

Ecclesiastes 7:1-8

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[0:00] We're going to turn today to the book of Ecclesiastes. So you may have heard this before, but I'm here kind of last minute to stand in for Paul.

But I think it's a passage worth looking at again. So the writer deals with adversity in this chapter, and I'm going to read the first eight verses of chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes.

It should be on page 556. Is that right? Great. Okay. So beginning at verse 1. A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.

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.

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.

[1:40] It is better for a man to hear the song of fools. 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. Better is the end of the wise, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Let's pray, shall we, and ask for God's help as we look at this together. Gracious Heavenly Father, we're so grateful that you've revealed yourself to us, that you've revealed the truth about life in this world as it is.

And we pray that you will train our hearts with wisdom to come to you in times of adversity. We pray for your help now, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So, in this passage, the writer deals, I think, with the subject of adversity, and he gives a very alternative view of adversity, of suffering, of difficulty, of problems in life.

[3:04] We're all experiencing a little bit of that, aren't we, in various degrees at the moment, adversity. And if you're not familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes, the writer takes a look at the world and shows us that things that we experience aren't always what they seem on the surface.

Earlier, before chapter 7, he deals with affluence. And he says affluence, the opposite of adversity in our minds, isn't always necessarily a good thing in life.

And he says here that adversity is not always a bad thing. He takes a really unique view on adversity, on difficulty.

And he talks about it in a very strange way. He says, amazingly, sometimes adversity is better. Did you hear that word being repeated throughout the passage?

Sadness, mourning, receiving rebukes, even the day of death, he says, over and over and over again, is better, or it can be better than the alternatives.

[4:19] Laughter, singing, feasting, or a birthday. Seems as if he's being quite morbid, doesn't it? He takes us around on this kind of tour of life, of different experiences, different places.

Seems like he's being a bit miserable. He takes us to a crematorium. And he says, in some ways, it's better to be here than in the birthing suite.

He takes us to a house where there is crying and mourning. And he says, in some ways, it's better to be here than laughing our heads off in the comedy lounge.

He wants us to know there is a unique opportunity to be had in those places that normally we run from and want to avoid.

Bitter, he says, can sometimes be better for us. For a person who wants to live wisely, to see things rightly, adversity can bring a great opportunity.

[5:25] Now, how can he say that? It's odd, isn't it? Well, listen again to verse 2, which I think unlocks this passage. Look again there. He says, it's better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, because for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart, he says.

Do you see what his concern is here? His concern isn't how you're doing on the surface, what everyone can see. His concern is about what is going on in your heart, what you're thinking of there, what is going on deep within you.

He wants us to refuse to live life on a kind of superficial level, and the dark moments of adversity can be a better training ground for your heart.

Moments of adversity can be laid on your heart. So I want you to show you his kind of upside down thinking with three comparisons that he makes.

First of all, he says, the day of death can be better than the day of birth. That's what he says in verse one, isn't it? And just think about that for a moment.

[6:46] What's the difference between a birthday and a dying day? They're worlds apart in so many ways. But think again, he is speaking, isn't he, of their ability to train our hearts.

So come with me to the birth suite, he says, or come to the christening or the baby shower. What is it like there on a birthday? Well, a birthday is filled with optimism and new life.

The mood is exciting, isn't it? There's a feeling of potential, of imagining what this new life will come to and become and achieve. The world is their oyster.

At the day of birth, hopes run high, don't they? It's not a time perhaps to dwell on human brevity or limitation. It's a time to say, you have got the whole of your life ahead of you.

The world is your oyster. Go and grab it. But then come to the crematorium. And it's a very different place altogether, isn't it?

[7:53] He's not wanting us to think morbidly. He wants us to think deeply because the day of death brings a unique opportunity.

It brings a certain clarity where the cold facts of our ultimate destiny, of our real condition are laid before us.

And in that sense, the day of death is better than the day of birth. Not because death is better. Of course it isn't. But because death, the day of death, can be a better teacher of our hearts than the day of birth.

You know, there's one place that I've heard as many prayers said in church, maybe even more prayers said than in church that I've been to recently, in hospital.

I'm much better now. But it did strike me how many prayers were said in hospital with people who were very ill.

[8:54] More prayers even than in church were said. God's name mentioned more in hospital. I'd be willing to bet that actually more people have become Christians in hospital or at funerals or at the bedside of a dying loved one than at a christening or a birth shower.

Because the day of death can be a better preacher of the things that we must learn here and do here. Of the reality about who we are in relationship with God.

That we're not God and we desperately need Him and the life that He gives and we need resurrection hope in Jesus Christ.

The last place anyone wants to be is in a palliative care ward or standing at a graveside, isn't it? Or to even think about those things. To even think about death.

To ponder it. We don't want to think about those things, do we? Blaise Pascal, the philosopher, said that despite his afflictions, man wants to be happy.

[10:10] But how shall he go about it? The best thing would be to do to make himself immortal. To get rid of death altogether. But as he can't do that, he said, he's decided simply to stop thinking about it.

Just don't think about it the day of death. Just blank it out. Blot it out. But if you are doing that, the preacher is saying here, hang on, you might be missing out on some real clarity.

On some lucidity to bring you to your senses. As strange as it sounds, coffins can be better sermon illustrations than cots in some ways.

Funerals are sobering moments. People are stopped in their tracks, aren't they, but by the day of death and the reality of death. And it puts us in a place to consider things very carefully.

And for a wise person, in a sense, they are a godsend because they focus and train the heart on what really matters. They keep us from drowning ourselves in frivolity, in triviality.

[11:24] And I just wonder whether the Lord is doing that with us at the moment. Doing that with our nation and with our world.

The day of death may for many even prove to be a godsend at the moment as we are faced with the reality of our need for God and through that we are brought to life as we trust in Him.

And if that happens for us, then the bitter things will truly end up to be better for us in the long run. It's a really alternative view of adversity, isn't it?

But let me show you another comparison that he makes. The day of death better than the day of birth but secondly, sorrow better than laughter. Look at verse 3. For by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

And again, we want to ask him, well what on earth are you talking about? But do you see his priority? His concern isn't whether you're all smiles on the surface.

[12:35] That doesn't mean a lot, does it? You can be deeply depressed, deep down. You can be utterly hopeless in your heart and have a smile on your face. His concern is what is going on in your heart?

And again, it seems upside down. He says sorrow can be better than laughter and we think, well why are you being so serious? Just lighten up a little bit.

But I think that response is part of this myth that we have come to believe where we think that true gladness and true joy and happiness in life comes when we live an unexamined and frivolous life. That is free and easy. Where we don't take things too seriously at all. Where we look for relief in comic relief. And we just smile.

But like he says in verse 6, that doesn't last. The laughter of fools can be like crackling thorns under a cooking pot.

[13:44] A few cackles and the joy disappears. It's just frivolous. One writer said, I'm always having fun but I'm never happy.

The world says though, doesn't it, it is better to be in your house at home watching Michael McIntyre or your favourite comedian on TV than in the house of mourning.

But he's saying no, don't miss the opportunities that can come in moments of sadness to listen and to grow in wisdom. People try to spend their whole lives laughing things off and singing.

But missing out on a strange gladness, a deep profound gladness that can come as we draw closer to God in moments of pain.

Tears can sometimes accompany moments of deep gladness. One writer, Gerald Sitzer, tells the story in his book, *A Grace Disguised*, when tragedy came into his life.

[14:59] He was driving on a road and a drunk driver smashed into his car and in that moment his world was turned upside down. He lost his wife, a child, and his mother who were in the car.

He wrote about the agonies that he and his children who were left behind faced as they tried to piece their lives together. He says, I was dizzy and nauseous with the vertigo of grief that overwhelmed me.

A few years after he published that book, *A Grace Disguised*, he kind of republished and changed the preface at the beginning of the book a few years later.

He said in that revised preface, rawness and utter bewilderment have strangely given way to contentment and deep gratitude.

He described the bitterness turning out to be redemptive for him and his children and many other people around him.

[16:08] And he closes with this line, as strange as it might sound to you, though without the suffering that I've gone through, I wish that every man could experience what I now have.

Sounds so strange, doesn't it? But perhaps only somebody who has been through suffering like that and who has gotten closer to God can really say those things and can really get Ecclesiastes 7.

God had provided an unexplained gladness in his sadness. He realized that somehow by God's grace later sorrow was better for him in the long run than laughter.

The preacher says it is possible to have a sad face in the mirror, to have tears coming down your face but still have a strange gladness within you. He's not being morbid.

He's saying sadness can be a trainer of the heart where there comes clarity and in those moments of sadness comes an experience of greater insight into God's love, of how deep God's love goes.

[17:30] Moments of truer resting in him, moments where we pray like we've never prayed before and we lean on him like never before. Learning what it means to be a child of God in a much more profound way.

learning reliance on him in the pain experiencing God's sufficiency and grace. And we know this, don't we?

Many of us know this, that God sometimes calls out to us in suffering that he might prepare for us a deeper joy and a deeper gladness in the heart, not just on the face.

His whole thing is seeing why adversity isn't always something that we should run from or be embarrassed about, but the wise person, the godly person, need not fear adversity.

Bitter, in this strange way, can be better. He's not saying it's easy, that as Christians we just go, I'm a Christian, suffering doesn't really matter.

[18:37] No, the suffering is real. He says, doesn't he, the rebuke of the wise in verse 5 is better for us even though it's less pleasant than the compliments than the songs of fools.

Some things feel harder genuinely, but the harder things, the less comfortable things in life often are the things that yield better results in the long run.

often the things that yield a greater focus and a greater understanding of God's goodness. So the day of death better than the day of birth, sorrow better than laughter sometimes, and thirdly and lastly, the end can be better than the beginning.

Look at verse 8 as we close. He says, better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

So he's already hinted at this, hasn't he, really? Because of course the end of all things, for you and for me, is death. And our end is a much better preacher, it is a much better trainer, a much better teacher of what matters in life than the beginning is.

[20:00] And that makes sense, doesn't it? Because how something is finished means something more, doesn't it, somehow, than the intentions we had when we began something.

That goes for life in general. And what is said about us at the end, or after the end, holds much more value, doesn't it, than what is said at the beginning of our lives.

And the preacher wants us to see that. How you leave the world, is far more important than how you come into the world. The wise person is someone who takes the long view, who actually takes the end view in life.

That's why he mentions in verse one, a good name being better than precious ointment. That is a reference there to a good name of a person when they die and they end, and ointment on a birthday.

You can smell of roses, you can be fantastic in everybody's eyes when you're covered in baby oil on your birthday, but what is said about you at the end and your name at the end matters much more, doesn't it?

[21:18] The end is not something that we want to face, though. But listen again to the training the end can give our hearts now. The end of our lives can be the friend of our lives now.

To preach to us that we're not going to live forever and we need to be wise about what we do with our lives now. And to sober up and to come to God who gives us that life.

He's saying if we can think for a moment about the end, if we can sense the inevitability of it, we can sense the ache of it, well if you can do that he's saying now is your chance.

Strike while the iron's hot, lay these things to heart and get right with God. Come to the Lord Jesus, trust in him. The end calls us to humble ourselves before God and receive his love and peace before the end.

You may have messed up your life at the beginning and you may have come into this world in a right mess and your life at the beginning may have been a terrible life, I don't know.

[22:37] You may have messed up in the middle of your life and to be honest you might want to say actually I'm a mess right now. But what he's saying here is that the old saying is true that all's well that ends well.

if we are trusting in Jesus and we have gone to God by the end of our lives. In the lucidity of this pandemic and perhaps we're contemplating aren't we much more the end of our lives much more clearly but bitter times like this can be better for us.

if we can open our hearts we are urged not to focus on the negative things for too long. If death confronts you just say a joke, get a glass of wine, smile.

But we are being forced to stare at death in the face at the moment aren't we and not being allowed to take our eyes off it and it's really uncomfortable. But the truth is it's always been there hasn't it? That's not different. This virus has merely opened our eyes to it in a different way and the preacher is saying folks that is a gift in some ways.

[24:06] In adversity comes this opportunity where we can seriously contemplate the important things of life and we can contemplate the lives that we've lived, maybe our regrets and our sins and our failures before God, our pride, that we might run to God and find a deeper gladness that we can only have by turning to him, that he might keep us from just drowning ourselves in frivolity and to be able to then look back on days of suffering that we have gone through and to lay them to heart and to be trained by them and to be wiser because of them.

I'm coming to a greater knowledge and understanding of my need for Jesus Christ and his love and his forgiveness. And we will one day, won't we, be able to look back at days like today and times like this and back over all of the sufferings of our lives, no matter how hard it's been, to be able to look back, being loved by Jesus in his presence forever and ever, even after death, even after the end, and to be able to say, now I can see clearly that in God's kindness and his wisdom for me, that time of bitterness was better for me because it led me to Christ and to this moment of peace and of joy and of life in him.

So let's pray that we can do that now. Let's pray.