

“UNDERSTANDING LIFE – BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES”

“WISDOM TO MAKE LIFE BETTER” (Ecclesiastes 7:1-10)

The world is looking for wisdom. But sadly, many look in the wrong place. True wisdom is not found in man. It is found in God and God alone. That’s why James told believers, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* (James 1:5) This wisdom is not revealed to everyone in this world. You can’t get this wisdom in a laboratory or from a university course. It is not about having a string of letters after your name or a high IQ. But it is about being touched by the power of God. Knowledge comes by looking around, but wisdom comes by looking up. Knowledge comes by study, but wisdom comes by revelation!

Before cable television we used to use a television aerial to get a good picture on our television. However, sometimes the reception was poor because although the signal is strong, the aerial was not pointed in the right direction. It is the same with our lives. God’s Word is always strong but often the aerial of our hearts is pointed in the wrong direction. It needs to be pointed toward God for wisdom. When our heart and mind is directed toward God we are able to tap into God’s divine wisdom. That is why in the worst of days we can understand life. We may not have all the answers we have the assurance that God is working all things together for good. This gives us hope in the darkest of days and strengthens our faith so we don’t give up.

When we look at our spouses or our children we sometimes can guess what they are thinking. But often we can’t. Because we cannot read minds. Likewise, with God we cannot guess what He is thinking. We have to let Him share His thinking with us. Ask for His wisdom today. Sometimes parents get frustrated by their children’s unwise words and actions that they bluntly tell the child “wise up.” As Christians, the more we know about God and life the more we realise how unwise we truly are. We desperately need God’s wisdom.

Solomon seems to begin to pivot in this chapter 7 from viewing life without God *“under the sun.”* He makes a number of observations about wisdom and how it can make a positive contribution to our lives on earth. Solomon uses the word “better” more than ten times to emphasise this. The style of writing here is more pithy, insightful and simplistic and reminiscent of Book of Proverbs. Solomon is seeking to help his readers to learn how to be delivered from a vain, empty life. He will show:

(1) WISDOM HELPS MAKE LIFE BETTER (v1-10)

(2) WISDOM HELPS US SEE LIFE THE RIGHT WAY (v11-29)

A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. (v1)

This statement seems hard to reconcile with our experience, *“and the day of death than the day of one's birth.”* But the second statement should not be divorced from the first, *“A good name is better than precious ointment.”* The precious ointment here may refer to the perfumes with which the bodies of the dead were usually anointed. So Solomon is simply saying that it is better to die with a good name and reputation than to have your body anointed with costly burial perfumes. A person has two names:

- (1) His parents give one
- (2) Others give him one

You can wear the most expensive perfume or cologne but if you have a rotten character, people will note of you that your “reputation stinks.” Solomon reveals that death is a great blessing for a man who has died with a good name. For when a person with a good reputation dies, their legacy is now sealed permanently, *“The memory of the just is blessed; but the name of the wicked shall rot.”* (Prov. 10:7) There is no opportunity for scandal to suddenly destroy their good reputation. We must ask ourselves: **What fragrance does my name leave?** Of course for the Christian, the day of our death is the best day of our lives. For then we really begin to live in glory. Spurgeon put it well,

“Death is the end of dying. On the day of the believer’s death dying is for ever done with. The saints who are with God shall never die any more. Life is wrestling, struggling; but death is the end of conflict: it is rest-victory.”



It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (v2-4)

The conventional order in human thought is that births are happy days and deaths are sad days. We prefer to attending birthdays and weddings to funerals. But Solomon overturns popular opinion on this matter. He argues, *“It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting.”*

Now Solomon is not saying that we should never go to the house of feasting. He made clear in God’s sovereign calendar of life that He has appointed *“a time to laugh . . . and a time to dance.”* But what Solomon is saying here is that the greater lessons in life that formulate the strongest of character are days of sorrow and adversity. Fools can’t cope with a crisis. They use the frivolity and entertainment to drown out their fears. But that doesn’t heal the broken hearted. Reality has still to be faced sooner or later. It cannot be escaped from. One of the best places to face the realities of life is a funeral. It is not a place of levity. The dead speak loudly to our own sinfulness and mortality. When you view the body of a friend or loved one, it’s amazing how so many of the trivial, ephemeral issues of life suddenly become much less important. One writer noted these advantages,

“In the house of mourning we are reminded of our own mortality. Our pride is checked. The spirit of sympathy within us is deepened. And all this tends to make us wiser and better men. Sorrow is better than laughter for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. Solomon, indeed, had already said that there is a time to laugh. And, doubtless, he recognized the fact that innocent laughter has its own uses in the economy of human life. But he felt that so far as the highest objects of life are concerned, a man is more likely to be benefitted and blessed by sorrow than by laughter.”

The moment we face life realistically is the moment we can start to truly live our lives. It tends to focus our minds on what really is important. You can only live your life well on earth when you are prepared to die. For only those who’ve trusted in Christ for eternal life can live well now - because they’re ready to meet God.

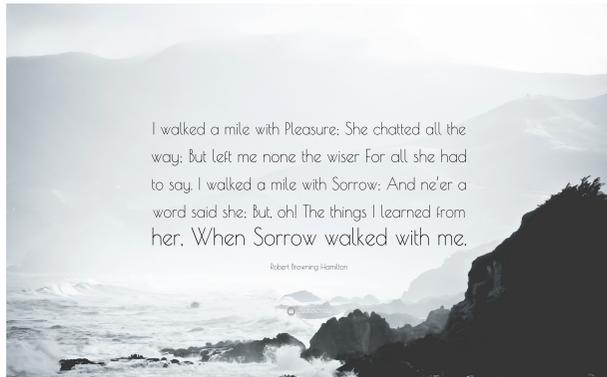
***Considering mortality
Gives life the proper view;
Preparing for eternity
Is the wisest thing to do***

We must learn to cultivate sobriety instead of frivolity. Then we will build real spiritual character. Hard times produce hard men and women who can endure the ups and downs of life. Such people are the ones who help others get through life. Bitter things often produce better people.

WILL YOU HAVE TRIALS? *Yes*

BUT WILL YOU REJOICE AND SPIRITUALLY GROW IN YOUR TRIALS? *Only you can decide to emerge bitter or better*

The Psalmist observed, “*It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.*” (Psalm 119:71) By contrast, the Rich Fool let his wealth and partying distract him from thinking of what was really important (Luke 12:13-21).



Suffering and adversity are not necessarily signs of Gods disfavour but rather for our good. Job emerged a better man through his manifold sufferings. He testified, “*But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.*” (Job 23:10) Gold does not fear the fire. The

furnace can only make the gold purer and brighter. *Those things that seem so painful now will one day be clearly seen as beneficial to our spiritual growth.*

It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity. (v5-6)

Solomon then turns to compare rebuke and praise. He argues that the constructive criticism of a wise person is better than being praised by a fool, “*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.*” The king compares the empty words of the fools to “*the crackling of thorns under a pot.*” Just as thorns burn quickly, noisily and produces little heat so the laughter of fools is loud, short-lived and accomplishes little.

Clearly, Solomon learned this lesson personally. For he revealed in other writings, “*Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.*” (Proverbs 27:6; cf. 9:8; 25:31-32) King David’s life was far more enriched by the faithful correction of the prophet Nathan than the flattery of the deceitful Absalom. A wise doctor is one that gives the truth and not simply a diagnosis that makes his patient feel good. Bad news can be good news in the long term if it saves your life. The test of true love is to love someone enough to tell them the truth. The Bible defines true *agape* love as one that, “*Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.*” (1 Cor. 13:6) After all, the Lord Jesus often lovingly rebuked His disciples and His words are perfect. Although it is often hard to accept a rebuke, it could make a world of difference to our lives. Rebukes hurt, but they are helpful. ***Do you receive them gratefully?***

Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart. Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools. (v7-9)

Solomon then gives some wise counsel on patience. He argues that the long haul is better than looking for the shortcut for an easy way out. Solomon ruled an Empire with great wealth flowing into it from all around the world. Bribery and corruption were rife in such environments and relationships. However, the King points out that bribery only buys you long term pain, “*Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.*” For such behaviour corrupts all relationships. The world boasts in cynicism “*money talks.*” ***How much can your testimony be bought for?***

Trusting God’s timing requires humility, patience and meekness. You can begin like a slave and a prisoner like Joseph and end up the Prime Minister of the nation. Not everyone can be bought with bribes and flattery. Don’t assume because things go outwardly well for an individual at the beginning that this means they are doing the right thing. The Prodigal Son began with seemingly freedom and wealth and ended up in servitude and destitution. Heed Solomon’s advice, “*Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.*” Bridges points out,

“The first clause is not indeed a universal maxim. Sometimes and that is that in the most important of all matters the ending is far worse than the beginning thereof. Yet it often holds good. Solomon had already given an example in verse 1, in the instance just to. The oppressor may appear to have the advantage at first but the end may bring him low. The ordinary trials of the Christian life are grievous in the beginning but fruitful in the end. Therefore, whatever be the trial of faith, never despond. Never look at the present dark face of things except in connection with the will of God’s love.”

Solomon's two brothers, Absalom and Adonijah were not willing to wait on God and let Him decide their futures. Their pride got the better of them. God triumphed over their will and ambition. Solomon got the job they coveted and Solomon didn't have to apply for it. Patience is always better than pride, "Let patience have her perfect work that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." (James 1:4) The command "Let" here implies submission to God in the trial. Submitting is an attitude toward God, where we do not defiantly shake our fist in His face and tell Him that He has no right to do this to us. It is when we say God's way is the best way. Patience prepares a man for blessing (Rom. 5:4) and pride prepares him for judgment (Prov. 16:18).

A truly wise person has meekness and self-control. After two proverbs celebrating patience and discipline, Solomon speaks about impatience and anger, "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools." Anger is a dangerous emotion. It is normally a sign of weakness, not strength. A momentary loss of self-control can yield serious consequences and adversely affect our walk with God. Moses was the meekest man on the earth yet he lost his temper and reacted wrongly by smiting the rock in Numbers 20. We must deal with our hearts and our temper or else we will live a life of total failure. It has been said that you can judge the size of a man's character by what it takes to make him lose control.



Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this. (v10)

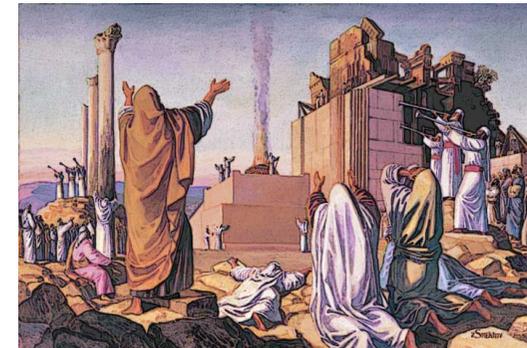
Solomon turns to another foolish and unwise activity – harping on forever about the past. There are always older people that bask in nostalgia. They, generally, see the past through rose-tinted spectacles by minimising the failures and magnifying the successes. It has been said, "The good old days are the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination." But these people, who wallow in the past, forget that we must live for God in our day and prepare for the future. The generation and time that God has sovereignly appointed for us. Daniel and his three friends could have looked back in Babylon and had a pity party that they didn't live in Israel during the Golden Age of King David. Rather, they rose up and lived for God in their place of service. That doesn't mean we simply ignore the past but we must not be paralysed by it. We must face the future with confidence trusting the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

EXAMPLE OF ZERUBBABEL'S TEMPLE

In 536 B.C., a remnant of about 50,000 Jews had returned from Babylon to Judah under the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). Led by Zerubbabel and Joshua, the returned remnant quickly rebuilt the altar and began offering sacrifices. Two years after returning in 538 B.C., the returned remnant had laid the foundation to rebuild the temple. The older men wept and the younger men shouted for joy (Ezra 3:8-13).

Many of the older Jewish believers were able to recall the splendour of Solomon's great temple. It was the most expensive building ever erected in human history and the centre of worship for centuries. We know that King David left over \$300 billion dollars worth of gold to be used in its building. People travelled from all over the world to see this great building. No expense was spared. It is not surprising that many feared the new temple would appear as nothing in comparison. This was self-evident already when the foundation were laid. It made them feel weak, hopeless, and insignificant in comparison. Some may even have felt that it is better to have the great memory of the past than this poor imitation. I am sure some argued, "God is not blessing this temple." This led to bitter weeping from those who remembered Solomon's temple,

But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off. (Ezra 3:12 - 13).



One of the most potent weapons the devil uses is the tool of discouragement. Many people are emotionally fragile and easily offended or discouraged. There is also a lesson to older folk who have lived life. Sometimes, they can become cynical and bitter with life. It can lead to them discouraging younger believers. They can use memories of blessing to encourage or discourage the next generation. Older saints can be used by the devil to discourage younger believers. Naomi was much older in years and in spiritual matters than her young daughter in law, Ruth. Yet instead of encouraging Ruth, she became an obstacle to her spiritual growth.

We must not simply remember the blessings of the past and use that as a stick to beat the weaknesses of the present. For if God is at work in our day, even in supposedly small things, it is just as much God as it is in the big things! It is just as much God's sovereign plan and will. We must never despise it. Light a candle in the darkness rather than curse the gloom. Let us persevere on for the same God is with us. The best is yet to be.