

Ecclesiastes 6:1-7:12

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to Ecclesiastes chapter 6, passage that was read for us, page 556, if you're following in the Black Church Bible. When I was a good deal younger than I am now, I had this thing that I would do with my cousin, where if we were enjoying ourselves together, and it could have been a meal in a restaurant or a cold drink on a hot day or something, something pleasurable, we would say, hmm, this, this is living. The sense was, if we had this experience all the time, well, that would be the good life. We were convinced that verse 2 was what made life worth living.

Chapter 6, verse 2, wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires. If we could have this all the time, this is living.

And those are the elements, aren't they? Wealth, possessions, and honor, lacking nothing that we desire. Those are the elements of the good life that is held out to us in Western culture today. This is living. You'll be able to say that if you're prosperous, comfortable, and respected.

Then, of course, if you come from a less individualistic culture than the West, you might define the good life more along the lines of verse 3. Have a look. Verse 3. A man fathers a hundred children and lives many years so that the days of his years are many.

You're not so worried about having all the stuff. For you, it's a large family and many years to enjoy them. This is living. All of our visions of the good life include some or all of these things, whether it's the first or the second list.

[1 : 53] And they're not bad in themselves. They're good things. But what we discover this evening is that these things will not, they cannot deliver the good life.

We need something more. They're not enough. Wealth, possessions, honor, so that you don't lack anything that you set your eyes on. You actually need more than that.

As he's been doing from the start of this book, Solomon is forcing us to look hard at the world the way it really is. He's shaking us out of our fantasy.

He wants us to be honest about what it is that we see there. He wants us to stop pretending that there is gain, there is profit in the world when we build our lives on the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and wisdom.

And he wants us to admit that it's all vapor. It's all thin air. Solomon's book is wisdom literature. So it's designed to form our mind in a biblical way.

[2 : 56] That means it helps us see that there aren't simple answers to life's complexities. Wisdom literature doesn't view the world in black and white. We would love it if it did that. If the Bible worked like that, we would be much happier because we long for simple answers to the difficult issues that life throws at us.

But life isn't easy. We live in a cursed world. A world where we're often perplexed by what God is doing. A world where even as Christians, in relationship with the living God, we find ourselves confused.

And a simple do this, follow these simple steps and get the outcome you desire, it doesn't work. We know that. And Solomon has already told us that if we make wisdom an end, even wisdom an end in itself, it won't help us either.

Because wisdom isn't something that we can make an end of in itself. You can't pull wisdom off the shelf. It doesn't work that way. It takes time. It involves skill and contemplation and discernment and prayer.

Wisdom flows from experience. And you can't find those things on Google. But wisdom can be passed on.

[4 : 11] And Solomon is doing that here particularly in Ecclesiastes as a whole, but specifically this evening. He's passing on wisdom about the good life. And in particular, he's telling us that the wise

person recognizes two things.

Two points this evening. The wise person recognizes, first of all, prosperity is not necessarily good. Prosperity is not necessarily good.

Chapter 6, verses 1 to 9. Now at the end of chapter 5, you just look up. At the end of chapter 5, we're told that God gives two gifts. It's everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil.

This is the gift of God. He gives the gifts and he gives the ability to enjoy the gifts. And what Solomon goes on to describe in chapter 6 is what happens if someone has only been given the first of these.

And Solomon calls it, chapter 6, verse 1, an evil or literally a tragedy. Verse 1, there is a tragedy that I have seen under the sun and it lies heavy on mankind.

[5 : 20] A man to whom God gives wealth, possessions and honor so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires. Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them. But a stranger enjoys them.

This is vanity. A grievous evil. A grievous tragedy. God's world is a stunning place. He has given us mountains and rivers and paintings and literature and music.

He has spread the table with smells and tastes. Take your pick. Steak. Meatballs. Cured ham. Stilton cheese. Scotch bonnet chilies.

Sun-dried tomato pesto. Peanut butter. Wine. Guinness. Cuisher. Mangoes. All gifts from his generous hand. But without the divine gift of enjoyment to accompany those things, they're all cold porridge.

Somebody here probably likes cold porridge. It was the one thing that I thought most of us won't like. One of my fears during COVID was that thing where people lost their sense of taste.

[6 : 31] Thankfully, I didn't get it, but I knew some people who did. And they described how eating, maybe you got that, how eating became joyless, even unpleasant because of the way your tastes changed.

That is what prosperity is like without the gift of being able to enjoy the things that prosperity affords us. You can lack nothing that you desire.

Here it is. Here it is. Have another one. Have ten. Have a hundred. But there's no lasting joy. No lasting pleasure because the stuff in itself isn't enough if God has not given the gift of enjoyment. Solomon presses the point further. Here verse 3. If a man fathers a hundred children, lives many years so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

A man could have a hundred children and live, verse 6, two thousand years. Children and long life are Old Testament pictures of prosperity and blessing.

[7 : 39] However, without the ability to enjoy them, the man, Solomon says, would have been better being stillborn. If there's no satisfaction in the blessing, then what's the point of the blessing?

What is the point of the years spent being dissatisfied? It's an arresting image, isn't it? Stillborn child. He's saying, if life is a restless, grievous, dissatisfying treadmill, verse 7, that's the image there.

And the stillborn baby didn't have any of that anxiety or pain. And they were at rest with the Lord all along, he says. They were better off than a prosperous person who lives two thousand years twice over.

It's a way of saying forever. Better off than the person who lives forever. Wisdom dictates that we recognize that wealth is not an automatic sign of God's blessing in our lives.

Because as the Lord Jesus told us, the good life doesn't consist in the abundance of things. Jesus said this for the simple reason that apart from God, there is no good in those things themselves.

[8 : 53] And we've seen this countless times over and over again with celebrities and wealthy, famous people. I remember some years ago listening to George Best. George Best was probably the first megastar sports person, certainly in Britain.

A hugely kind of famous, successful footballer. I remember listening to him reflecting on his life, talking about fame and success. He said he built his dream home exactly to his specifications and he never really lived in it.

Didn't like it. He had whatever he wanted at his disposal and it left him feeling empty. He spoke about how he dated numerous Miss Worlds and how he got bored with beautiful women.

He'd been given the prosperity without the divine gift to enjoy it. I mentioned Matthew Perry a few weeks ago. Chandler from Friends. He lacked nothing he desired.

But all that he did, all that that did for him was leave him anxious and empty. And he needed to numb the ache in his soul so much that he died a broken and pathetic addict.

[9 : 57] And the list goes on and on and on and on. But we know it's not just those at the top who experience this, is it? We know what it's like to aim for something and then to get that thing only to discover that there's no lasting joy.

I've seen my peers who took a different course in life. They've made a lot of money and the rising standard of living means that special things become normal things. And therefore then they lose their appeal.

There's no joy in the meal or the glass of fine wine because they're just ordinary sustenance now. That same cousin I told you about at the start, I met him last year.

He lives in Australia. He's a successful lawyer. I met him for lunch in London last year. And during the lunch, I was appreciating it. It was on him.

And I said, this, this is living. And I could tell he was bored by it. Because he has that all the time. But it's also true that we know the positive side of this.

[11 : 06] The thrill of simple things that have been accompanied by the blessing of God to enjoy them. The way that a child's painting brings more joy than owning a Picasso would.

The way we see the poor child with only a stick to play with. Who runs around shooting his enemies. And laughing at his imaginary world.

And how he is better off than the spoiled child with a room full of toys who can only huff. Because one of those toys isn't the newest. We've seen that. Here's the thing.

Don't think that being more prosperous will automatically deliver the good life. The joy that keeps eluding you. Verse 9. The wandering appetite is never satisfied.

Instead, Solomon says, enjoy the sight of your eyes. Verse 9. That is, enjoy what's in front of you. Enjoy what he called in chapter 5, your lot. What God has given to you.

[12 : 02] And don't waste your time. Verse 11. Just talking about why things are the way they are. Don't waste your time with a, why has God made things this way seminar or podcast.

That's just more vapor, he says. Verse 11. The more words, the more vanity. And what is the advantage to man? But it is realizing this that opens the door to a solution.

You see, the obvious question at this point. I think the obvious question at this point is, okay, all right, I get it. Prosperity is not necessarily good. But how do I get the gift of enjoyment? Well, the answer is there in verse 3.

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things. His soul is not satisfied with good things.

Literally, that translates, his soul has not seen the good. Now, that's not a reference to seeing the good in the thing. When it says there, satisfied with life's good things, the thing has been added in our English translation.

[13 : 15] His soul has not seen the good. It's about discerning the good in what God is doing in frustrating our ability to be satisfied apart from him. To think that the good life is possessions, wealth, and honor.

See, because of our sin, God has laid a curse on the world. And that means that creation simply will not yield enjoyment. Unless that is we see that God is doing this and we turn in fear to him.

That's been a thread all the way through the book. When we accept that the world is the way it is, under the hand of God. And we accept that he is working his good purposes out.

And then we turn ourselves over to him in repentance and faith. Our soul has seen the good. And what that does is enables us to see that everything that we have is gift.

And we're thankful. In short, when we see that the material things are gift, not something we can grasp after, not something we can gain for ourselves.

[14 : 26] When we see that they are gift, it makes us thankful. And thankful people enjoy what they have. Prosperity is not necessarily good.

But when it is met with thankfulness and faith in the God who gives, it unlocks all manner of joy.

One author says, The Lord gives a can of peaches to an unbeliever and a believer alike.

One can only lick the label. The other gets the can opener thrown in. Thankfulness is what unlocks the gift of enjoyment.

Solomon then now turns to make a contrast to that first point. And he does this with his favorite genre, Proverbs. So, if prosperity is not necessarily good, wisdom also dictates that secondly, adversity is not necessarily bad.

Chapter 7, 1 to 10. Now, there is a growing trend in our culture that adversity is a good thing.

[15:37] We should stand up straight. Take it on the chin. Hurt is good. If you know who David Goggins is, that's his story. Okay? The more painful it is, the better it is for you. Adversity is a good thing.

That's not quite what Solomon is saying. He ends chapter 6. Do you see verse 12 of the question? 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? Who knows what is good for man? Well, Solomon answers the question. Chapter 7, verse 11.

Wisdom is good. Chapter 7, verse 12. Wisdom preserves the life of man who has it. And these proverbs open us up to wisdom by highlighting for us a series of relative goods.

Certain things are good, but certain other things are better. Learn these lessons and you will be wise. And the backdrop for Solomon's list is the experience of adversity under the sun that we live through.

[16:41] This is such an alien idea to us. We want life to be comfortable. We want it to be easy. And we think that if it isn't comfortable and easy, it can't be from God's good hand.

We start to get frustrated. We start to maybe not say it out loud, but we start to get frustrated with God. We begin to despise his providence.

But these verses teach us the opposite. They speak positively of death, rebuke, and being patient. So, first thing, thinking about adversity and how it can be good, death is a better teacher than birth.

Verse 1. Having a good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death than the day of birth. Having a good name matters.

It matters more than whether you use expensive cologne. If you smell good, but when your name comes up in company, it stinks the place out. That's a problem. That's what he's saying in verse 1.

[17:45] Now, we understand that. We understand the comparison. Integrity and character matter. But the second half of the verse, well, it seems to take a bit of a darker turn, doesn't it? He's saying, How on earth can that be right?

Surely the day a child is born is a day of immense joy. It's a day of excitement and potential. It's not that way when someone dies. Remember I said these are relative statements.

Solomon is not saying that death is good and birth is bad. Nor is he saying that choosing death is wise. Just as precious ointment is good, but a good name is better.

So birth is good. It's wonderful. But there is a sense in which death is better because of what it teaches us. That's why Solomon takes us, verse 2, to the house of the morning.

Death isn't the teacher of the dead person. They're dead. Death teaches those who are left behind. And the wise among us will take those lessons, lay what it teaches, to heart, verse 2.

[19:00] When you go to a house of mourning, what do you learn? Well, you're reminded again that death is coming. It's coming to all of us. Death relativizes everything else and shapes how we live in the present.

Death gives us perspective on what really matters in life. Death causes us to accept our own fragility. There's none of that on a maternity ward.

People are serious at funerals. Mourners tend to talk more, or they should talk more, about real issues. Turning a funeral into a celebration, some people try and do this.

That's a mistake because of verse 3. Sorrow is better than laughter in that context. And it's better because in our sadness we are led to the kind of wisdom that Solomon is talking about here.

We get a deeper grasp of reality. And we pray with the psalmist, teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom. Death is a better teacher than birth because it grounds us in reality and causes us to ponder how we might live well in light of it.

[20:13] Death is a better teacher than birth. Verse 5, rebuke is better than empty praise. It is better for a man to hear 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. It's another kind of adversity. When someone corrects you. When someone tells you you've got something wrong.

None of us love that. None of us say, I want to sign up for a bit of rebuke. But when it comes our way from the lips of the wise, it is a gift.

And it is far more beneficial to us than the cheerleading of yes men and fools. Thorns and brambles. They're not usually used for kindling under a pot because while they pop and crackle, they don't produce much heat.

They aren't actually really much use. That's the reason that Solomon uses the image here. So it is with the flatterer. And someone says, oh, you are very good at whatever.

[21 : 17] That thing you did, that was excellent. That was the best I've ever seen. That was the best I've ever heard. You're the best whatever it is that I've ever come across. Always praising you. Always laughing at your jokes.

If you surround yourself with people like this, you're a fool, Solomon says. If your spouse is a cheerleader, your marriage is nowhere near as healthy as it should be or it could be.

If your staff only praise you because their jobs depend on it, you're in a perilous position. If you don't have people in your life who will say to you, that comment you made, that was a mistake, you should apologize.

Or stop it with a vanity on social media. Cut it out. Whatever it might be. If you don't have people in your life that are able to do that. If you don't invite that from people, you're a fool.

Now, of course, no discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful, Hebrews 12 tells us. But if it is received with humility, the writer of the Hebrews says it will bear a harvest of righteousness in your life.

[22 : 21] You'll grow and you'll mature. And the adversity, the criticism, the correction, it will have been worth it. Third comparison comes in verse 8.

Death is a better teacher than birth. Rebuke is better than empty praise. The third comparison, better is the end of a thing than its beginning. 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.

Patience is better than proud grumbling. The sort of adversity that comes into our lives that means that we have to be patient is difficult.

Patience is a really difficult thing. When you see a patient person, something, well, when I see a patient person, something in me just is a bit of envy. I want to be more like that.

[23 : 23] Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. Every epic fail compilation that you might see has a version of this verse 8. The person who celebrates too soon. Running in a try and showboating over the line only to drop the ball.

He's saying, wait to celebrate until the battle is won. And waiting in general, as I say, is the thrust of this comparison. Being patient with God's providence in your life. Remember back in chapter 3, God is the Lord of the seasons.

God is the Lord of every single detail in your life. There is nothing. He knows the number of hairs on your head. There is nothing outside of His sovereign providence.

Which means you are where you are in the situation you're in because God has allowed that to be the case. And when things get especially difficult, we love verse 10.

Remember the good old days. Why were the former days better than these? What's the problem with that?

[24 : 28] The problem with that is that we are no longer in the good old days because God doesn't want us to be. And we are where we are because He does. Grumbling and wishing that you were in the past is to despise God's providence in the present.

Patience is better than proud grumbling. So whatever situation you find yourself in at the moment, don't forget that you are there under the all-encompassing providence of God.

Even the injustices. Even the accidents. And the well-thought-out decisions. All of them are under His care.

So getting angry and getting impatient is no good. Rather, we must learn that God has us where He has us so that we might learn patience.

That we might learn a deeper trust in our Heavenly Father. That we might learn a closer walk with Him. By definition, adversity can't always be bad.

[25 : 37] Because adversity is the way of the cross. When we follow Jesus Christ, we choose adversity. But we're choosing an adversity that makes us more like Him.

It's an adversity that makes us wiser. Makes us humbler. Makes us more Christ-like.

So Solomon here would have us lean in to what death can teach us. Lean in to correction and rebuke. And lean in to patience.

Because in the end, those things will make you more like the Lord Jesus Christ. The life of wisdom.

It's a life that knows that prosperity isn't necessarily good.

And adversity isn't necessarily bad. This. This. Is living. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

[26 : 44] Let's pray. Let's pray.