

Ecclesiastes 7

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Date: 22 May 2018

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[0 : 00] If there's one thing that the preacher of Ecclesiastes has tried to convince us of is that things are not always as they seem in the world in which we live. If you were here last week, last Tuesday, the preacher showed us the topsy-turvy experience where affluence and plenty do not always necessarily automatically mean blessing and enjoyment.

Do you remember back in chapter 6 there was the man who had everything and yet he couldn't enjoy anything. But in our passage today in Ecclesiastes 7, the preacher goes one step further. He shows us the flip side of that. Affluence is not necessarily a good thing in itself, but adversity is not necessarily a bad thing in itself.

He takes a unique view on adversity, on suffering, on pain, because he says in one sense adversity is better.

Did you see that word? It came up over and over again in the passage, didn't it? The word better, it's repeated. And the passage alarms us here, doesn't it?

[1 : 20] The preacher alarms us, he says sadness, mourning, adversity, even the day of death is better than the alternative.

Seems as though he's being quite morbid here, doesn't it? He takes us around different places, but he seems like a pretty miserable tour guide. So he takes us to a crematorium and he says to us, it's better to be here in the place of death than in the birthing suite.

He takes us to the house of mourning, to the house of sadness, to a place where there's been loss, where there's been a death, where there's grief.

And he says to us in that place, it's better that we're here now, crying our eyes out, than if we were in the comedy lounge, laughing our heads off.

And what he wants to show us is that there is a unique opportunity to be had in those places, in those dark moments. There is something valuable to be had there, in those places that you can't replace.

[2 : 39] Bitter is sometimes better. For a person who wants to live wisely, to see things rightly, adversity brings a great opportunity.

How can he say that? Well, the clue is in verse 2, if you look there. It's 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. Do you see what his concern there is? His concern isn't what's going on on your face, on the surface of your life.

His concern is what is going on in your heart, and what you are thinking of, what you are like there, deep within. He wants us to refuse to live life just on a superficial plane.

And the dark moments of adversity, he says, are better, because they are a better training ground for your heart.

[3 : 49] I want to take you through his thinking this afternoon, to show you three of these comparisons, three of these better situations that he makes. And the first one is, he says, the day of death is better than the day of birth.

It's what he says there in verse 1, isn't it? The day of death is better than the day of birth. What's the difference between a birthday and a death day?

They're worlds apart in so many different ways, aren't they, those two days. But he is thinking specifically about their ability to train our hearts.

So he says, come with me to the birthing suite. Come with me to the christening. Come with me to the baby shower. What is it like on that day, on a birthday?

Well, it's filled with optimism, isn't it? It's filled with potential, with that feeling of new life. Imagining what that new life will become, the things that that person will do and achieve.

[4 : 58] The world is their oyster. At the day of birth, hopes run wild, don't they? It's not a day to dwell on human brevity.

It's not a day to dwell on limitation. It's a day to say to someone as they lie in your arms, you've got a whole life ahead of you. Grab it.

But by contrast, come to the crematorium. And it's a very, very different experience, isn't it? He's not trying to get us to be morbid.

He just wants us to think more deeply. Because the day of death brings a unique opportunity that the day of birth cannot bring. It brings a certain clarity.

Where the cold facts of our destiny and our condition are laid before us. The day of death is better than the day of birth.

[5 : 56] Not because death in itself is better. Of course it isn't. But because the day of death is a better teacher of our hearts than the day of birth.

I wonder whether more people have become Christians at funerals than at christenings. Because the day of death is a better preacher of the things that we need to hear and consider in life.

Of the reality of who we are in relationship to God. That we are not God. That we are not immortal.

And that we desperately need his grace and his forgiveness.

We need the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. The last place if we had a choice would be at the graveside, wouldn't it? We'd want to be.

Or even to think about it. To ponder death. We'd say the day of birth is better. We don't even want to have death laid on our hearts for too long, do we?

[7 : 01] We don't want to think about our brevity. We don't want to think about any of these things. The 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal. He writes, despite his afflictions, man wants to be happy.

But how shall he go about it? The best thing, he said, would be to make himself immortal. Get rid of death. That will be the best thing. But as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop thinking about it. Just don't think about it. Avoid funerals where you can. The day of death. Just blank it out. Put it out of your mind.

But the preacher is saying here, if you do that for your whole life, you are missing out on some real clarity. You're missing out on a lucidity to bring you to your senses.

Because coffins are better sermon illustrations than cots. Funerals are really sobering moments, aren't they?

[8 : 08] And we all know that. People are stopped in their tracks by the day of death. And they are put in a place where they are made to consider very, very important things carefully.

And so for the wise person he is saying here, in a sense the day of death is a godsend. Because it focuses the heart on what really matters.

It keeps us from drowning ourselves in triviality. The day of death may even prove to bring you to new life in God.

And if that happens, bitter would have definitely been better for you. Even though it felt awful at the time. Let me show you another comparison he makes.

The day of death better than the day of birth. Secondly, he says sorrow is better than laughter.

Verse 3. For by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

[9 : 16] What on earth is he talking about there? Well, do you see again his priority. His concern isn't what's going on on the outside. His concern isn't whether you've got a smile on your face.

But what is going on underneath? Smiling all the time doesn't necessarily mean anything, does it? You can be all smiles but underneath be utterly hopeless.

And totally unhappy. His concern again is what goes on in your heart. And how you are in your heart. And again, it seems upside down.

Sorrow better than laughter. And we think, why so serious man? Lighten up. We're often led to believe the myth, aren't we?

That gladness of heart comes when we live an unexamined life. Where we live a frivolous life. People say be free, be easy.

[10 : 17] Don't take things too seriously. If you want relief in life, just get some comic relief. Just smile. And everything will be alright. But like he says in verse 6, The laughter of fools can be like crackling thorns under a cooking pot.

A few crackles, cackles and pops and snaps and they disappear. They're just frivolous. Ibsen said, I'm always having fun but I'm never happy.

The world says it's better to be in your house with the TV on and Tommy Cooper or Michael McIntyre telling you a few jokes than be in the house of mourning.

But the preacher is saying, don't miss the opportunity that comes in sadness to listen and to grow. People spend their whole lives laughing and singing but missing out on this strange gladness that he speaks about here that comes in moments of pain.

Tears can sometimes bring deep, deep gladness. Gerald Sitzer has written a book where he recounts the moment when a drunk driver struck his car about 20 years ago.

[11 : 39] And in that moment he lost three generations of his family. He lost his wife, his mother and his four year old daughter. He writes the book entitled A Grace Disguised and he's a Christian man.

He's a believer. He wrote about the agonies he and his remaining three children had trying to piece their lives together in the years after the accident. He says, I was dizzy and nauseous.

With the vertigo of grief that overwhelmed me. About eight years after the first publication of his book he republished. And he changed his preface at the beginning of the book.

Where he writes, He described the bitterness turning out to be redemptive for him and his children and many others around him.

And he says this, Gerald Sitzer, he gets Ecclesiastes 7 doesn't he?

[12 : 57] God had provided an unexpected gladness in his dark sadness there. And he realised that sometimes sorrow is better than laughter.

The preacher says it's possible to look at a sad face in the mirror and yet there be a deep gladness present in the heart. He's not being morbid.

He's saying that sadness can be a better trainer of the heart. Because in the house of mourning comes clarity. There comes those epiphany moments.

Moments of insight into God's love. Moments of true rest in him. Learning what it means to be his child in a very, very profound way. Learning reliance on him.

In the pain. Experiencing his sufficiency. And his grace. And many of us know that, don't we?

Sometimes God speaks to us in suffering.

[14 : 00] And he does that that he might prepare for us a greater and deeper joy. And a deeper gladness. A gladness in the heart. Not just on the face.

The preacher's whole thing is getting us to see why adversity isn't always something to run from. It isn't always something to be embarrassed about. The wise person, the godly person, need not fear adversity.

The Christian need not fear adversity. Bitter in God's plan can be better. It is going to be less comfortable, isn't it? Sure it is.

When we face suffering. That's his point in verse 5. It's better to hear a rebuke from a wise person than the song of fools. Getting wise criticism is not nice, is it?

It's just not a comfortable thing. I hate that. Someone pointing out a fault. I'd rather be showered with compliments constantly. It'd be so much more comfortable, wouldn't it? But that is better than the song of fools.

[15 : 06] It's better than easy listening compliments all of the time. And the point he's making is that the harder the thing is, the less comfortable the thing is, the stronger and greater the adversity in life.

Often that brings the greater results. It brings the more lasting results. Adversity brings real change. It brings real focus. It brings real life in the long run in Christ.

First, the day of death better than the day of birth. Sorrow better than laughter. And thirdly and lastly, he says the end is better than the beginning. The end is better than the beginning.

Verse 8. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. And the patient in spirit, one who looks to the end, is better than the proud in spirit.

He's already touched on this, hasn't he? Because of course the end for each one of us is in death itself. And just as the coffin is a better teacher than the cot, so the end of things is a much better preacher to us.

[16 : 16] The end of things is a much better teacher of what matters than the beginning of things. How something is finished, just in general, says more, doesn't it, about the process than how it's

begun.

Someone could brag at the beginning of something, but it doesn't mean anything, does it, in compared with what the situation is at the end. And that goes for life.

One day someone will write out your obituary. They'll write out mine and they'll read it out. And you will be spoken of after you are gone, at the end.

And what is said then, in that moment, will mean more than what has been said at your birth, at the beginning, when you first arrived. The preacher wants us to see that.

To realise that the end is calling. And how you leave this world is far more important than how you came into it. The wise person then is someone who takes the long view, who takes the end view.

[17:26] That's why he mentions that funny thing in verse 1, about a good name is better than precious ointment. I think that relates to the day of death and the day of birth.

Saying you can smell of roses on your birth, covered in baby oil, in precious ointments. But what is said about you at the end, your name then matters far more.

The end is not something that we want to face, is it? But the preacher wants to tell us, just as with all of the other adversities here, the end can be our friend here.

The end, death, tells us and preaches to us like other things cannot. The end tells us that we're not going to live forever.

And we get one chance, one chance in this life to get right with God and the opportunities that he gives us to do that. And we better be wise about that.

[18:31] And we better sober up. And come to him. The good news is that you may have messed up at the beginning of your life. You may have messed up in the middle of your life.

And you may be messed up right now, if truth be told. But in a way, the bard is right. All's well that ends well. And if you can think about the end, if you can sense the inevitability of it, if you can sense the ache of it, God says to you, well there, now is your chance.

Strike while the iron's hot and lay these things on your heart and get right with me. come to Christ. Trust in him.

Don't waste the lucidity of your sadness and your mourning and your death and your end. because those times can be better for you when your heart is open to him.

We're urged by the world, aren't we, not to focus on these things for too long. Don't think about them too long. If death confronts you, just tell them a joke. Get a glass of wine.

[19:53] Smile. Don't think about it. Be happy. But the preacher tells us here, in adversity comes a great opportunity where you might seriously contemplate important things, where you might seriously contemplate your regrets and your failures before God and before others, where you might come face to face with your pride, that you might run to him in those moments and find a deeper gladness.

Dwelling on death and these difficult things might be the means that God uses to bring you to life, to save you from drowning in frivolity.

And in that, bitter is better. Let's join together in prayer.