

How to Handle Adversity

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[0 : 00] 6. And we actually finished chapter 6, but I do want to go back a wee bit as we look at this together, and then we will be into chapter 7. We're more than halfway through Ecclesiastes, and tonight's isn't too complicated. I'm going to go through it fairly quickly.

That's famous last words. That never means anything, really does it. I don't know why I keep saying that, but I'll try. I'll try. Ecclesiastes 6, reading from verse 10 into chapter 7 up to verse 14.

The preacher says, whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known. No one can contend with someone who is stronger. The more the words, the less the meaning. And how does that profit anyone? For who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow, who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? 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. It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the songs of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. 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. Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing, and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter.

But the advantage of knowledge is this. Wisdom preserves those who have it. 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. We'll end our reading at the end of verse 14 to Ecclesiastes 6, and especially chapter 7. While you're doing that, can I just remind you, I see there's one copy left.

[3 : 08] I printed six of these out this morning, so it's great to know that five are gone. How to spend a day in prayer. I mentioned this because if you weren't here this morning, we were looking at John's gospel, and how the early disciples, before they were called, some of them spent a day with Jesus, we're told. After this, they confessed he is the Son of God. And if Jesus is less than impressive to us, then that's what we need to do, spend time in his presence, quality time, not just praying and moving on, but talking to him, just simply talking to him. So, if you want this, I'll leave this here, one copy left. And if you want one and somebody's taken this, come and see me, and I'll print you out another one. How to spend a day with the Lord. Very important.

Let's come before God. Let's ask for his help. A loving Father, with your word open before us, we come to a difficult portion of your word, Lord, in the book of Ecclesiastes. Sometimes difficult for us to understand and even to embrace, Lord, what we read. Sometimes it just appears negative and meaningless in some ways. But, Lord, we know the futility of this life without you at the center. And, Father, we thank you that we have come to know this for ourself. So, Father, as we come to consider your word again, speak to us, we pray. Bring us into the light of your countenance. Show us Jesus afresh. We ask these things in his name. Amen. Job. You know the book of Job and how he suffered. Here's a wee kind of image that I came across.

This is what sometimes we can be like. We go out at times in the life of a wee cloud. And if somebody met Job during his day, they would know who he was. You must be Job. Life is hard for you.

[4 : 57] Life is difficult. And you might feel like Job, or maybe you've gone through experiences, maybe not quite as similar. His was very severe. But maybe the difficult times in life. How do you cope with things when they're bad and you don't feel, what am I getting out of this? Life is a struggle. That's what we're looking at tonight in the passage before us. Where is God? How does God fit into those difficult times? Where is wisdom during those times? And that's what we're going to look at this evening as we look at this. We're looking at the book of Ecclesiastes. If you've been with us up until this point, you know that the preacher, the teacher, the speaker in the assembly is looking at life under the sun, basically from two perspectives. Life without God, what's the point?

What's it all about? We live, we eat, drink, be merry, we die. What was it all about? Is this life all there is? And if you're a Christian, you know that's not the case. Life only makes sense. The world, the whole solar sense, when you see God as creator, as he has a plan, he has a purpose, there is a purpose for life. And only Jesus makes sense of this. He is what the Bible is all about.

And the preacher is looking at life from those two perspectives. And up to this point, he's tried everything that the world say. He had wealth, he had wisdom, and yet all of these things left him empty without God. And we've been looking at all of these things together, many, many topics. Last time, we looked at the topic of money, how it disappoints. We never have enough. How it hurts us. It leaves us fragile. We have to leave it behind. It changes us, makes us money-grabbing. It frustrates us.

We can get angry and so forth. It can depress us. It never satisfies us. There's no real enjoyment in it. But we finish with looking at God's gifts. God not only knows how to bless us, give us what we want, give us what we need, sometimes withholds it from us. We don't grudge God when he does this, because he gives us contentment. He gives us enjoyment, even in terms of wealth. And we looked at all of that last time. Now, when we come to this section, we are looking at dealing with adversity, dealing with difficult times. Chapter 6, verse 10, I preached on that last time, or I mentioned it briefly about someone who operates, but there's somebody above them, and how can they function when there's somebody above them in that way? I want to go back to that verse, because it sets the context in some ways for what's about to come. There's a sense of fatalism about verse 10 in chapter 6. Look at this. Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known.

No one can contend with someone who is stronger. What the preacher here is saying, he goes, what already exists, what already exists has already been named. In other words, it's already been predetermined. When something is named, our daughter will give birth, hopefully, to a wee baby at the start of December. We've not asked her if she has a name for this wee boy yet, hoping it goes to full term and so forth. She knows, but she will name him, her and her husband will name. When God creates the world, he names things. He gave us power to name things. When you name things, that is you, that is your wee possession. When our girls were growing up, they had dolls, and every time you asked them, what are you going to call a doll? It was always Rosie. Rosie, every time.

[8 : 50] Rosie was the name, and it was funny. What are you going to name? And what this is saying is, there is someone stronger than us who has already named things. Things are already predetermined.

And that is what you have here. Job had to learn this, that God was determining things, things were happening, of which he had no control over. It's a big thing when you learn that, that God is stronger than you, God is bigger than you. He's already named things as they relate to you.

He's given you days, the hours, the days, the minutes, the years that are already predetermined for you. God decides. And he mentions this in verse 12 of chapter 6, For who knows what is good for a person in life? During the few meaningless days they pass through it like a shadow. Who can tell them what will happen under the sun? So, the preacher here is looking to someone stronger than us who names things, who is in control. But you notice in chapter 7, he has a good doctrine of the providence of God, of the care of God. Look at verses 13 and 14 of chapter 7. Consider what God has done. This is a stronger one who names things. Who can straighten what he has made crooked? This is what Job had to learn. When times are good, be happy, he says. But when times are bad, consider this. God has made the one as well as the other. Sometimes we think God, when things are good, God is good. When things are bad, God isn't involved. God makes the sun shine on the righteous and the unrighteous. It rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. So, here you see the preacher has this strong view of the providence of God. God is sovereign. He names. And

whether it's good or bad, they're coming us this way. He has ordained both. He sees the hand of God in many things.

We cannot change this when God determines. He knows what is good for us. So, when our times are good, be happy, he says. When times are bad, consider that God has made both. And it's good for us to do this. And that's what we're going to do looking at a few topics that the preacher mentions, to consider how we cope with these bad times, these difficult times. So, I'm going to go through these fairly quickly because I don't think there's anything I can tell you this evening that you do not already know.

But it's just to reaffirm them again in your own mind. So, first of all then, in these five or six things that he mentions, the first thing he mentions in the bad times that God ordains for us is death or mourning when this comes our way. You have in this passage, chapter 7, a very strange set of sayings by the preacher. They almost appear ludicrous and absurd. It's better to go to a funeral than to go to the house of feasting. And you know this. He's contrasting two things, mourning with feasting or mourning with pleasure. And he concludes in verse 2, it's better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting. Now, if you voted on this in Western Hills tonight, don't be surprised if 99% don't agree with that. Most people will live, there's a restaurant in, for instance, in Musselburgh that we've been trying to go to.

[12 : 34] They keep saying it's the best restaurant in Scotland, believe it or not. Anyway, Lucila and I keep trying to go to it. We're looking forward to that. We just said today, let's book this up for Friday and we'll go to this restaurant. That'll be nice. That'll be a house of feasting. Now, we don't get excited if there's a funeral coming up this week. So, what is this all about? It just doesn't make any sense. Deep down we know it's rather going to a house of feasting than a house of mourning. Well, you know, if you're a Christian, you already know this, because when you go to a funeral, it causes you to take seriously the brevity of life, that life is short. And I preach it. I've not done a funeral here. I can't believe I've been here for nearly a year and a half and not done a single funeral. He's disappointing me. Come on, folks.

I've not had a single funeral. Anyway, I'm used to doing so many, and especially non-Christians. I do many of these in London. It's my service to the community in that way. But it gives you a great opportunity to get people to sit up and take notice of their mortality. You will not live forever. This person here shows us that we live and we will die. We are all going to go that way. And that is why funerals cause us to take what is important very seriously. House of feasting is good for the moment. It lasts for a bit. It's good fun. You enjoy it. It's good laughter, joking, and so forth. You go home and it's gone. It quickly evaporates. But the thoughts that you have at a funeral really can wake you up. Victorian days, I think I've mentioned this before, they used to speak very freely about death. But they never spoke publicly about sex. Nowadays, it's the opposite way. Folk readily, comedians will talk about sex quite freely. But folk don't talk about death. Even when funeral service, we talk about somebody who's departed, who's passed away, who's not with us anymore, who has gone to a better place, rather than just saying what's actually happened to them, they've died. That is the reality of it. The person is no longer alive. They have died. Phil Riken, in his commentary, says this, In his novel, *The Second Coming*, Walker Percy writes, The present-day unbeliever is crazy, because he finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies. He takes his comfort and ease, plays along with the game, watches TV, drinks, and his drink laughs, and for all the world, as if his prostate were not growing cancerous, his arteries turning to chalk, his brain cells dying by the millions, as if the worms were not going to have him in no time at all. That's very graphic, isn't it? Never thinks that these things are all going to happen. We eat, drink, and be merry. But the preacher says, verse 4, For the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of the fools is in the house of pleasure, because it causes us to take seriously the most important things of life.

[15 : 55] People begin to wonder about life, the brevity of life, and that's why the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. For a Christian, in many ways the Christian, we already know that we are ready to die. We have encountered the reality of this. That's why in verse 1 of chapter 7 he says, The day of death is better than the day of birth. The Christian can say that. Let me read to you from Philip Ryken's commentary again. It says, This is why the day of a believer's death is the best day of all. In the day of his birth, he was born to die. The minute you're born, you're born to die. That's what Thomas Boston says.

In the day of his death, he dies to live. Thomas Boston further describes our dying day as the day we enter a better world with higher perfection, greater purity, deeper rest, better company, higher perfection, better employment than the world we entered on the day we were born. Death is our entrance to glory. It's what C. H. Spurgeon described as reaching our port, all danger over, and we have come to our desired haven. That is why we can say the day of our death is better than the day of our birth. We die and we live. When we are born, we are born to die.

And that is what the preacher wants to impress upon us, death. That is how we should view death. Take it seriously. And only in God, only in the gospel does death really make sense and can be a victory over death. You know this if you're a Christian. You've been to many funerals, and we impress us upon a world who doesn't take it seriously. We have to do this. The second bad thing you could say that happens to us is sorrow. Sorrow. Here the preacher contrast sorrow with laughter.

Look at verse 3. Frustration is better than laughter. Or if you're using an old version of the NIV, it says sorrow is better than laughter. So, it doesn't necessarily mean death. It's just anything that makes us sad. It's another strange thing, isn't it? How's a house of mourning better than a house of feasting? How can sadness be better than laughter? He tells us why in verse 3.

Sorrow is better than laughter because a sad face is good for the heart. A sad face is. Now, why is a sad face good for the heart? In many ways, sadness and sorrow helps us appreciate what we have.

[18:44] I was saying to Lucille, I think I was sharing. I can't remember if I shared with you on Wednesday. I'm having a problem with my gutters. I'm on a block of eight tenants with gutters that are, it's like the beach grove garden. Everything is growing out of these things. And I'm frustrated because nobody seems to bother. And I'm up there, and I'm thinking, 30 feet in the air, trying to kind of clear out those gutters. And it's just annoying. And I need help from the tenants up there. One let me in, cleared it out. The other two didn't. And they're driving me nutty. Just, ah, Saturday afternoon, I thought, I've got better things to do with my time than clear out gutters. And all they're doing is giving me grief. And then it was really getting to me, and I had to stop. I really had to stop and think, I've got a lovely wife and two daughters, and my house is okay. And I started to recall everything that I had much to rejoice in. And only then did the gutters just seem to disappear.

And I couldn't care a job about the gutters. And life is good. And that's what bad things cause you to do. They cause you to wander away from the, woe is me, everybody hates me, think I'll go and eat worms kind of thing. It causes you to stop and think, you know, this thing is really annoying. It's making me sad. It's making me angry. But I need to bring myself back from the dark place. Otherwise, I'm just going to be miserable. And start to, so you start to count your blessings and name them one by one. And you're surprised what the Lord, I'm saved. You're saved. What more do we need? And you've got family. You've got friends. You'll walk out here tonight. You can see. I used to visit folk and think, ah, pastoral ministry's hard. I've come to see folk in hospital. And I'd appreciate, Lord, I thank you that I'm not in the bed. They're going through. But one thing, I sometimes think, I really need to thank the Lord for an awful lot more, is the fact that I can see. I just, I just, I would hate to lose my sight. You can take my limbs. I wouldn't mind a blade, a blade runner. That's quite cool. I wouldn't mind it. Chop my knees off or whatever. Take my limbs. But don't take my sight. I'd hate to be blind. It's just a thing I would really hate to be. And see, if you were blind every day of your life and this morning you received your sight, you'd be as high as a kite tonight. You'd be describing the colors. You'd be, oh, I can see.

I can see everybody. I know I can put a face to your voice. We take all these for granted. But the sad things cause us to appreciate those things. And that's what he's saying here. Laughter is short-lived. Look at the illustration he gives in verse 6. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. It's actually a play on words, crackling of thorns under the pot.

[21:33] The play on words is, it's like nettles under kettles. That is the wee phrase. In other words, trying to light a fire under this wee cauldron and you've only got rubbish to nettles to try.

There's no real flames there. It's a waste of time. And that's what he's actually trying to get us to do. Sadness and sorrow cause us to stop and consider. I knew more about God and I've known more about myself during the difficult times. I remember in Derbyshire for six weeks really wrestling with God over a particular thing. And I learned more about him during that difficult time than the good times, than the times where he appeared to be blessing me. Sadness causes us to do this. And that's what Paul knew. He says, sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor but making many rich, having

nothing and yet possessing everything. Jesus himself says in Luke 6, 21, happy are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

That is the secret here. So, sorrow. Sorrow causes us to appreciate what we have. It caused—God sends sorrow, sends difficulties to cause us to sit up and take notice, not just death but sorrow.

Thirdly, criticism. Times when we're rebuked or criticized, he contrasts the rebuke of a wise man with the song of fools. Not all criticism is bad. It depends on the source. So, he says in verse 5, it is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. Some fool could be writing a song about you and say, John, I've wrote a song about you. Let me just play this to you. They don't know you. They're bonkers. And they're coming up with all this stuff. You're better to listen to a wise person who comes and says, John, actually, you're a bit of a dumpling. You really need to sort this. Has anybody ever pointed this out, that this is what you're like? You'd rather have the person singing to you than this person. But you know deep down what's best for you. The words, even the rebuke of a wise person who comes and says, I'm telling you this. We know this. We don't like criticism. None of us walks towards it. One of the things I struggle with in life, I must confess, is people telling me stuff I already know. It's as if the Lord hasn't done anything in my life in that area of sanctification. When people go, have you ever thought about that? Yeah, yep, I know that.

Thanks for that. Appreciate that. That still is a bugbear to me. But when somebody comes up and tells you something perhaps you didn't know, or maybe they're right and you just haven't been listening, you might think you know it, but you don't. God's Word and God's messenger, if they're a wise person, it's good for us to listen. That's what the preacher's saying. It's good for us to respond. [24 : 35] And we can't be too sensitive in this area. Look at verse 9. Don't be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. That was happening to me on Saturday afternoon, just getting annoyed. So don't be quickly provoked in your spirit. So if somebody comes, it's frustrating when folk keep saying, can I give you some constructive criticism, when that's all they ever say, and it becomes destructive. But constructive criticism is good when it comes from the right source. Thirdly, fourthly, another difficult time, dissatisfaction. He's concentrating, he's contrasting the good old days with the present. And this is advice for those who are dissatisfied with the present. Lord, I don't like 2024. Lord, 1962, that was a great year. Or just five years ago, two years ago, now isn't very good. But we like the past. The past was good. That's really what comes from somebody who's failing to cope with the here and now. They'd rather regress back to the past. The preacher's solution to this is not to consider the past or even to consider the present. It's to consider the future. That is how we deal with dissatisfaction in the present. Not going back to the past, but looking to the future. Look what he says in verse 8. The end of the matter is better than its beginning. The past and patient, present, and the present is better than pride. In other words, dissatisfaction with wanting to go back to the past fails to recognize what God can do in the future. Lord, I'd rather be back there because I don't like that today and tomorrow's going to be worse. That's how I feel, Lord. This is bad. I'm on this trajectory that's gone down and I just fear for tomorrow and the next day. I'd rather live in the past. The past was better. Lord, you can't do or are you going to do something today and even tomorrow?

It's a failure to recognize who God is. So, he says, don't look back to the past, but don't even focus so much on the present. Think of the end of the matter. And you know the verse that you have given to many folk. You probably quoted this to many folk. Romans 8, 28. We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

If you saw Jesus dying on the cross, you would have said that was the worst thing that could ever happen to humanity. That was the worst thing that we've ever done. And yet, from this point of view, it's the best. Jesus died on the cross for our sins because it's only in the future that things begin to make sense. So, we do not live in the past. We might struggle in the present, but we don't go back to the past. We look to the future. We look to a God who is sovereign. Fifthly, money. I'm not going to dwell on this because he's mentioned this and he compares it with wisdom in verse 12. Wisdom is a shelter. He says money is a shelter as well. But wisdom is better. It's better to go through life making right decisions than making loads of money. Wisdom is a shelter, making good choices in life.

And that's all I'll say on that. But let me finish with one more. Reputation. Reputation. Verse 1, a good name is better than fine perfume. It's the first verse of chapter 7. Your name is who you are.

If you've got a good name, that means it's not just John. That's a good name. Or Clarissa or something. Your name is who you are. You've got a good—if somebody says to you, you've got a good name, it means it's your character. It's everything you are. So, the name of God is who he is to know somebody's name in that sense, is to know them. A good name is basically a good character. It's a reputation. It's really who we are. Our name is who we are. Perfume is what we portray to others.

[28 : 52] You want to smell good, so you put this on, and you want to portray, I smell pretty good. I'm quite a nice person. I'm wearing Chanel whatever. It's not high karate. I'm wearing this. This costs a small fortune. I am somebody quite important. Perfume is what we want to portray to people, but it's not necessarily who we are. Our name is who we are, not our perfume. And that is what he's saying.

Our real self, our character, is better than a facade that we put up. Keeping it real. Here's a couple of quotes. Look after your character, and God will look after your reputation. Or, to put it another way, look after your character, and your reputation will look after itself. And rather, I'm trying to praise, look at me, I'm really good. Work on your character. That is what's real. That is your name. That is who you are. So, here, then, is a summary from the preacher about how to handle difficult times. Death is not a bad time. A house of feasting is not as good as a house of mourning. Death, consider its reality. Don't mask it with song. Sorrow, use it. Don't try and laugh it off. Use the difficult times to appreciate what God has done. Criticism, don't despise the words of the wise to you.

Dissatisfaction. Cope with the present by considering the future. Money, wisdom in this life is more valuable than money and reputation. Keep it real, brothers and sisters. Work on your character. Work on who you really are. Be that man or woman of God. God is the God who goes with us. As a Christian, we know there is suffering in this life, but compared to the glory that awaits us, it cannot be—it can't even compare. Let me finish with 2 Corinthians 4, and then we'll sing.

[31 : 02] Therefore, we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. May the Lord give us that fresh vision of the Lord from this morning, and that fresh vision of the glory that is still to ours in the future. Let's stand and sing, there is a higher throne.