

Adversity - Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

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The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.¹

Our Humanity and the Reality of Ultimate Death

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?

In these three verses we see the word man (literally *ādām*) used four times. This may simply be used in a generic way for human beings, but also may very well point back to Genesis chapters 2 and 3. If that is the case, then it alludes to Adam's naming of all living things in Genesis 2:19. Whether or not it is Adam who is not able to dispute with one stronger than he, certainly all of mankind is not able to dispute with one stronger than we. There is a point of mortality here. For no matter how long we live our lives, our lives appear as a few days in vain which pass quickly.

There is nothing new under the sun. Yet the God who spoke and brought everything into being is indeed sovereign, creative, and powerful. It is God who is creative and powerful. How can the created being dispute or contend with the sovereign God?

Thomas Boston adds, "Has God decreed all things that come to pass? Then there is nothing that falls out by chance, nor are we to ascribe what we meet with either to good or ill luck and fortune. There are many events in the world which men look upon as mere accidents, yet all these come by the counsel and appointment of Heaven."²

Consider Isaiah 45:9-12 (NLT),

"What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator.

Does a clay pot argue with its maker?

Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying,

'Stop, you're doing it wrong!'

Does the pot exclaim,

'How clumsy can you be?'

How terrible it would be if a newborn baby said to its father,

'Why was I born?'

or if it said to its mother,

'Why did you make me this way?'"

This is what the Lord says—

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 773.

² Thomas Boston (1812). "An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, with Respect to Faith and Practice, Upon the Plan of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity", p.179

the Holy One of Israel and your Creator:
“Do you question what I do for my children?
Do you give me orders about the work of my hands?
I am the one who made the earth
and created people to live on it.
With my hands I stretched out the heavens.
All the stars are at my command.

Jim Winter's writes, “In his amazing story ‘1984’ George Orwell writes, ‘Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past?’ It is evident that man has been unable to exercise any control over his destiny, yet he persistently seeks to discover what the future holds. Lost in the shadow of his own ignorance, he hangs on the words of anyone who claims prophetic vision. Presidents have turned to astrologers and numerologists; hard-bitten businessmen have made decisions on the turn of a Tarot card—all in a vain attempt to crack the code that will unlock tomorrow. ‘What vanity,’ declares the Preacher. ‘Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?’ There is no ghost of Christmas past, present or future—destiny lies in the hand of a sovereign God.”³

Reading on...

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

I heard a preacher once compare the good name with the precious ointment in verse one to a good reputation compared to a dirty, smelly man who covered his body odor with sweet smelling deodorant.

When we are born there is great potential. And the reality is, that's all there is when we are born. While God has named our future, we truly have no idea what the newborn baby will turn out to be. Solomon is comparing that to the obituary, the eulogy of one who has lived a full life. There is something solemn and telling for the wise at a funeral.

Verse two reminds us that there are two types of people at every funeral: (1) those who can't wait for it to be over and get out the door and (2) those like my friend Pastor Everett who at every funeral lingers at the casket, praying, and contemplating his life and the fact that this is indeed the end of all mankind. They take it to heart. And so, for the wise man, he takes his

³ Jim Winter, *Opening up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 90.

mortality seriously while the other simply wants to move on to the next fun part of life. He understands that man is born to die, but as a believer that same man dies to be born.

To be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord.

“For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it’s not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit.

So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. For we live by believing and not by seeing. Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.” 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

It is Better to Listen to a Wise Man’s Rebuke Than to Listen to the Song of Fools

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 heart 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.

These texts are very much proverbial. And so we will work through them with that in mind.

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon writes, ‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful’ (Prov. 27:6). Verse 5 carries the same argument.

One commentator writes, “Adlai Stevenson, once remarked, ‘Flattery is all right—if you don’t inhale it!’ Praise can be a heady drug, but it is rarely any use to us. The crackling thorns under the pot make an impressive display of intense fire, but never last long enough to produce a meal. When we receive the ‘rebuke of the wise’ we may feel that we are being roasted, but in the end it produces something that will nourish and sustain us.”⁴

Verses 7-8 give us a picture of oppression, greed, and pride. Oppression ruins our judgement, but the bribe corrupts at the heart level. The wise man understands the big picture, seeing the logical conclusion, and can thus exhibit patient wisdom.

Verse 9 teaches what I share with almost all people who come to counseling here at the Chapel. That is, don’t react when you can respond.

When the doctor strikes my knee with a small rubber mallet, she is looking for a reaction – actually a knee – jerk reaction. We often react sinfully out of habit. It happens quickly and without thought. We have a tendency to jump to conclusions and often ascribe negative motives to those with whom we interact.

Solomon is reminding us that our goal in life is to glorify God, and that our responses in every situation should be those responses that bring praise and honor to our Lord Jesus Christ.

My grandfather would often say, “Those were the good old days.” But were they really?

- I remember growing up without air-conditioning.
- I remember growing up with a television that only got three channels.
- I remember walking to school uphill both ways.
- I remember the days before cell phones, and computers.
- I remember when many diseases killed thousands of people, diseases that are now curable.

So, are the good old days better? In many ways they are only better in our imaginations. When we say, “Weren’t the former days better than these”, are we saying that God is not at work right now?

It is not from wisdom that we say this. It is from romantic memories and imaginations. Just as the Children of Israel talked fondly of Egypt, our fondness for the past is seldom based on reality.

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

David Gibson writes, “Notice how all of these four things are variations on escapism. Extortion is a way of escaping your responsibility; impatience is a way of escaping reality and wishing things were different from the way they are; anger is a way of escaping your inability to cope with things not being the way you want them. Nostalgia is a form of escapism by taking a vacation in the past instead of grappling with the present or looking to the future in faith.”⁵

⁴ Jim Winter, *Opening up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 95–96.

⁵ Gibson, David. *Living Life Backward* (p. 102). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

In verses 11-12 we are reminded that wisdom is better than wealth. Wisdom and wealth are not mutually exclusive. Certainly, God has blessed many in this room with both. But wealth without wisdom is like the story of the three little pigs. That home and foundation are easily blown away. Wisdom, however, whether it comes with wealth or not, preserves the life of the one who has it.

God has made the one as well as the other. God is the author of both good fortune and bad.

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.

The Puritan writer Thomas Boston wrote a small book titled the Crook in the Lot. Boston writes, "As to the crook in your lot, God has made it; and it must continue while He will have it so. Should you ply your utmost force to even it, or make it straight, your attempt will be vain: it will not change for all you can do. Only He who made it can mend it or make it straight."⁶

Here is the reality of life. What does life teach me? What does the grave teach me? You may have all the wisdom in the world and still not understand:

- Why was my child born with challenges? It is a crook in your lot.
- Why have I contracted this disease? It is a crook in your lot.
- Why has my marriage fallen apart? It is a crook in your lot.
- Why was my family member killed in an automobile accident? It is a crook in your lot.

And in the day of prosperity, and in the day of adversity, remember God has made the one as well as the other. And God has not informed us of why he has done it, or what will be the outcome.

So, you must trust him. He will never leave you, nor forsake you.

Psalm 90 reminds us, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

While wisdom has great benefit, wisdom has definite limits. Wisdom cannot straighten out what God has made crooked.

We cannot fully explain everything. Wisdom can never achieve the kind of control over your life and destiny that you seek. But it can help you with your money, with impatience, with anger, and with reminiscence.

Never forget that it is God who controls the times. It is God who rules the universe. And so, although you can live well, and die well, and know some things truly, you cannot know all things completely.

⁶ Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot, Or, The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men*, ed. Don Kistler and Maureen L. Bradley (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, c2001., n.d.)

But God does. So trust him.

Reflect and Respond

Learn contentment, peace, and joy in the fact that God has decreed all things that come to pass.

Search diligently and cultivate friendships with those who are wiser than you. Be cautious in taking advice from peers.

Prepare your mind, be self-controlled, look to the coming of Christ.

Learn to number your days that you may gain a heart of wisdom.