

Reflections on Life and Death

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- [0 : 0 0] I was driving home and happened to turn the radio on and the funeral service of Pastor Silas McKinney was on.
- ! He is a long-standing pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church having served them for many many years and so he was given a state-recognized funeral and the funeral was broadcasted live over ZNS.
- At the end of the funeral they sang a hymn, the recessional hymn for all the saints. And as I listened to that hymn my mind was flooded with many memories of our dear sister Keba because that's the recessional hymn that we sang at our funeral.
- And naturally thinking about Keba triggered many memories about her life and also about her death.
- And for those of you who don't know Keba, Keba is a dear long-standing member of our church who passed away about two and a half years ago. Keba had an unusual practice where she collected obituaries.
- [1 : 1 7] It was not unusual for me to be telling Keba I was going to go to a funeral and she would say to me, bring me a copy of the obituary even though she didn't know the person. And she did that and she had stacks of obituaries that she would read and that she would identify songs that she liked.
- That was just something that she did. And it was not that Keba was a morbid or a sad person. She was quite the opposite of that. She was very fun-loving and she was the life of most parties.
- But Keba was sober-minded about life and about death. She wasn't fearful of death. But she was mindful of it.
- And the way she thought about death made her thoughtful about life. Thoughtful about how she lived. And Keba lived well.
- And since I stood beside her bed when she died, I can also testify that she died well. And so last Sunday, and I wasn't mindful of this message at the time.
- [2 : 3 0] I wasn't. I only connected the experience of last Sunday as I began to prepare for this message. But naturally, thinking about Keba's death and thinking about Pastor Silas McKinney's death, an old pastor who served for many years and died at 89, I naturally thought of my own death.
- Thought of my own life. And that should be the effect of death on all of us. Death should cause us to think about life and death.
- But especially our own life and our own death. And I believe that's the intended effect of the passage that we have come to this morning in our sermon series in the book of Ecclesiastes.
- In Ecclesiastes chapter 6. And if you've not yet done so, please turn there in your Bible.
- And this, like last week, is a somewhat lengthy passage of Scripture that we have come to.

- [3 : 48] We will begin in verse 10 of chapter 6, and we will conclude this morning in verse 14 of chapter 7. So please follow along as I read, starting in Ecclesiastes chapter 6, verse 10.
- Whatever has come to be has already been named. And it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.
- The more words, the more vanity. And what is the advantage to man? For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?
- For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? 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.
- [5 : 13] 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 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 thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools.
- This is also 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. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.
- [6 : 30] 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.
- Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity, be joyful.
- And 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.
- Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for the great privilege that we have to gather in this place.
- And in this moment, to sit under the instruction of your word. And Father, we pause because we recognize that we need the intervention of your Holy Spirit to cause these words to benefit our lives.
- [7 : 47] And so I ask in this moment that you would grant us all the presence of mind and the goodness of heart to be able to engage in this moment with attentiveness and hearts that are postured to obey your word.
- Lord, I ask that you would grant me grace to be faithful to proclaim the truth this morning. recognizing that in and of myself I am nothing, in and of myself I am insufficient.
- And so I cry out to you, Lord, for help and for grace that I may speak as I ought to speak. And Father, I pray that you would use your word this morning for the profit of all of our souls.
- in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. I wonder this morning how many of you would rather attend a funeral than go to a party.
- How many of you would really be more eager to go to a funeral than to go to a party? I think if we're all honest, we would probably say, no, I'm not that eager to go to a funeral and if I had the choice between the funeral and the party, I'd go to a party.

[9 : 07] Yet in this passage before us, the preacher tells us that it is more beneficial for us to go to a funeral than to go to a party.

And the reason is that at a funeral or memorial service, we are made to think about death. We come face to face with death. And here's why that's beneficial.

It's beneficial because the day of death provides us with an opportunity to think more soberly about death and to live more wisely in life.

That is the consistent effect of death. It gives us an opportunity to think soberly about death and to live wisely in life.

The day of death has a tendency to slow us down and sober us up. It's a time when we come face to face with life's ultimate questions.

[10 : 25] And more importantly, we come face to face with the reality of our own death. Although this is not a funeral service this morning, the passage before us can have the same effect if we will let it.

This passage is an opportunity for us to think more soberly about death. And more wisely, we can live in life.

And the reality is we are all on our way to death. When we go to a funeral, we are to be mindful that the person who has died is just a few steps ahead of us.

More or less, and we come face to face with this reality in the passage before us. This section of Ecclesiastes that we have come to this morning is introduced in chapter 6 where we started to read in verse 10.

Look again at what the preacher says. He points out this practice that we human beings have about naming things. We name whatever exists or we name concepts so that we can understand them.

[11 : 44] That is something that is innate in us. We are not content having things around us that we don't have a name for. We name things. And then he refers to us.

He refers to man and he points out the fact that what is what is known about us. And he says that man is not able to dispute with one who is stronger than he.

And clearly the one who is stronger than man is God. And God is the one over whom we don't have control. He is the one whom we did not name.

He is the one who named us. And the preacher is helping us to see that in our quest to control and understand and name all things we aren't able to do it with God and there's this sense that he is saying to us talking about it is not going to change it.

That's the point he seems to be making in verse 11 when he says that talking is not going to change the arrangement. He says the more words the more meaninglessness.

[13 : 03] And he actually questions what advantage that would be to us to dispute with God as it were to try to vie for his place the one who is over all things and who is named all things he says there's no advantage to you to do that.

And then the preacher concludes with two questions in verse 12. And these questions introduce the main focus of the passage before us. The preacher asks these two questions for who knows what is good for man why he lives the few days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow.

That's the truth. Silas McKinney lived 89 years but the Bible will call it a shadow. Passes on this earth like a shadow. He goes on he says who can tell man what will be after him under the sun.

Now these two questions the preacher answers in verses 1 through 14 of chapter 7 and now remaining time I want to consider the answers that the preacher provides for us.

First in verses 1 through 12 in chapter 7 the preacher tells us three good things that man can do while he lives the few days of his life on the earth as a shadow as a fleeting breath.

[14 : 32] He says there are three good things that we can do. The first is number one we can reflect upon death.

We can reflect upon death. This is the point the preacher makes in verses 1 through 6. He's saying the same thing in different ways in these six verses.

In verse 1 he says a good name is better than precious ointment so is the day of death than the day of birth.

Now this proverb sets up this very important point that the preacher is seeking to make. When a person has a good name it means that he or she is known as a person of good character and we know that a good name is valuable a good name is an asset to have when you have a good name people will trust you and they will respect you and what the preacher is doing is the preacher is comparing a good name to precious ointment and this precious ointment is a type of perfume it's a fragrant perfume it would have been the same kind of perfume that was poured on the feet of Jesus a kind of nard but one of the things I know that we all know about perfume is that perfume wears off some of us may put perfume on this morning and you know maybe a couple hours later it's all gone it will not last but a good name that is truly reflective of good character will last and so the comparison between the day of death and the day of birth is similar and so the preacher is doing the preacher is comparing something that is of lasting value with something that is of fleeting value and what he says is that when a baby is born it's like the sweet fragrance of the precious ointment there's the excitement and joy and celebration but over the coming days and weeks and months the excitement wanes the celebration stops and it all wears off just like perfume but not so with death actually death begins to set in from the moment the baby is born when a baby is born the death clock starts ticking so why is the day of death better than the day of life or to put it another way why is it better to attend a funeral than a baby dedication but the preacher tells us the answer in verse 2 he says 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 see the reason it is better to go to the place where death is being mourned than a place where life is being celebrated is that death is the end of all mankind and the living in that context of mourning the living in the context of mourning death will lay it to heart and be aware that this is my end as well the point that the preacher is making is that when we attend a funeral we come face to face with what awaits us and we have an opportunity to reflect upon it to take it to heart we have an opportunity to think it through we have an opportunity to think of our life in relation to our death and this is why the day of death is better than the day of birth the day of birth does not bring us face to face with life's ultimate realities the way the day of death does in verse three the preacher tells us that sorrow is better than laughter for by sadness

of the face the heart is made glad commenting on this verse theologian Michael Eaton makes the point in his commentary on Ecclesiastes that may be put right or is put right is actually the appropriate translation which is better than made glad and he says it's because it means that the inner life may be better situated for making right judgments and estimations in one's approach to life and he goes on to make the point that a man who has looked deaf in the face may have his inner life transformed for the better not however that there's any automatic effect of suffering so he's making the point that when we are in the place of mourning when we are sad it is an opportunity for our hearts to be put right it's an opportunity for our hearts to be adjusted it's an opportunity for priorities to be shifted it's an opportunity for us to see as we ought to see instead of the way we by default see in verse 4 we are told that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth and here in this verse the preacher is not saying that the only place that you find wisdom is in the house of mourning we can find wisdom elsewhere but instead the preacher is calling us to appreciate and see the value in being reflective of death away from death scripture says the man thinks in his heart so is he so what the preacher is saying is that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning the heart of the wise thinks about death the heart of the wise contemplates death the heart of the wise does not live foolish and flippantly the heart of the wise is aware that when we say in the mornings or see this afternoon that that is informed with if the

[21 : 34] Lord wills the heart of the wise doesn't look at our age and say well I have more time the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning and being informed by the realities of death fools on the other hand don't think about death they ignore death as much as they can and their hearts are given over to folly and unreality and a necessary part of becoming a wise person is the willingness to be corrected the willingness to be rebuked by the wise or rebuked by wisdom and the house of mourning if we properly listen we will all be rebuked to one degree or another as we're reminded of the brevity of life and the certainty of death and we're reminded of what really matters as I reflected I could think about many many occasions as a matter of fact

I cannot think of an occasion where I have sat in a funeral absent mindedly and I wasn't corrected I wasn't adjusted I wasn't made to see in a different way than I had been seeing and I've come to the conclusion that as a pastor and being close to bereaved families at times and being aware of all the different things that could be going on in families which are surfaced in death come to the conclusion that a lot of the crying at a lot of funeral services have a whole lot to do with regret more than grief and said funeral services that you tend to put these things in better perspective and sadly some who are weeping some who are grieving the effect of death is setting upon them they're saying things the way they should see them but the person is dead sometimes relations are strained and sometimes forgiveness needed to be extended but it can't be extended because now the person is dead and a lot of the weeping is the hearts are being put right in terms of seeing reality as they should but it's just too late and we are rebuked by wisdom and when we're rebuked by wisdom we don't make excuses we don't try to defend if we are wise but here we should not confine the words of the preacher just to the time of mourning because being rebuked the correction of the wise is on a broad and wide spectrum it's not just when we do something wrong it is also when we are doing something that's not beneficial and be challenging us with our priorities and our passions and how we use our time and how we spend our money and the preacher tells us it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools and I think we would all agree that the rebuke of the wise is far less pleasant than the song of fools who might even be praising us and commending us but it's a song of a fool and why is this the preacher tells us in verse six he says for the crackling of thorns under a pot as the crackling of thorns under a pot so is the laughter of fools this is also vanity the laughter of fools is a bunch of meaningless noise it's just like the thorns being burned under a pot the laughter of fools will soon end will soon be of no value and the preacher is telling us that in this broken and fallen world in which all mankind is headed to death we would be wise to reflect on death rather than being distracted by the trivial passing things of this life and so in light of the preacher's words calling us to reflect upon death how do you view death do you view it as a future reality and certainty that awaits you and that you take seriously or do you ignore it and live for the moment and try to have as much fun as possible

out of every moment of life and truth be told the life to come is more important than this life and we have to use this life to prepare for that next life and while we will all face death only once in this life we will face adversity many times we will face hardship and difficulties and challenges many many times in this life and in verses 7 through 9 we find the second good thing that the preacher calls us to do as we live the few days of our fleeting lives on this earth in verses 7 through 9 he tells us be patient in adversity be patient in adversity in verse 7 the preacher sobers us by telling us that oppression can drive the wise into madness and that a bribe can corrupt the heart that a bribe can corrupt an otherwise good heart and the oppression that is in view is not just from people the oppression that is in view can come from hard circumstances in life as well and these are the realities that we all face

I'm sure you've heard of people who under pressure made some bad or wrong decision some decisions that contradict the wisdom that they're known for perhaps it was a loss of a job or costly illness mounting financial pressures or even living under the unreasonable expectations of people those kinds of situations can bring about the kind of oppressive and adverse circumstances that could tempt an otherwise wise person to commit foolish sinful acts and often times what is needed is patience waiting on the Lord but rather than waiting on the Lord some people panic out of fear and commit folly and we see the reason that patience is required in verse 8 the preacher says better is the end of a thing than its beginning so we need to patiently wait and not lose heart because it looks bad in the moment when the adversity sets in it looks bad when you hear the initial report of what the situation really is but the preacher says the end is better and to get from the start of it to the end of it where it's better requires patience but in this fallen world as we face adversity and we face these situations that tempt us we become impatient and sometimes we even become angry sometimes people become angry they would think in a vacuum where they're too smart to openly direct their anger to

God but they carry the anger and the anger spews on those around them patience is an expression of humility while impatience is an expression of pride notice how the preacher helps us to see that in verse 8 he says better is the end of a thing than its beginning and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit there's this connection between patience and humility and impatience and pride and when we respond with patience it is an expression of humility and when we respond with impatience it is an expression of pride and that leads to anger and in verse 9 the preacher cautions us against anger notice what he says verse 9 be not quick in your spirit to become angry for anger lodges in the bosom of fools in other words the person who is quick to become angry is simply an angry person anger defines him or her anger lives in his or her bosom such a person is a foolish person and such persons are foolish because they don't understand life and they don't understand how to respond in adversity we are called to be patient in adversity and again one of the reasons is that the situation in the end will work out it will be better even though in the beginning it might not seem so some of us at this very point

[32:11] I am aware are walking through adversity adversity related to health adversity related to finances related to employment related to marriage related to parenting and the list goes on I want to ask you this morning is your approach to adversity in your life marked by patience by humble waiting for the Lord or is it marked by impatience is it marked by anger is it marked by this attitude that somehow life has dealt you a sour hand and it is unfair and it spews out in anger on those around you I think the preacher is saying to us adversity is a part of life things don't always go the way we want them to go but we can respond with patience because the things are going to go and the end is going to be better than the beginning let us respond to adversity with patience the third good thing that the preacher tells us that we can do as we spend our few fleeting years on this earth is we should number three apply wisdom to all of life apply wisdom to all of life the preacher makes this point in verses 10 through 12 notice again what he says say not why were the former days better than these for it is not from wisdom that you ask this 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 as we live life and we meet with various challenges and difficulties we are often tempted to long for the so called good old days we long for the past when we didn't have the particular challenges that we are faced with and I'm sure all of us at some point in time have longed for the past maybe this week maybe today you've longed for something that you had in the past but the preacher says it is not from wisdom that we ask why were the former days better than these and the reason it's not wise is that all the days and every generation has its own set of challenges its own set of opportunities as well and if we long for the days of the past we will not see the opportunities in the present there are challenges and opportunities together and instead what we should be doing rather than longing for the good old days and questioning why those days were better than these we should be longing for wisdom so that we will know how to navigate life and we will navigate all the twists and turns of life and all of its disappointments and sorrows although wisdom

is needed for this life we are reminded that not everyone has wisdom wisdom is not a common possession it is not something that every single person has if everyone had wisdom there would be no fools but the preacher reminds us in verse 11 that not everybody has wisdom he says wisdom is good with an inheritance an advantage to those who see the sun those with wisdom in this life have an advantage and the reason is in verse 12 wisdom is like money the same way money can serve as a protection can protect us in times of unexpected financial demands in life money can protect us from financial difficulties by providing what we need to meet them wisdom in the same way can protect us wisdom is knowing how to navigate through life's decisions with its twists and turns and its bumps and its valleys wisdom is valuable and sometimes wisdom is more important than having money there are some situations in this life that money just will not answer we need wisdom we need wisdom to live well we need wisdom as a primary thing and it's interesting that when we read the book of proverbs time and time again in the book of proverbs we are told to cry out for wisdom to seek wisdom we're never told to cry out for money never told to seek money and the reason is wisdom is necessary we need wisdom because it enables us to live well notice what the preacher says he says the advantage of knowledge is in verse 12 towards the end the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it knowledge alone is not even enough we need wisdom in addition to that knowledge because the wisdom is protective and just to be clear when we talk about wisdom and we talk about folly scripture uses the words differently the wise man is not the smart man the foolish man is not the dumb man when scripture refers to the wise and refers to the foolish person the wise person is the person who lives life with reference to

God the foolish person is the one who lives life indifferent to God and sometimes even an outright rebellion against God and so I want to ask you this morning what's your view of wisdom do you truly see wisdom as being more valuable than money more important than money see because true wisdom is going to lead us to God true wisdom is going to cause us to rightly relate to God true wisdom is going to cause us to navigate through life as we ought money offers no guarantee that it'll do that as a matter of fact as we heard last week money can have quite the opposite effect money can be a snare to our souls and this is not to live in unreality and not recognize that we need money to take care of our needs but it is to put money in its rightful place and what scripture says is wisdom is necessary we need wisdom to navigate through this life in a way that is pleasing to God and so I wonder this morning whether you are aware of your need for wisdom perhaps you need financial resources this morning but are you aware that more than those resources what you really need is wisdom and are you applying wisdom to the situations in front of you rather than longing for the good old days well to summarize in these twelve verses the preacher helps us to see three good things that we can do while we live on this earth and in essence wait for the day of our death three good things one we can reflect on death we can be patient in adversity and apply wisdom to all of life the preacher's second question in verse twelve of chapter six is this for who can tell man what will be after him under the sun well the preacher answers this question in verses thirteen and fourteen and he does so by calling man to trust in the sovereign

God who sovereignly reigns over all of life notice first of all what he says in verse thirteen consider the work of God who can make straight what he has made crooked here we see the sovereignty of God we see that God ordains particular things he sets things in a particular way and we are called to consider his work we can't change his work but we are called to consider his work what he has made crooked we may not like we may not prefer we can't make it straight we can consider it but we can't make it straight what a sovereign God wills and brings to pass cannot be changed and the preacher brings it home by telling us to consider further this other reality about the sovereignty of God in verse fourteen he says in the day of prosperity be joyful and in the day of adversity consider

God has made one as well as the other so that man may not find out anything that will be after him he raises these two big issues the issue of prosperity and adversity and truth be told if we can choose we would only choose days of prosperity but the preacher reminds us that God has made both prosperity and adversity they come from the hand of a good God an all knowing God a wise and a sovereign and all powerful God he says and in the day of prosperity be joyful rejoice the day of adversity we are to consider and if you consider what the preacher is saying to us it is a given that we will have both the preacher assumes that we will have both he assumes that we will have days of prosperity he doesn't say in the day of prosperity be joyful and if the day of adversity comes consider he says no in the day of adversity in other words it's going to come and when it comes here's what you are to do you are to consider that God has made one as well as the other and that man so that man may not find out what will be after him the preacher is in essence saying to us that rather than engage in the futile task of trying to replace adversity with prosperity in our own strength we are to instead ponder use that energy to ponder use that energy to consider

[45 : 13] God has made both of them and he has a purpose behind each of them Michael Eaton comments on verse 14 in his commentary on Ecclesiastes and he writes the following both prosperity and adversity have their uses one leads to joy and the other draws attention to the realities of life and leads if so allowed to a life of faith in the sovereign God both are subject to God's will and part of his providence the constant fluctuation between them keeps us dependent not on our own guesswork but on God who holds the key to all unknown so

God doesn't want us preoccupied with the unknown he doesn't want us to be preoccupied with what is coming after us he wants us to only be occupied with what is in front of us if it's a day of prosperity be joyful in it but if it's a day of adversity take the time to ponder the work of God the great German reformer Martin Luther said it well when he said let us therefore be content with the things that are present and commit ourselves into the hand of God who alone knows and controls both the past and the future brothers and sisters we live in a broken fallen world and as we live in this broken fallen world we are to consider the work of God in the midst of the crooked things that we would rather be straight we are to consider that

God is working out a sovereign good purpose in our lives and in his world Doug Sean O'Donnell in his commentary in Ecclesiastes wisely writes God can twist the times so that a proud boy sold into slavery a bad thing that's Joseph is the very man God uses to save thousands of people from starvation a good thing God can twist the time so that an evil nation destroys a holy building that's the Babylonians a bad thing so that another nation the nation of Israel which is called to be holy might repent a good thing in both the good and the bad days we are to bless the name of the

Lord and Donald goes on further and he says this trust in the Lord sovereign purposes knowing that he once used the worst day in human history the day of Christ crucifixion to bring hope and happiness to the world forever and so brothers and sisters this morning and guests let us take the counsel of the preacher in Ecclesiastes as we live our few lives on this earth as he says as a shadow as a shadow that will soon pass let us reflect on death it's where we're all headed let us be patient in adversity it's going to come then let us apply wisdom to all of life we need wisdom we need to be crying out to

God for wisdom and I want to encourage you as I've seen the need to do this for myself as I studied to prepare this message we need to be more intentional to pray for wisdom we need wisdom in the day of prosperity that we don't squander it we need wisdom in the day of adversity that we don't squander that let us humbly ponder God's work and let us keep ourselves from the futile speculations of things that God has chosen not to reveal to us but he has left compartmentalized in his own sovereign purposes that he has not revealed those of you who are here this morning and you don't know

[50 : 41] Jesus Christ in some respects you've been listening in on a conversation you've been listening in on a conversation that really is for the people of God those who have come to know Jesus Christ in the pardon of their sins those who have been forgiven of their sins those who are on their way to death and after death they won't be condemned I want to say to you this morning that you're on the same journey to death but outside of Jesus Christ there awaits what the Bible calls the wrath of God to all who do not repent and what scripture says is that all those who come to Jesus confessing their sins all those who come to Jesus repenting of their sins he will receive and he will pardon and he will restore in relationship to

God and so I said to you this morning believe the good news that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners and those who come to him he will not turn away so come to Jesus and believe in him he alone is mighty to save let's pray