

In times of suffering, it's so easy to say, verse 10, why were the old days better than these? But the preacher wants us to wait and see how things will pan out.

[14 : 02] And I think that's true. In times of suffering, we don't know how and why things are happening. But as we wait and see with hindsight, we can look back and actually see some good in those terrible situations.

Wisdom asks, what is God teaching me through this crisis? Even though we're tempted to wish things are different, tempted by anger as well, tempted to take things into our own hands, the preacher says that patience, self-control is the way.

And it's not that wise people have no pain. God allows tears. Wise choices don't solve our problems, but they help us.

They force us to look for the better way. Verse 11, wisdom like an inheritance is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Inheritance here is about Jewish people and the land.

Remember the land, the promised land? It was their permanent possession. They could survive hard times as long as they had the land. People can survive adversity as long as they have their wisdom.

[15 : 16] Verse 12, wisdom is a shelter just like money is. But when the money runs out, the wisdom will still shelter us, preserve our lives through the storm.

And again, it's not that wise people are free from pain, but wisdom will help them suffer well.

There's always a model for how to do good things and how to enjoy the Christian life, but very few examples of how to suffer well as Christians.

Wisdom will help us suffer well. Because wisdom is honest about death and adversity. It's willing to listen to rebuke and correction. Wisdom is patient, waiting to see how things pan out.

These are not the cure for a crooked path in life. They're just a better way to walk them. Look at verse 13. Consider what God has done.

Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider this. God has made the one as well as the other.

[16 : 26] Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future. No one knows what tomorrow will bring, what Monday the 5th of July will be. Will it be a day of crisis or a day of prosperity in your

family?

No one knows what will happen this week in your marriage or your health. My friend's grandmother, for 20 years, she's been saying, this Christmas will be my last.

But she's still here. I don't know if you've got a relative like that. This Christmas, oh, it's my last one. Who knows this year at Christmas whether they'll have a house of feasting or a house of mourning? No one knows. I'm completely sick and tired about talking about the coronavirus. I'm sure you are as well. I hate talking about it.

On Wednesday just gone, we still didn't know how many people we were allowed to have here in the building. It's a week-by-week proposition for us. Who wants to live like this?

[17:25] No one can. It's terrible. What is good for us in a time like this? Shall we fly off the handle and point fingers at government officials? Shall we abuse politicians and contact tracing or wait patiently and just see how things pan out?

Anyone brave enough to book a holiday this year? Yeah, well, I was stupid enough to do it. The family and I, we're going to Darwin tonight.

And we've been looking forward to this for ages, booked it months and months ago. This past week with the outbreak there, daddy hasn't been at his best this past week. If I'm honest.

A bit of a crisis at the Henderson household. Who knows if there's going to be another outbreak in Darwin and we'll have to stay there forever. No one can discover what is good for us.

What is good for people in a time like this? In the meantime, until Jesus returns. Patience is better, says the preacher. That is the better way through.

[18:32] Being realistic about the virus. Making plans accordingly. A time for laughter, but also a time for tears. God has made the one and the other.

Who can straighten what he has made crooked? No one can contend, remember, with someone who is stronger. Wisdom looks for a better way.

Speaking of a better way, the New Testament offers us something better as well. In the reading which Andrew brought us from Romans, it's a similar picture of suffering and despair.

And Paul's wisdom is like Ecclesiastes. He doesn't promise that we'll escape trouble, but just promises a better way to suffer well. He says, In times of trouble, remember, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

That way, even if trouble separates you from your loved ones, or from your money or from your health, even if disaster separates the life from your body, remember that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

[19:41] Romans 8 says, If God didn't spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also graciously give us all things?

That is, all the things we've lost in this life, will God not graciously give it back to us in the next life? The end of the matter is better than the beginning, remember?

That's what Ecclesiastes says. Whatever we have lost in this life, we will be given back by God when we see him face to face. And just like Ecclesiastes, that is not a cure for your problem today. It's just a better way to help you suffer well. It does make your problems easier to deal with. He says, And that is the wisdom you need to call on when facing the suffering and the uncertainty of tomorrow.