

Living a Meaningful Life

How to Handle Adversity

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

In his quest to find out how to live a meaningful life the writer of Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of how to handle adversity.

Let us read Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14:

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. ¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? ¹² 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?

**^{7:1} A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death than the day of birth.**

**² 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.**

**³ Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.**

**⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.**

**⁵ It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.**

**⁶ For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools;
this also is vanity.**

**⁷ Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.**

**⁸ Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than
the proud in spirit.**

**⁹ Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.**

- ¹⁰ Say not, “Why were the former days
better than these?”
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.**
- ¹¹ Wisdom is good with an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.**
- ¹² 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.**
- ¹³ Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked?**

**¹⁴ 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.**
(Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14)

Introduction

This past week the world watched the remarkable rescue of the thirty-three Chilean miners. The rescue was dramatic, tense, and powerfully moving.

You remember that “The 33” (as they have become known) were trapped in a gold and copper mine that collapsed on August 5, 2010. For about 6 hours there was dust everywhere. Eventually, the dust settled and they were able to survey the damage. They soon realized that they were in an extremely grave situation, wondering if they would ever be found. After a few days they could hear drilling through the rock, which they said sounded like helicopters. So, they knew that the people above ground were looking for them. But, would they manage to find them in time?

On the seventeenth day after the mine collapsed a drill bit broke through the rock into the tunnel where the men were located. Immediately, they fastened a note to the drill bit, which read: “We are well in the shelter, the 33.”¹ And that is when the world heard

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Copiap%C3%B3_mining_accident.

that all 33 men were still alive, and preparations for the most dramatic rescue in mining history began.

It is hard for us to imagine the thoughts of the miners in those first 17 days. Surely, they wondered if they would ever be found alive. Would they ever see their loved ones alive again? Why did God allow the mine to collapse? And what possible good could come out of their adversity?

The writer of Ecclesiastes, also known as the Preacher, lived in a time of great national prosperity and economic boom. And yet people still encountered adversity periodically—as all people in all ages do. And apparently, people did not trust God sufficiently to see any good in times of adversity.

Lesson

It is against this background that the Preacher encouraged suffering people to show their trust in the sovereign God by looking for what is relatively good in times of adversity.

And so in today's lesson we are encouraged to trust in our sovereign God by looking for what is relatively good in times of adversity.

I. The Predicament (6:10-12)

The first point that the Preacher makes is about our predicament, which is that no one knows what is good for man.

The Preacher says in verse 10a: **“Whatever has come to be has already been named.”** He is thinking of God who names things. God named things at Creation: Day, Night, Sky, Earth, Sea, and so on. He gave names to things because he brought them into existence. And so the Preacher is affirming that whatever happens in the present has already been predetermined by God in the past.

Then the Preacher says in verse 10b, **“And it is known what man is.”** God created man and so he gave him a name: Adam.

And the result of God's creation of man is **“that he** [i.e.,

man] **is not able to dispute with one stronger than he**” (6:10b). The **“one stronger than he”** is God. God is the sovereign Creator of the entire universe. He created all things, including man, and he gave names to them. God is the Creator; man is the created. We should never forget that.

That is why the Apostle Paul said in Romans 9:20, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”

Mere creatures are not able to dispute with their Creator.

The Preacher shows the futility of disputing with God in verse 11, **“The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?”** Arguing with God is futile because he is sovereign, and he has set the times (3:1-8). **The more words** one uses in arguing with God, **the more vanity**, that is, the more futility. It is wasted breath. So, **what is the advantage to man?** There is no advantage at all. It is futile to dispute with one’s Creator.

“For,” the Preacher continues in verse 12a, **“who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?”** Man lives for such a short time on the earth. His life passes as quickly as a shadow.

Nevertheless, the Preacher raises the key question, which is, **“Who knows what is good for man?”** This is of course a rhetorical question, and the expected answer is: “No one but God.” We think we know what is good for man, but we really don’t.

The Preacher reinforces what he has just said with a second rhetorical question in verse 12b, **“For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”** Again, the expected answer is: “No one but God.” Only God knows what tomorrow will bring. Only God knows if it will be a day of prosperity or a day of adversity.

So, the predicament is that no one—that is, no man—knows what is good for man. Of course, God knows, but man does not.

II. The Lessons (7:1-12)

Fortunately, the Preacher is not a pessimist. He has graphical-

ly shown us our predicament so that he can set down eight lessons to help us in times of adversity. He gives us a series of proverbs in which he shows us how some things are better than others.

A. *A Good Name Is Better Than Precious Ointment (7:1a)*

First, a good name is better than precious ointment. The Preacher says in chapter 7 verse 1a, **“A good name is better than precious ointment.”**

One can buy precious ointment. But one cannot buy a good name, which in this context means “a good reputation.”

In the day of adversity, you might lose everything you have. In these tough economic times, some of you have lost income and some of you have even lost jobs. There is no shame in losing income or losing a job, although you may feel terrible about it.

However, it is another matter entirely to lose your good name. If you have been caught stealing or cheating or committing adultery or something like that, you lose your good name—and that is far worse than losing all your money.

B. *The Day of Death Is Better Than the Day of Birth (7:1b)*

Second, the day of death is better than the day of birth. The Preacher says in verse 1b, **“And the day of death than the day of birth.”**

This seems like a strange proverb when you first read it. How can the day of death be better than the day of birth? We celebrate the day of someone’s birth with great joy and laughter and delight. But when someone dies we are filled with sorrow and mourning.

So, how is the day of death better than the day of birth? Some say that the day of birth *introduces* a person to a life of misery (see Job 5:7; 14:1; Psalm 90:9-10), but the day of his death *releases* him from a life of misery. That may be true in one sense, I suppose, but surely for the non-Christian the day of his death is the *beginning* of unspeakable and unending horror in hell. On the other

hand, for the Christian the day of his death is the beginning of glorious and unending joy in heaven.

That is why the Puritan Thomas Boston wrote of the Christian believer, “In the day of his birth he was born to die, but in the day of his death he dies to live.”²

That is also why the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

C. *The House of Mourning Is Better Than the House of Feasting (7:2)*

Third, the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. The Preacher says in verse 2, **“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.”**

It is fun to go to a party. It is not *pleasant* to go to a funeral. But it is *better* to go to a funeral. Why? Because at a funeral we are in a frame of mind to lay to heart the things of eternity. At a funeral we face our mortality and we stare eternity in the face of the deceased person. We stop and think that one day we will be in the casket, and it is time to take stock and think about how prepared we are for eternity.

Pastor Tommy Nelson tells the story of Allie Miller. Allie was a businessman who established their church’s tape library and developed its recording, storing and filing system, and mailing protocols.

Allie was about sixty years old when he died of prostate cancer. Before he died he told Pastor Nelson that the greatest thing that ever happened to him—other than knowing Jesus Christ savingly—was cancer. Pastor Nelson asked Allie how this could possibly be true. Allie replied that cancer was the thing that finally put everything in perspective for him.

You see, Allie came to know the Lord when he was a young

² Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston of Ettrick*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, 12 vols. (London, 1853; repr. Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 5:484.

boy. But, he said, “I used him as my Savior.” Allie was a great man but he never really got serious about eternal issues until God showed him that he was going to die.

Allie said, “When you have a death pronouncement given to you, you don’t have to take it by faith that you are going to die. Now all that stuff I’ve been hearing about laying up treasure in heaven takes on real meaning.”

Instead of using Christ Allie now began to serve Christ because he knew that every day was a tick of the clock. And that is why Allie could say that the greatest thing that ever happened to him—other than Jesus Christ saving his soul—was the appointment God gave him with cancer.³

The house of mourning is better than the house of feasting because we are confronted with our mortality and the reality of how well prepared we are to step into eternity.

D. Sorrow Is Better Than Laughter (7:3-4)

Fourth, sorrow is better than laughter. The Preacher says in verses 3-4, **“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 is in the house of mirth.”**

This proverb is similar to the previous one. People try to escape from reality in all kinds of things: parties, movies, books, entertainment, drugs, and so on. But the wise person confronts reality—even in the house of mourning—to prepare for eternity.

E. The Rebuke of the Wise Is Better Than the Song of Fools (7:5-7)

Fifth, the rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. The Preacher says in verses 5-7, **“It is better for a man to hear**

³ Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived: A Study in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005), 93-94.

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 also is vanity. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.”

Hearing a rebuke from someone, especially someone who is wise, is not pleasant but it is good because it is valuable. However, listening to the song of fools may be pleasant but it is not ultimately good because it has no permanent value.

F. The End of a Thing Is Better Than the Beginning of a Thing (7:8a)

Sixth, the end of a thing is better than the beginning of a thing. The Preacher says in verse 8a, **“Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.”**

Many of us are good at starting things but not so good at finishing things. However, it is good not to get sidetracked and to finish what we begin.

G. The Patient in Spirit Is Better Than the Proud in Spirit (7:8b-10)

Seventh, the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. The Preacher says in verses 8b-10, **“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 bosom of fools. Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.”**

In times of adversity, we should not be proud in spirit and try to take things into our own hands. Rather, we should be patient in spirit and trust that God is at work for his glory—and our good. We may think that former days were better than the current days. But we don’t know what God is about to bring about. I think that this proverb was particularly applicable to the 33 miners.

H. Wisdom Is Better Than Folly (7:11-12)

And eighth, wisdom is better than folly. The Preacher says in verses 11-12, **“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.”**

People who come into an inheritance may squander it if they are foolish. But, if they are wise, they will use it wisely. Money can be used to provide essentials and even for the future.

Wisdom protects us in the adversities of life. Having gone through trial and difficulty and suffering, wisdom helps us to look at life from God’s perspective.

III. The Conclusion (7:13-14)

Now, the Preacher is ready to conclude his message.

He exhorts us in verse 13, **“Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?”**

God is the sovereign God who has made all things. He has brought all things into existence. Sometimes these things look **“crooked”** to us. In our text the Preacher referred to death, mourning, and sorrow. We experience these things as **“crooked.”** But even these **“crooked”** things are **“the work of God.”** And no one can make straight what God **“has made crooked.”** It would be the height of arrogance and foolishness for us to try to change the work of God. We have no choice but to take the long view and accept that adversity is also from the hand of God.

This consideration leads to the Preacher’s final conclusion in verse 14, **“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.”**

“In the day of prosperity be joyful”! The Preacher has given this advice before (3:12), and will do so again (8:15). But in this passage, he has focused on human adversity. What do we do **“in**

the day of adversity”?

His exhortation is, **“Consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”** God has made both the day of prosperity as well as the day of adversity, but in such a way that we cannot predict which comes when. We do not know what the future holds, and so we cannot predict the future. All we can do is accept prosperity as well as adversity as it comes from the hand of God. We do not know what the future holds. We simply have to trust in God who is in sovereign control of the future.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . No, *in* all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31-39).

Paul claims that we are more than conquerors not *in spite of* our adversity but *in* our adversity. He explains that this is so because nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And since the love of God is always with us, we can search and always find some good even in our adversity. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thank you for the teaching of the Preacher.

We know that we are a richly blessed people. In comparison to other people we have so much material blessing from you. And yet not one of us is exempt from adversity. Help us to trust you in times of adversity by looking for the good in our situation.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.