

Why Wisdom is Always Worthwhile

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a delight to be back here this morning looking at this wonderful book, this misunderstood book. I'd like to focus our attention on chapter 7 this morning, and chapter 7 follows many of the major themes of Ecclesiastes so far, but here we have quite a special emphasis on wisdom, I think.

Now, in terms of structure, what I'm going to talk about this morning, I think there are four main points that the writer's trying to get across.

So I'll talk in four sections. Section 1, verses 1 to 6, let's call this section Wisdom That Comes Through Adversity. Wisdom That Comes Through Adversity.

So the first line there, have a look at it. A good name is better than precious ointment. So I think the preacher of Ecclesiastes launches this chapter, launches his argument here with a truism, something that everyone would agree on, i.e. a good man, you know, in those days, somebody with a good character is better than having nice perfume, having nice things.

I think we'd all agree with that. So I think he starts with that. He gets the ball rolling. People read it. They nod their heads and go, of course that's correct. But then for the next six verses, he gives us things which would give us pause, which people would think, huh, I'm not sure about that one.

[1 : 20] A good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death better than the day of birth. I think that would cause people to pause right there. And he goes on in this vein, verse 2, it's better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

Going to the house of mourning, that means going to the home of someone who's died and perhaps they're laid out there, like Jesus when he visited Lazarus. So why would the preacher say things like this?

Surely, given the choice, you'd rather go to a birthday party than a funeral. Does the writer have something against happiness? No, he's not anti-joy. We know that because in many places later in the book and before, he urges us to enjoy life.

Eat, drink, be merry. Anyway, the issue at hand is not what is more enjoyable for us. The issue is what is ultimately better for us. And he says it is better to go to a funeral than it is to go to a party.

Now, why would he say such a thing? Because when you go to a funeral, the house of mourning, we're confronted by something that we generally don't want to think about.

[2 : 31] Especially in Vancouver 2015. If in Victorian times the taboo topic was sex, today surely it's death. We don't like to talk about it or even think about it.

I mean, you want to bring a dinner party to a crashing halt, just lean over to your host and say, have you given much thought to your death recently? Oh, we don't like to talk about it, don't like to think about it, but we should, and we should with regularity.

The Puritans had many spiritual practices. I'm sure you're aware of this. And one of them was biblical meditation. Where they would put time aside just to think well about something, to think long biblically about something.

And they had a list of topics. One of the topics they were supposed to meditate on daily was their own death. They were supposed to consider that. And that was a good thing. You know, being confronted by death shakes us up.

It makes us think about how we're living. It makes us think about what kind of spiritual shape we want to be in when we do eventually die. Seeing death firsthand, going to the house of mourning, it focuses our eyes wide open to the important things of life.

[3 : 43] I asked the ministers at St. John's. You remember this, just last week. I asked all the ministers at St. John's, I said, would you rather officiate a funeral or a wedding? And every single one of them said they would much rather officiate a funeral.

And that's because at funerals they said people actually listen to your sermon. And afterwards people want to have real conversations with you because they're shaken up. And that's what being confronted by death does.

Shakes us up, but in a good way. And you mean, what's the alternative to that? The alternative is this. It's, well, I'll put it this way. What does life look like for a person who's trying to ignore the house of mourning? It's a life spent maximizing time in the house of feasting.

That's verse 2, isn't it there? It's a life trivialized away. It's a life of distraction, vainly attempting to take your mind off the inevitable. Folks, that is not how the wise live.

That is how the fool lives. My old high school, Auckland Boys Grammar. It was a very, very strict boys school.

[4 : 48] If you were disobedient, you were caned. They'd hit you, they'd beat you with sticks. Now, I don't have anything particularly against that, to be honest. But let me tell you about this more.

The teachers would like to show you their instruments of punishment. And one teacher, Mr. Wilson, he was a music teacher. He imported his cane from Singapore.

So you can imagine it was a very good one. Long, thin, made out of fiberglass. Let me tell you something. About my school. There was 1,500 boys at my school.

There was no ADHD at my school. There was none. Seeing the cane sitting on the teacher's desk had a wonderful way of focusing the mind at the task at hand.

That's what the house of mourning does, I think. Gets you focused. Makes you live better. Makes you live wiser. Now, as Christians, because of our faith in Jesus, of all people, you know, we should have no need to distract our minds from death.

[5 : 59] Because we follow one who conquered it. Now, I'll talk more about that later. So moving on with this particular passage here. In summary so far, what have we said? It's good to be confronted by death, because if you're not thinking about death well, you're probably not living well.

Now, Ecclesiastes, he reiterates this point in verses 3 to 60. You see verses 3. Sorrow is better than laughter. I mean, it's counterintuitive, isn't it? Verse 4.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. The heart of fools is in the house of mirth. I mean, this is a nonsense to our sort of modern sensitivities. But here's what he's trying to say. You will learn more from one good funeral than you will from a thousand parties.

And what you will learn will make you wiser. Unlike the fool who, by choice, is blind to the deeper issues of life and just wants a constant stream of good times.

The poem by a guy called Robert Browning Hamilton is a 19th century English poet. Very short poem. Let me read it to you. I think he summarizes this well. He says this. I'll end my point here.

[7 : 20] Dealing with death and sorrow and the adversity that comes with it is much better for preparing us for our own life and our own death than anything else.

Alfred Noble was a Swedish man, born in 1833. He invented dynamite. He became fabulously wealthy. He had the rare opportunity of reading his own obituary. What happened is his brother Ludwig died.

And through a journalistic error, they printed Alfred's obituary in the paper the next day. And so Alfred woke up in the morning, opened his morning paper and saw his own death notice.

And it was quite a shock to him. What was a real shock to him though was what they wrote about him because he got to see what others actually thought about him and his work and his life. So in the obituary, he read a few of them.

One of them he was described as a man who made millions through the deaths of others. One French newspaper wrote this. Noble was a man who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before.

[8 : 24] Now of course he was stunned by this. And as a result, became determined to do something to improve his legacy. And a year before he died in 1896, he signed his last will and testament and set aside the vast majority of his wealth to establish the five Nobel Prizes, including one for peace.

Folks, have your death before you. You will live wiser for it. I'm not just talking about you'll be nice and you'll do better things.

Having your death before you will bring you to Jesus. And you know as a Christian, it is your duty to die well, trusting in Christ. Think about it now while you're in fairly decent shape and not when it's too late and not while or when you are maybe blinded by the temptations that come with death.

That's the end of our first section, section one. Section two, and we'll move quicker here. Second point here, the preacher of Ecclesiastes moves from the benefits of facing death and mourning and sorrow to the dangers that we face when we go through suffering.

So we've just said sorrow, dealing with death, it can be good for us, it can make us wiser, bring us to God, but not always. There are dangers and trials and there are many and he lists a number of them and let's just, I'll list a few off to you.

[9 : 45] The first danger here, verse seven, surely oppression drives the wise into madness and a bribe corrupts the heart. So under extreme oppression, we become mad, we become corrupt, we become part of the system of oppression.

The second danger, verse nine, do not, be not quick in your spirit to become angry for anger lodges in the heart of fools. So in Ecclesiastes, the anger it's talking about, it's generally a particular type of anger.

It's an anger that comes with, like a frustration that comes with being perplexed by life. You know, why me? Why is this happening to me? Why not the guy up the road, God?

I'm the nice guy, he's the bad guy. I can tell you where he lives. Why me? Sometimes our trials don't make us wiser, they just make us angry.

And that anger can become lodged in our heart, becomes part of who we are and how we live. And we need to bring that anger to God and ask for his grace. Another danger it lists here, verse 10, say not, why were the former days better than these?

[10 : 54] For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. So the third danger, when suffering, when in adversity, is misplaced nostalgia. Do you remember, does anyone here know the song Glory Days by Bruce Springsteen?

Does that ring a bell with anybody? Great. Shall I sing a little bit to you? Okay, just to remind you, it's like, you know, glory days, they'll pass you back. No? Yep. The voice of an angel, they say.

So, there's three verses and the first verse, you'll know, it's very catchy. It's, I had a friend who was a big baseball player back in high school. And then the second verse is, he's talking about a beauty queen, a former beauty queen.

So in the first verse, it's, I had this, I've got this friend who he used to play baseball with and now he's older. When we go to the bars or the pubs, all he wants to talk about is the good old days. This other friend's this lady who was the beauty queen and now she's, marriage is broken and she's a single mother and all she wants to talk about is, you know, when she was beauty queen.

The last verse. So it's a very catchy song but it's actually a very sad song. The last verse is this. Think I'm going down to the well tonight and I'm going to get, and I'm going to drink till I get my fill and I hope when I get old I don't sit around thinking about, but I probably will.

[12 : 08] Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory while time slips away and leaves you with nothing, mister, but boring stories of glory days. They'll pass you by, glory days, in the wink of a young girl's eye, glory days, glory days.

So twisted nostalgia. This is the sin that the Israelites fell into when their hearts looked back at Egypt, right? They'd escaped from Egypt and they're in the wilderness and they're looking back going, oh, it was so much better then.

Our temptation now when suffering is to pine unhelpfully for better days past. Now, to evaluate your life now and say, this is really difficult and before it was really easy, that's okay, that's fine.

But to long for the old days as an escape, as a way of not dealing with your current troubles, that's foolish. I think it's helpful to remember Psalm 118.

This is the day the Lord has made. This is the day of God. This is the day we must deal with. Nostalgia probably doesn't help. Another danger, danger four, trying to make sense of God's plans and getting frustrated when you can't.

[13 : 24] Now, the preacher in Ecclesiastes gives us an example, verse 15. A very good example. In my vain life, I've seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing.

Why do the good die young sometimes? The evil seem to live for a long time. Why does that happen? Well, let me give you an illustration. If you remember the tsunami that killed about 200,000 people in 2004.

So I had two friends that died in that tsunami. That was sort of in my part of the world. And there were a young couple, newlyweds, in Indonesia, there, on an extended honeymoon, setting up an orphanage.

And they were killed in the tsunami. Now, flip side. I read the other day that it was Robert Mugabe's birthday. In his 35-year rule of Zimbabwe, he has systematically destroyed the country.

Once, quite a prosperous place. Zimbabwe is now one of the poorest in the world. They have almost the lowest life expectancy rate in the world, in part because there's not enough money to pay for simple things like removing sewage.

[14 : 30] Can't pay doctors. Can't pay nurses. Mugabe had his birthday party. He spent \$1 million on his birthday party. He turned 91. Why do the good die young?

Why do the evil seem to live long and prosper? This is the kind of injustice that Ecclesiastes is talking about here, that the preacher is talking about. It's the opposite of how we think God should govern a just world.

Now, the danger is we think this. We think, where is God? Perhaps he's not just. Perhaps he's not there. The danger is trying to untangle God's plan with our thimble full of knowledge.

It's an exercise in frustration. The preacher of Ecclesiastes doesn't explain the reasons behind what looks like an injustice. He doesn't explain God's wisdom.

He doesn't try and get behind it. It's just a blunt statement. He says, this happens. Sometimes the righteous perish. Sometimes the evil people prosper. This is the way it is.

[15 : 28] The good die, the evil live. This is how life it is. You must face life how it really is. And however it really is, that's what you trust God in.

You're not going to untangle it. Verse 13 explains this. Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what God has made crooked? Now we'll move on again to the next point.

Moving quicker again. So the main point here I think is in suffering and trials they can make you wiser but there's dangers. Section 3 in the passage is an umbrella point to everything we've said so far.

It says get wisdom. That's it. Basically get wisdom. It's good. Verses 11, 12 and 19. Wisdom is good with an inheritance and advantage to those who see the sun for the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money.

In verse 19 wisdom gives strength to the man more than ten rulers in a city. So look at 11 and 12 first here. He's saying and if we encompass all we read about in Ecclesiastes about this topic he's saying this that wisdom is that wealth is beneficial but without wisdom it will not sustain you.

[16 : 46] There was a study in New York a while ago that followed on from a massive increase in suicide amongst teens of wealthy parents and in a paraphrased summary of that study here's what they said when kids have complete financial security provision and an exhaustive wide range of opportunities for recreation and pleasure it leads to apathy a sense of entitlement and insecurity and the problem is as you pile these kids up with prosperity you never teach them sacrificial service you never teach them to be committed to something bigger than themselves and their souls rot and they despair so there's nothing inherently wrong with wealth it's just that Ecclesiastes says it offers some protection in life but wisdom offers more so much more and on a much deeper level now after this exhortation you'd expect the preacher of Ecclesiastes to give us his 10 hot tips on gaining wisdom wouldn't you but he doesn't he does the opposite actually he says this verse 20 surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins and he nails his point home and this is my last section section 4 and in summary he says this and by the way he says no one's wise no one's wise this is what he discovers verse 25 to 29

I turn my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness behold this is what I found says the preacher in verse 27 while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things which my soul has sought repeatedly but I've not found one man I among a thousand I found but a woman among all of these I've not found see this alone I found God has made man upright but they sought out many schemes so after all his exhortations for wisdom he seems to conclude no one is wise now don't get too hung up on the man woman thing here in verse 29 one man among a thousand I found but a woman among all of these I've not found he's not saying men are wiser than women he's not making a gender distinction here he's talking about his personal experience it's a general it's not a general statement about gender he's saying look I talk to a lot of people wise people are almost non-existent that's his point so the end of this chapter after urging us to live wisely he finishes with this broad indictment of humanity remember preacher of ecclesiastes he's been on a search right think through wisdom and I don't think this is the answer or the conclusion he was hoping for but it's essential that it's a conclusion that we arrive at if we are to actually live wisely in the short time we have on earth we must accept that people are just not clever foolishness marks every aspect of our life we must realize that if we are we must realize that we do not have it in us to be as wise as we need to be but this is a big but but through faith we can receive forgiveness for our foolishness and that frees us from the past frees us from our past and we can actually submit our lives to Christ and receive his spirit and know God's wisdom and how does that happen well let's return to verse 15 again there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life and evil do the good die young and the evil stay alive the righteous one gets nailed and the wicked are let off this is how God does it amazingly this is how we receive God's wisdom this is how we are made right with God this is how we don't suffer the punishment of fools this is the path of wisdom

Jesus dies an early undeserved death and we let off the punishment now let me finish here with reading a couple of verses from 1 Corinthians 1 which I think captures this better than I could from 1 Corinthians 1 just a few verses Paul says this we preach Christ crucified Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God for the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men for consider your calling brothers not many of you were wise according to worldly standards not many were powerful not many were of noble birth but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being can boast in the presence of God and because of him you are in Christ who became wisdom from

God righteousness and sanctification and redemption folks would you have that in your hearts this morning as we come to the table Amen what do on the