

What is Better?

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[0 : 00] Last week, if you were here and you heard the sermon from last week, I introduced you to Foolish Freddie. You'll remember that Foolish Freddie is a Christian. He works in the city in the numbers game in a big firm. He has other interests, but Freddie really loves investing his wealth, chasing money. He loves nothing more than buying low, selling high, and making a killing.

Last week, we talked about how foolish Freddie was in pursuing wealth. The preacher of Ecclesiastes said that it was meaningless, that you can't hold on to your wealth, and that no matter how much you have, you'll always be hungry for more. Even when you do get wealth, you can't enjoy it.

And so we said that there was more enjoyment in an ice cream, in a well-earned glass of red wine, than in all the sort of net energy in chasing money and pursuing wealth. But Foolish Freddie, as his name suggests, wasn't listening. And the pundits were correct. There was a bubble in the market, and in about one week, house prices fell nearly 40%. And along with all his colleagues and thousands of Australians, Freddie got a charming phone call from his bank manager, who demanded that top up the mortgage. At the same time, of course, the share market dropped 60% as well. Hundreds of thousands of workers in the city lost their jobs too. The newspapers are calling it the COVID financial crisis, and Freddie is in big trouble. And Wisdom says, verse 10, if you can see on your sheets, verse 10, whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is, has been known. Put another way, there is nothing new under the sun. We have seen this all before. Today, it's the COVID financial crisis. In 2008, it was the global financial crisis. 2001 was the dot-com boom. 1992, the recession we had to have 1987. It was Black Friday on Wall Street. Whatever exists has already been named. That is, named by God. There is nothing new under the sun. And of course, Freddie, he shakes his fist and rages against God, because he thought he was only supposed to have blessings all his life. A crisis was not part of his plans for the future. He's like a clay jar shouting at the potter. Why have you done this? Why have you made me like this? But shaking fists and God, shaking fists flying off the handle at God, it hasn't helped Freddie at all. It hasn't made his suffering 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 to build up and a time to tear down. A time to laugh, also a time for tears. All the good times, but also the bad, have been known and named by him.

Verse 11, the more the words, the less the meaning. That is, the more we argue against God and his plans, the more futile, meaningless it is. And how does that profit anyone? And so here is the question for today. Look at verse 12. Who knows what is good for a person in life? During the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow. That's nice and cheery, isn't it? A shadow is fleeting and temporary.

It lacks substance. When it's gone, there's no evidence that it was even there in the beginning. That is Ecclesiastes' view of human life, which is very bleak. Who knows what is good for a person in their few and meaningless days? The answer, no one. No one knows. Only God.

[4 : 13] Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they're gone? What will tomorrow bring? No one knows. Freddie was the finance man. Freddie's only job was to predict what the markets will do tomorrow. And he thought it was boom time. And he was wrong. In an uncertain world, no one knows what tomorrow will bring. And so who knows what's good for us in these few days we have like a shadow? Not Freddie is the answer. Not us as well. Only God knows. And all of that so far is lovely and pessimistic, isn't it? It's pretty bleak. Shaking our fists in despair, raging against God seems like a good thing to do. And the preacher has made things like this in the text. He's made things bleak to show us the value of wisdom, showing us what wisdom can do.

And what he does in the rest of the passage, he outlines a series of wisdom proverbs. And they operate a bit like this. It is better to than doing this. It is better to than doing this.

A series of wisdom proverbs. He wants us to see the advantage of wisdom, even in an uncertain world. We can't force God into giving us easy times, nor change what tomorrow will bring. There is an advantage, however, in being wise in the meantime. So have a look at chapter 7, verse 1.

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart. Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

So the first proverb there makes a lot of sense. It says, a good name is better than fine perfume, and that is quite logical, isn't it? You can buy Chanel No. 5, but you can't buy a good reputation, which is all quite neat. Well done. But then the proverbs start to go a bit crazy, and it'd be a bit topsy-turvy when he starts talking about death. Verse 1. The day of death better than the day of birth, really? If you had a choice between two houses, is the house of mourning better than the house of feasting? How can frustration, verse 3, be better than laughter? These proverbs all seem to be upside down, and that's because death is introduced as a theme. The proverbs here about wisdom are honest about death. Wisdom knows there's a time to laugh, but also a time to mourn. And so in verse 1, the day of death is better than the day of birth. Why? Because death means the end of our pain.

[7 : 22] The day of birth means we've got a lifetime of tears ahead of us. Would you rather have would you rather be at the end of your pain or facing a lifetime of it, staring down the barrel of it? We'd rather be at the end. I'd rather go to the house of feasting, verse 2, than a funeral.

But the funeral is honest about our own mortality. Verse 2. For death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart. Wise people, they go to funerals and they realize how short and fleeting life is. It's the same idea in verse 3. Frustration and sad faces, they're better than laughter. Sad faces, that's what you find at a funeral. Sad times, they teach us to treasure each day rather than spend them frivolously. And that makes sense of verse 4 as well.

See, wisdom accepts that God has included tears and pain in this life. Foolish Freddy, he hopes that with enough parties, enough frivolity, enough wealth, he can drown out thoughts of death and consequences. Foolishness says, this investment, it's too good to be true. But wisdom knows there's no such thing. Foolishness says, I've never had a car accident and so no worries tomorrow. But wisdom knows that you can't predict life on Melbourne roads. Foolishness says, we don't need to watch what we'll eat, we'll be young forever. But wisdom knows you blink and suddenly you're 44. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, because God has allowed a time for everything. We don't know what is good for a person each day.

We hope for the best, but wisdom plans for the worst. And that might sound quite pessimistic to your ears and quite negative. It's tempting to listen to the sweet sound of endless optimism. In the same way, a song sounds better than criticism. In times of trouble, would you rather listen to your favorite song or get feedback from someone? Verse 5, it is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. See, the rebuke of a wise person, it hurts my ears. I don't want to hear feedback. I don't need a constructive criticism. But that sort of feedback is honest about the world around us. Endless optimism. It sounds sweet like music, but it's a song about no consequences.

It's a song that constantly wants to delay thoughts of death. It's noisy and loud, like verse 6, the sound of crackling thorns under a pot. Crackling thorns, they make a noise. They disappear just as quickly as they came. The crackling noise might sound, you know, calming and nice and sweet, but actually the sound is the sound of destruction as the thorns are actually on fire. Foolishness is simple and short-sighted. Wisdom requires humility and discipline. Foolishness is quick and easy.

[10 : 51] Wisdom is patient and self-controlled. Look at verse 7. Extortion turns a wise person into a fool and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a 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 contrasts impatience with self-control. He warns that quick and easy wins, like extortion and bribery, might be a way to get things.

They'll always be a temptation, but they are the mark of a fool. The mark of wisdom is patience and self-control. It knows, verse 8, that the end of a matter is better than the beginning, which I think means wise people allow things to play out rather than rushing to judgment.

It makes sense why verse 9, do not be quickly provoked in your spirit. That is about anger. When adversity strikes, the fool flies off the handle, but wisdom waits to see the end of the matter, to see how things will play out. And I don't know about you, but these proverbs about patience and anger have easily been written just for me. I don't know about you, would your loved one say that you're calm and patient? That you're a wait and see type person? Would they say that you're a fly off the handle, rush to judgment type instead? The way to find out what type of person you are is to have a week like Freddy's, where your plans and God's plans are totally opposite. And then you'll learn whether you're wise, that is, patient and self-controlled, or whether you're foolish, that is, angry and flying off the handle. In times of suffering, it's easy to say, verse 10, why were the old days better than these? But the preacher wants us to wait and see how things pan out in the end. Wisdom asks, what is God teaching me through this time of trouble?

Even though we're tempted to wish things were different, tempted by anger to take things into our own hands, the preacher says, patience, patience is better. And it's not therefore that wisdom means no pain in life. But wisdom helps us to find a better way to deal with disaster. Wisdom, verse 11, wisdom is like an inheritance. That is, like the land for the ancient Jews. Wisdom was their, sorry, the land was their permanent inheritance. They could survive hard times as long as they had the land. We can survive hard times as long as we have our wisdom. Wisdom is good, verse 12, like money is good. But wisdom will preserve us through a storm long after the money has run out. [14:04] See, wisdom is honest about death and adversity. It's willing to listen to rebuke and correction. It's patient to see how things turn out. None of these things are a cure for adversity and crisis, but they will help you to suffer well. They are a better way to walk through the crooked paths of life.

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. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Tomorrow, July the 5th, will it be a day of prosperity or a day of disaster? No one knows. What will happen to your marriage this week? What will happen to your health this week? No one knows. My friend's grandmother has been saying for 20 years, this Christmas will be my last, on and on. Do you know a relative like that? Oh, this is my last one. She's still here after 20 years saying the same thing. This year at Christmas time in their house, will it be a house of mourning or a house of feasting? No one knows. Will she still be here? Only God knows. I'm sick and tired about talking about the coronavirus. On Wednesday, just gone, we still didn't know how many people were able to have in the room. It's a week by week proposition. It's sort of no way to live, is it? We can rage and fly off the handle in the meantime, or we can just wait and see and allow things to play out and take them as they come. Anyone brave enough to book a holiday this Christmas?

My family, we're going to Darwin tonight for two weeks, and we booked it, you know, ages and ages ago before this happened. But this past week with the outbreak there, daddy hasn't been at his best, if I'm honest. A bit of crisis in the Henderson household. Who knows if there'll be an outbreak while we're up there? Who knows if we'll be allowed to come back in to Melbourne and we have to stay in Darwin for a really long time. And no one can discover what is good for us in the meantime. Shall we fly off the handle and point fingers at governments and contact tracing and all that sort of business? Or shall we wait and see and just take things as they come? Patience is better, says the preacher. Being realistic about the virus, that is better. Time for laughter and a time for tears.

[16:54] God has made the one as well as the other. Who can straighten what he has made? No one can. He is the sovereign one. No one can contend with one who is stronger. That is God.

Wisdom, at least wisdom, looks for a better way through the tears. Speaking of better ways, the New Testament offers us something better as well. In the reading which Eileen brought us from Romans, it's a similar picture of despair. And Paul's wisdom is like Ecclesiastes. He doesn't promise we'll escape trouble, but just offers a better way to suffer well. He says, in times of trouble, remember this, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ. That way, even if trouble separates you from your family or trouble separates you from your money or trouble separates you from your health, even if disaster separates your life from your body, nothing will separate us from the love of

God in Jesus. Romans 8 says, Maybe not now, but maybe not in this life. Wisdom calls for patience. The end of the matter is better than the beginning, remember? But will not God give us back everything we have lost in our suffering now?

Now, and just like Ecclesiastes, that is not a cure for your problems now, but it will make them easier to deal with. Easier so you can model to the rest of us what suffering well looks like.

There's lots of Christian examples. Most of them are about showing how someone does really well with good things. Not many examples of us suffering well. Wisdom is a better way so we can suffer well through times like these that are uncertain, where we don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Paul says, remember that no matter what is against us, whether it's trouble or hardship, persecution or danger, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

[19 : 20] And that is the wisdom you need to know when facing the suffering and the uncertainty of the rest of this week and perhaps the rest of your lives as well. Let's pray that we would be wise.

Father God, please make us wise. Please would we be realistic about death? Please would we be patient and not fly off the handle?

Please, Father, would we trust that you are sovereign? And Father, it's always tempting to despair.

And thank you that you don't promise us an easy life, that you're clear about the way the world is.

Help us not shake our fists and rage against you, but to trust in your goodness, a goodness that would give us your only son, Jesus. I thank you that one day we will have again everything we have lost in this life.

Please, would that future hope help us to suffer well? We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.