

Mortality and Adversity Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Today we continue our journey through the book of **Ecclesiastes**, moving into the **2nd half** of the book as we complete **Ch. 6** and cover the first half of **Ch. 7**. And as we do that, we're going to talk about death, funerals and some of life's toughest questions: Who knows our future? When will our good and bad days come? Who's really in control? Will this broken world and my broken life ever get straightened out? Who can do that?

David Gibson: So you think you've got wisdom? You think you've got your life in order, got it nailed down—you think you understand how the world works? If death and destruction come knocking on your door on a Tuesday morning completely out of the blue, if the doctor tells you that your own end is near or the phone rings with heartbreaking news, then at that moment you will realize the control you thought you had over life was just self-deception. Thinking you know enough to have control of your own life is just an illusion, but the tears on your pillow at night are real. **[Pray]**

**Would you rather go to a funeral or a party? To a funeral home or the Angus Barn?
Weep after hearing tragic news or laugh at a good joke?**

Confession: I don't like funeral homes or including funerals. Yeah, I said it. I detest death, though I don't fear it. **Truth is:** I—probably like most of you—would rather avoid such places and events. That doesn't mean I don't think we should have funerals or honor people that have died. We should! **But let's be honest**, those are hard places to be and hard events to attend, and if we never had to go to another funeral, I don't think any of us would complain.

But death and sorrow teach us a lot about life, how we should live now and remind us that we have something grand to look forward to!

In today's passage the Preacher talks about how attending a funeral and embracing sorrow can teach us wisdom for this life and point us to the next. He talks about how to listen to and wait for wisdom—and the dangers of folly. And finally, we are reminded that only God can straighten out what is crooked in this world—and in our hearts—and that we need to trust him in the good days and in the bad.

Main Point: We should face the uncertainties and adversities of life by wisely understanding our own limitations, choosing the way of wisdom, and trusting God, who knows and controls the future and will redeem all that's broken.

Structure:

1. Prologue: Two Reminders and Two Rhetorical Questions (6:10-12)
2. Proverbs: What's Good for Us? Two Recommendations (7:1-12)
3. Epilogue: What Will Happen to Us? Two Considerations & Admonitions (7:13-14)

Prologue: Reminders & Rhetorical Questions (6:10-12)

1. **Two Reminders: God is God, and We're Not (10-11)**
 - 1) **First Reminder: Only God Knows and Controls the Future (10a)**
10a: Whatever has come to be has already been named

Naming” parallels creating. Naming something in creation is to assert and affirm its identity, its value, its existence, its reality, and that it is under the control/sovereignty of its “namer.”

Who "named" what has come to be? God did. Whatever has come to be was already known by God.

He knew in advance and expected what has happened (no surprises!), and he knows the future: everything that has and will occur in your life – the good and bad, the joys and sorrows, and everything in between.

And best as we try to predict and control the future we cannot. **James 4:14:** *yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

Some of you know that better than others. You’ve received unexpected tragic news amazingly good news, experienced horrible unplanned suffering, or maybe surprising blessings or joys...and each of those has changed your life and reminded you: **you don’t know what tomorrow holds and you’re not the one in control.** Events have occurred and new information has come into your life that you didn’t expect and didn’t plan for and didn’t have any control of and it changed your life—irreversibly and profoundly.

At the very least these things should teach and remind us, as this verse does: we don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but God does. He’s not surprised, he’s always known.

2) **First Reminder: Our Knowledge and Control is Limited and Subject to the Will of God (10b-11)**

10b: *it is known what man is*

“**Man**” = human being (man or woman)

God knows us fully, exactly who we are, what we’ve done, what we will do, everything we think and feel, every desire, and the moment of our conception and day of our death. He knows us better than we know ourselves: our limitations, our temptations and our loves.

And the truth is: we are mortal and imperfect sinners, but also human beings created in the image of God and we are loved by him who made us. He knows what we are and who we are—yet he loves us...so much that died for us. Because of his great mercy, *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)*

10c: *[Man] is not able to dispute with one [God] stronger than he.*

We can, and should, cry out, lament, even question God. But he is God, infinite in power, knowledge and goodness. **Who are we to dispute with him? Who are we to tell him, even silently in our hearts, that we know better, we would do it better.**

Let’s remember who we really are and who he is. “We are but weak mortals before an omnipotent God.” (Garrett)

But let’s also remember: “The will of God comes from the heart of God and is an expression of the love of God. What God wills for us is best for us, because He knows far more about us than we do. You and I may not understand how God exercises His freedom, but it isn’t necessary for us to know all. Our greatest freedom comes when we are lovingly lost in the will of God.” (Warren Wiersbe)

11: *The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?*

Once again: “you talk too much”

More words, more talking doesn’t mean you know more, and it definitely won’t help you know the future.

I love to make people laugh—too much sometimes, gets me in trouble. And I also love to explain things in great detail, too much really (Me: “long story short” Shauna: “too late!”) **But the reality is: much of my talk, much your talk, and most of the talk from politicians and entertainers and other experts will vaporize—in our memories and in history.** Much of our talk will evaporate and won't be helpful. It will be of no “**advantage.**” Our words (and works) don't have the power to control tomorrow or create new life or defeat death. But God's words (and work) can. His power and knowledge is infinite. He can do the “impossible.” His word of the utmost advantage to man.

2. Two Rhetorical Questions: (1) What's Good for Us and (2) Who Knows What Will Happen to Us? (6:12)

1) 12a: *For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?*

Answer: no one...but God!

We humans know some of what is good for us, but not always what is best for us. And we generally wouldn't willingly choose to suffer. But God perfectly and always knows what is good for us, even allowing us to experience suffering and hurt.

Think about it: Have you made mistakes? Do you have regrets? Things you wish you'd have done differently? Choices you wish you'd have made? Paths you wish you would have taken? Words you wish you had said—or hadn't said?

God doesn't have regrets and he always knows what is best for us. The truth of this verse shouldn't lead us to despair, it should lead us to faith and trust. **You don't have complete control, you don't know the future, you will make mistakes.** But he never does and he's always in control, and he knows your future. **Trust him.** Even when you think he isn't there, or isn't listening, or doesn't care, or is powerless during the tragic events of your life, or doesn't know your suffering---he is there, he is listening, he is in control, he does care (more deeply and sensitively than you can imagine), and he suffered and died in your place. There is **NOTHING** in your life that escapes his not only his sight. There is no sin in your past/present/future that he doesn't know about or can't forgive.

We often don't know what is good (more good) for us, but he always does.

2) 12b: *For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?*

Answer: no one...but God!

No one can predict with 100% accuracy what tomorrow will bring – for themselves or anyone else.

We try to predict and control it (and we should plan for the future) but, ultimately, we don't have that power and foresight. **We don't know what tomorrow will bring. (James 4:14)**

Proverbs: What's Good for Us? (7:1-12)

In this section, the Preacher tells us what is better for us, literally what is “more good” (“*tov*” in Hebrew, “*gooder*” in Southern). He is answering the first question from above. There are 7 “more good” comparisons, which we can divide into 2 scenes.

Scene 1 - A Funeral:

1. Be Wise by Considering Death and the Brevity of Life (7:1-4)

Spurgeon: Let us, then, talk about preparing to die. It is the greatest thing we have to do, and we have soon to do it, so let us talk and think something about it. **Yes, let's do!**

Verse	Is Better	Than
1	Good Name	Precious Ointment
1	Day of Birth	Day of Death
2,4	House of Mourning	House of Feasting & Mirth (Frivolity)
3	Sorrow	Laughter

Why? Why are these things better?

V. 2 – this is the end of all mankind

V. 2 – the living will lay it to heart

V. 3 – through sadness the heart is made glad

1) **1a:** *A good name is better than precious ointment.*

Having a good name is more precious than the momentary pleasures or the praises of the world. Precious ointment or perfume is pleasing to the senses and can also be helpful. **An Altoid, good deodorant, Polo (“by Ralph Lauren”), Axe body spray could your “precious ointment!”**. But no ointment is so precious that it is better than maintaining a good name by loving God and our neighbor. **Our precious creations are not more precious and pleasing to God than a good name, than faithfulness and integrity.** **And when can we know we have a good name (reputation)?** How long should we strive for a good name? To be above reproach and an example? **Our whole life – until our death.** And a good name is not fully earned until the day of death. We must persevere in our faithfulness. May **“my precious” (Gollum)** be our good name.

2) **1b:** *The day of death [is better] than the day of birth.*

This seems backwards, upside down, and counterintuitive. What is he talking about?? This is crazy talk...but is it? For us the day of death is filled with sadness as we come to grips with the end of a life, while the day of birth is filled with joy because we celebrate the beginning of a new life. (Donnie & Meghan)

That's all very true. **So I think most of us would say that the day of birth is far better than the day of death.** But here we read the day of death is better than the day of birth. **Why? It's not because** he's saying birth and the blessing of new life shouldn't be celebrated and appreciated, **nor** is he saying death and funerals are joyous occasions to look forward to. He's saying **it's better because death forces us to consider some of life's most important questions and lessons, and to deal with the reality of our mortality and the mortality of others. We may not like it, but it is good for us.**

Death forces us to evaluate our life and how we are living it. We are forced to look death in the eye, and ask ourselves: *What am I doing with my life? What will people have to say about me when I die? Is this all there is? Is there a God? Is he in control? Will he save me?*

Gibson: The wise person sits in the funeral home and stares at the coffin and realizes that one day it will be his turn. The wise person asks himself, “When it is my turn, what will my life have been worth? What will they be saying about me?”

FRIEND: WHAT IF THAT'S TODAY? Have you dealt with that reality and those questions? Do you have answers? Do you have hope? Can you say, as Paul did (Phil 1:21,23) that to live is Christ but to die is gain and that your better desire is to be with Christ?

It also reminds us, if we are in Christ, that at the moment of our death our suffering is over and glory awaits us. We will no longer have to experience and witness the injustice, pain, and tears we see on this earth. **The day of a believer's death is the best day of all; it is their entrance into glory.**

Thomas Boston: [paraphrase] On the day of our birth we are born to die but on day of our death we die to live, we enter a better world, with higher perfection, greater purity, deeper rest, better company, higher perfection, and better employment than the world we entered on the day we were born.

3) 2: It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting [and] 4: the house of mirth.

Dad: "A funeral is better because you don't have to bring a gift."

? **House of feasting and mirth (frivolity):** wedding reception or party, Thanksgiving

? **House of morning:** home of someone who has died, funeral home

We avoid death, even in our language about someone dying: He—or She—"has passed away" or "has gone to a better place," or "is not with us anymore," or "has departed," or has "kicked the bucket." (I have no idea what that means, how's a dead person kick anything?)

But as with the "day of death" in the funeral home we will be confronted with the reality of death, We can't avoid it's lessons and questions.

It should force contemplation of our own mortality, and teaches us how to live.

Daniel Fredericks: Death is an enemy but also an evangelist. Death is the great mentor for diligence, sobriety, love, generosity, reverence and humility. Death forces the most profound questions to be asked, but mercilessly mocks those who sleep through its lessons.

Ps 90:12: *So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

Matthew Henry: (about funerals) "It will do us more good, and make better impressions upon us. We may lawfully go to both, as there is occasion. Our Saviour both feasted at the wedding of his friend in Cana and wept at the grave of his friend in Bethany; and we may possibly glorify God, and do good, and get good, in the house of feasting; but, considering how apt we are to be vain and frothy, proud and secure, and indulgent of the flesh, it is better for us to go to the house of mourning, not to see the pomp of the funeral, but to share in the sorrow of it, and to learn good lessons, both from the dead, who is going thence to his long home, and from the mourners, who go about the streets."

4) 3: Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

"laughter" means "to behave in a frivolous manner" **foolish fun**

He's not saying that we shouldn't laugh or celebrate or go to parties (many times in this book (7:14) he tells us to enjoy these blessings, to eat and drink with joy. **Rather he is saying that sorrow and sadness have lessons to teach our hearts that laughter and frivolity can never teach us.**

Zack Eswine: "Wisdom does not use sad things to avoid life. Wisdom uses sad things to learn life. The Preacher doesn't say that it is better to be sad. He says that it is better to engage sadness and to take to heart what it has to teach us who live."

Will you let death teach you? Will you let the reality of your mortality redirect your priorities, your attitudes, your desires and decisions, the things you long for and work for and pray for and hope? "For if death is not your lord and does not own you—it never, ever can be if you are in Christ—then it can teach you." (Gibson)

Scene 2 - A Fork in the Road:

2. Be Wise by Choosing the Walkway of Wisdom, Not the Footpath of Folly (7:5-12)

The way of wisdom, while narrow and more difficult, is “better.”

1) Listen to Wisdom and Treasure Its Value (5-6)

5-6: *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.*

Scathing picture of foolish laughter--frivolous entertainment: Thorns in a fire would burn fast and make a lot of noise but wouldn't last, wouldn't produce heat and ultimately wasn't useful (for cooking or heating).

Like a match, sparkler or fireworks. Noisy and entertaining, but short-lived and soon burnt out. Fun to look at or listen to, but not helpful in the long run.

The Teacher says this laughter “also is vanity.” **It is short-lived and useless.**

Think back to those catchy pop/party songs of your youth (any maybe present): Did you learn much from any of them? Entertaining? Yes. Helpful for life? Probably not.

The Teacher is not saying comedy, or fun entertainment (or fireworks) are bad and we should avoid them. (This isn't a call for censorship, you can keep watching “The Office.”) **But he is saying** that frivolity and mindless entertainment doesn't give you much wisdom; it isn't better for you than wise correction and loving discipline. **Don't go to Dumb & Dumber (1 or 2) for wisdom, rather we should welcome wise correction and constructive criticism.**

John Stafford Wright: “We must be ready for serious conversation with men and women who are experienced in life and be open to criticism from them. They may not answer all our problems, but their advice will be worth far more than popular songs devoid of serious moral content and the shallow humor of comedians.”

Prov. 12:1: *Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.*

Listening to constructive criticism of a godly friend, a brother or sister, can protect us from sin and folly and point us in the right direction, and ultimately it can help lead us to or back to Christ and to a life that honors him. This is easy to agree with, but hard to do. May we be willing to receive hard truths from wise people.

2) Stick to the Patient Path & Wait Wisely (7-10)

We all face temptations toward impatience:

Impatience for financial gain, leading to a foolish or sinful decision

Impatience in waiting for an outcome, quitting or bailing on something or someone too soon

Impatient anger, frustrated we don't get what you want, **when** we want it.

Impatience with the present and nostalgia for the “good old days”

Four Impatient Temptations:

1: Extortion (V. 7) *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.*

“Oppression” – **extortion or bribery**

Solomon said that the temptation to prosperity could even corrupt **the heart of a wise person**; they might give in to bribery or extortion.

Even wise people are tempted by riches; they might even stoop to some form of financial oppression as greed and impatience takes hold in their hearts.

This temptation and practice has been around for years and still flourishes today: slavery, human trafficking, fraud, bribery an extortion, identity theft, gambling, Ponzi schemes, political systems and elections...I'm sure you can think of other examples.

If you hold an influential position—of any kind—be on guard and don't use it for personal advantage or to oppress (take advantage) of someone. Such tactics erode your character, making you susceptible to other temptations, and they hurt and enslave your neighbor. It's wickedness.

2: Impatience (V. 8) *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.*

It is unwise and prideful to be impatient and unwilling to wait for an outcome; it is better to be patient and wait for conclusions and resolutions.

The patient are in it for the long haul and willing to wait. They don't throw in the towel too soon and are willing to be patient—even if the outcome seems doubtful. When adversity comes, they bear with it patiently, work hard, and WAIT for results (trusting God all the way).

Has that ever been you? Have you bailed on something too soon? Does adversity often cause you to quit? What about a job or a relationship or a church or reading the Bible or praying or sharing the gospel? **Jesus persevered** in his work and endured the shame of the cross and reproach of his people. May we, his people, **persevere and endure** as he did, working toward and waiting on the outcome, **trusting the Lord with the results.**

3: Anger (V. 9) *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.*

Fools aren't patient. They fly off the handle. When things don't go their way, they explode.

Don't think you're ever a fool? The bible says you are if you quickly lose your temper!

The Preacher has in mind the rash anger that erupts when we think that something is not happening as quickly as it should. We tell ourselves that we have a right to be angry. We shouldn't have to wait. **We DESERVE to get what we want when we want it and we are JUSTIFIED in our anger and DEMANDS.** But we need to see our anger for what it is—sinful folly, spiritual immaturity, and an arrogant mistrust of the sovereignty of God.

Prov 12:16: *Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.* (NIV)

Prov 14:29: *Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.*

Temper your temper! Put it away from you. (Eph 4:31, Col 3:8) (**Recommend *Uprooting Anger* by Bob Jones**)

4: Nostalgia (V. 10) *Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*

Ah, the Good Ol' Days – when we had no electricity or indoor plumbing or toilet paper, when we used leeches to treat medical ailments, and anesthesia was a shot of whiskey, and worst of all: chocolate was expensive and really hard to get. **<SIGH> Those were the days!**

Truth is: When we experience adversity, when we fall upon hard times, when we experience suffering and failure, **it is easy for us to complain and long for former days** when we think--things were better and easier and more joyous...when we looked and felt better.

But in doing so we express our dissatisfaction with the present, and to some degree, our lack of hope in the future.

The Preacher says we shouldn't ask this because we question *"it is not from wisdom."*

Each phase of life has its own unique opportunities and challenges, and we cannot face the challenges of this time by yearning for former days. **Remember, learn from, and appreciate—yes; live in the past – bad idea, not wise! (Uncle Rico – I'm talking to you!)**

Warren Wiersbe, died last year: "Yesterday is past and cannot be changed, and tomorrow may not come; so make the most of today. "Carpe diem!" wrote the Roman poet Horace. 'Seize the day!' This does not mean we shouldn't learn from the past or prepare for the future, because both are important. It means that **we must live today in the will of God and not be paralyzed by yesterday or hypnotized by tomorrow.**"

3) Value Wisdom (11-12)

11-12: Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. 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.

Wisdom is beneficial with an inheritance (NIV "like an inheritance"), an advantage to "those who see the sun" (who are alive).

Money can—to some extent—protect people from adversity and hardship. In a time of famine, money can safeguard people from hunger. In a time of unemployment, money can shelter people from losing their homes. In a medical crisis, money can pay for healthcare. Similarly, **wisdom can protect people from adversity.**

But...wisdom, in addition to providing "advantage," has an advantage over money, it preserves the life of its possessor. Though it may be used to preserve or protect it, money by itself does not give life.

The Teacher is not talking about eternal life but about life on this earth. But centuries later another wise Teacher will teach us about eternal life. He will bring the wisdom of the Gospel, which gives new and eternal life.

Jesus said: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* (John 11:25-26)

We've looked at the question of what is good for us, but what about the other question Qoheleth asks? Who knows what will happen to us?

Epilogue: Consider the Work of God...and Trust Him with Your Life (7:13-14)

Two Considerations:

1) Remember: Only God Can Straighten What's Crooked (7:13) Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?

Answer: no one...but God

We've considered suffering, death and foolish impatience and anger. All these things, and others, remind Qoheleth and us that this world and our hearts are crooked. **But these adversities and sorrows are within the sovereign control of God. He has allowed the crookedness. But we'd like to see all this crookedness straightened out wouldn't we?**

Application What is the one thing in your life that you would change, if you had the power to change it? What crooked thing in your life would you straighten if you could? What God “**has made crooked**” does not make a moral judgment on God. Not saying God creates evil or sin. Rather, the Preacher is stressing God’s sovereignty over all events and situations—even the bad ones. Even cancer, even adultery, even losing a child. He hates and grieves all of it, but he is also in control and only He can and will straighten the crookedness of this fallen world and our sinful hearts.

Sadly, there are some things that we cannot alter, at least for the time being. This **does not mean that we should not try to right wrongs and relieve suffering**; Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible frequently condemns those who inflict or permit suffering and oppression.

When those times adversity and sorrow come—and they will—you need to know who God is, that He is in control, and that he will straighten this all out. You need to hear his word, deep down in your soul. **You need to hear promises**: that no matter how bad things get, how painful and sorrowful life gets, he’s in control, he’s got you, and one day soon he will return and set all things right. **Soon and very soon**, the sorrows will come to end and there will be glorious joy and rest. Jesus “*WILL wipe away every tear from [your] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*” (Rev 21:2)

We cannot fix it all, not even everything in our lives. There is no cure we can create or conjure that will correct all the crookedness. **But God can—and will. Maybe not while we live, maybe not when and how we would, but he will. He is able. May we trust him—even and especially in the darkest of hours. Remember: Jesus died in history’s darkest hour, yet he rose again! He lives! And if you repent and believe in him, despite whatever adversity or hardship life throws at you, and despite even your death, you will live! You will live in glory, with Christ, forever!**

2) Remember: Good and Bad Days Will Come, but God is Always Sovereign. Enjoy the Good and Persevere in the Bad, Trusting and Thanking God in Both. (7:14) *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.*

We do not know what the future holds, so we certainly can’t control it. But what we can do is accept prosperity, as well as adversity, as it comes from the hand of God. We can enjoy the good days and persevere in the bad.

Zack Eswine: How do you do this? Recognize the moment and respond accordingly. If something goes well in your day, no matter how small, **celebrate over it!** No more wondering if you can be happy about good things. No more needing to wait and pray to discover whether it is okay with God whether you smile or not. “In the day of prosperity be joyful!” A great deal of happiness is passing some of us by because we think that when a good thing happens we are supposed to consider it rather than get on with rejoicing over it.

In contrast, “in the day of adversity consider.” Let the tough stuff sink in. Don’t run from it. Don’t use god-talk to pretend it doesn’t exist. Set your heart and mind on the awful thing. **No evil thing can ultimately win.** The foulest thing will reveal something true about the nature of life and the nobler purposes we were made for. Take time, lots of time, the time needed to grieve, ask questions, wrestle with it, work it out, and come to terms. Why? Because though

this is a mystery, we need to stand on this truth, that **no matter what happens in our lives, God holds on to us and maintains his purposes for us.** We cannot make crooked things straight. We can't fix everything. Both good things and bad things happen to us. God is within the thing either way. **This means that something larger than our prosperity and something larger than our adversity has a hold on us.**

God has a hold on us. Jesus died for us. May we trust and follow him faithfully.

[PRAY]