

Sorrow is Better than Laughter  
Ecclesiastes 7  
November 7, 2021  
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CenterPoint Church

Read Ecclesiastes 7

*“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* (Matt. 4:4b)

## Introduction

Some of you know Sharon Betters, the wife of retired pastor Chuck Betters and mother of Chuck and Dan, who are local pastors. She wrote a book where she talks about the grief and spiritual struggle after the death of her son, Mark. In one chapter, she writes about how a couple months after his death, she and her husband attended a Bible conference and got seated, hoping to be fed God’s word to be strengthened in this very dark time. The first speaker’s talk was titled “How to Live a Long Life” which had the premise: “If we obey God’s rules, God is obligated to give us many years on this earth. Therefore, if someone dies young, it’s because of God’s judgment and wrath on that person.” You can imagine how that landed with a couple who had just lost their 16-year-old son in a car accident. Sharon was so angry, so wanted to confront the speaker and tell him how much he had distorted God’s word. But she didn’t do that, she just wrestled internally, a mix of grief, anger, and fatigue.<sup>1</sup> But as you can tell from the name of her book, *Treasures in Darkness*, Sharon found in her time of grieving that God not only ministered to her in the midst of her grief, but that she found some better theology than that speaker’s formulaic view of sin and judgment. The Scriptures teach that sometimes the righteous struggle and die young and the wicked flourish and live long lives; our passage today even says, *“There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.”* But none of this is outside of the plan and view of our Heavenly Father, who works in spite of the great enemy, death, and can bring good out of evil.

This morning we are heading into the second half of the book of Ecclesiastes. We’ve seen Solomon’s quest to understand life, to find something that is not just temporary and fleeting. He’s tried it all, bought it all, and experienced it all, and he’s still sorting through his experiences to find something solid that he can stand on. This chapter is a further exploration and he’s going to tell us something along the lines of, “I don’t have it all figured out, but I do know that God is in heaven directing things and man is down here making a mess of things. If you want to understand life and death better, you’ll need to spend some time in the house of mourning and sorrow. You’ll need to stop masking your pain with fun and frivolity, and lean into the things that you usually want to avoid.” Our first nine verses carry the theme that

### **I. Wisdom is Found in the Darkness (vv. 1-9)**

*<sup>1</sup> A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. <sup>4</sup> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. <sup>5</sup> It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. <sup>6</sup> For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity. <sup>7</sup> Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. <sup>8</sup> Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. <sup>9</sup> Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon W. Betters, *Treasures in Darkness* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), p. 97.

In high school math classes, you learned the “greater than” sign. This first section holds seven “greater than” or “better than” statements:

- 1) A good name is better than precious ointment (in other words, our character matters more than our outward beauty)
- 2) The day of death is better than the day of birth (that phrase was part of my Easter sermon conclusion this year)
- 3) Going to the house of mourning is better than going to the house of feasting
- 4) Sorrow is better than laughter
- 5) A man hearing the rebuke of the wise is better than hearing the song of fools
- 6) The end of a thing is better than its beginning
- 7) Being patient is better than being proud

As you’ll recall, at the beginning of chapter 3, Solomon listed 14 pairs of contrasting seasons in our lives – a time to be born, a time to die; a time to kill, a time to heal; a time to weep, a time to laugh, etc. But he did not say anything about whether one of those times was better than the other. He didn’t say that peace is better than war or that reaping is better than planting, just that different seasons in life require different actions and emotions. But here, Solomon tells us that some times and emotions are better than others, and it’s almost always the sober, dark, sorrowful emotions that are to be preferred to the cheerful, fun times. There’s a sense where this is an Old Testament equivalent of Jesus’ list of blessings and woes that we studied back in the spring in Luke 6. Jesus told us that blessed are those who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, and who are persecuted. And then He said woe to those who are rich, have had their fill, are laughing, and are spoken well of.

Think of two men sitting side-by-side at a funeral. Neither of them knew the departed very well. One is thinking about how boring and depressing everything is, and can’t wait to get out of there because there are some exciting events later that weekend. The other one stares at the coffin and listens to the Scriptures and the eulogy and meditates on how one day he will be in the same place, and whether he is living the kind of life he wants to lead. These nine verses speak directly to these two men. The emphasis is on thinking about death and participating in mourning, which will make you much wiser and give you greater perspective in your life than constantly chasing fun and laughter. There’s nothing wrong with laughter and pleasure in and of themselves, but they lead us to the life of vanity quicker than the life that maturely reflects on pain, sorrow, and death. We don’t invite suffering and sorrow into our lives, but neither should we do all we can to avoid them when they come.

Our age is an age of entertainment and distraction that shields us from having to experience boredom and negative things. We keep ourselves busy and entertained so we don’t have to feel pain or face hard questions about ourselves and about life and death. But we can’t put off the realities of suffering and death, so Solomon says that it’s better to face it head on than bury our heads in the sand and hope it doesn’t happen. If you always avoid the topic of death, my friend, you may be uncomfortable with it for some reason and it may be a good indication that you’re trying to outrun it. Don’t assume “out of sight, out of mind,” because death could come at any moment for any of us or our loved ones. Are you ready to deal with it? Are you living your life the way you want to be living it? Are you ready for death and what comes after? The fool is always looking to be distracted, but the wise person welcomes deep reflection on painful, dark things.

Verse 5 says, *“It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.”* I remember being part of a parachurch outreach to the local Middle School when I was a youth pastor in my mid-20s down in Florida. I showed up one morning to the gym where we met and one of the other youth leaders, also named Dave, said, “What are you speaking about this morning?” I had a

vague notion of something I was going to say, but truthfully was going to wing it, so I laughed and said, "I have no idea, I'll figure something out." He stopped me and said, "Hey, you need to come prepared. These kids are worth it, the Gospel is worth it. I've got a talk that I gave recently, I'll give that, and you prepare something for next time." I could have been really resentful of Dave because we were equals; we were both volunteers, it wasn't like he was my supervisor. I could have said, "Who does he think he is criticizing me?" But instead, I took what he said to heart and vowed to never show up unprepared again, because he was right, kids hearing the life-changing message of the Gospel is worth putting in some effort and work.

I have learned some of my best lessons from people who rebuked me in a wise and loving way. I learned how to do ministry from people who both encouraged me and called me out when I needed it. I learned how to be a better husband and father when people called into questions things that I said or did. And I've prayed that when I rebuked others in a gentle and loving way that they took it that way and grew from the experience. I'm sure you can think of times of your life when "*the rebuke of the wise*" was good for you. When someone rebukes you, you can either get defensive and strike back, or you can withdraw and let it crush you, or you can learn from it. The healthiest thing is to hear the truth in what they say (not everything that's said is true) and grow from it. And this ties into verses 8-9 where we're reminded that it's better to be patient and calm than angry and impatient. A fool rushes things and lets his anger get the best of him.

Solomon lumps in these hard things of receiving rebukes and not being angry with going to funerals and embracing our sorrow and thoughts of death because it all comes under the idea of finding wisdom in the darkness and the things we'd rather avoid. The next section goes on to say that

## **II. Wisdom is Helpful Even When Life Doesn't Make Sense (vv. 10-19)**

*<sup>10</sup> Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. <sup>11</sup> Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. <sup>16</sup> Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. <sup>19</sup> Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.*

This section starts out by saying, "a wise person does not look to the past but looks to the future, even to what they will be leaving to their heirs" to make decisions. That's just good, practical advice – when you want to make the right decision, don't look backwards, look forwards and use wisdom and knowledge to make your life better. But, verses 13-14 remind you that a greater factor in how you live your life is remembering that God has created everything and has ordained both days of prosperity and days of adversity. We need to be able to proclaim "Blessed be the name of the Lord" in either of those times. We respond to the good things in our lives with "God has given me this, I'm so thankful," and to the bad things in life by saying, "God has done this for some purpose that I pray He will someday reveal to me, so I'm thankful."

Verses 16-17 ("*be not overly righteous... be not overly wicked*") seem to be advocating for a very moderate religion, one where you don't care too much, don't try too hard, don't press hard to be

godly and Christ-like; but don't sin too much either. This would seem to greatly conflict with a lot of the things that the New Testament teaches, like Mathew 5:48: "*be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" and Philippians 3:13b-14: "*...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" I think Solomon is giving more of a warning against self-righteousness on the one hand and unrighteousness on the other. It's the warnings against being a Pharisee, against thinking that keeping all the rules will make you acceptable in God's sight. But it's also the warnings against living with no rules and thinking God does not care how you use your body or treat other people. Neither of these is a wise way to live. And, as verse 18 says, someone who fears God will see the problems of both of these extremes and live wisely, in both godly restraint and humility.<sup>2</sup>

One of the songs that we sing, "Come Ye Sinners," was written by a man named Joseph Hart, who grew up in colonial America. He was raised in a Christian home, but as a young man became an atheist. By his early 20s, though, he became convicted of his sins and realized that he needed to be a better person. So he became religious, cleaned up his act, and tried to do everything right. But as his life went on, he changed his mind about trying to do the right things and living in obedience to the Bible and the law. He decided that he could just believe in God and then do whatever he wanted. By his early 40s, he had tried both behaving well (trying to justify yourself like a Pharisee) and misbehaving (acting as if there is no law, what we call antinomianism). He had gone from one extreme to another. At age 45 he heard a sermon by the preacher George Whitefield that introduced him to the grace of Christ for sinners like him in a way that he had never understood it before. He is quoted as saying, "Pharisaic zeal and Antinomian security are the two engines of Satan, with which he grinds the church in all ages... The space between them is much narrower and harder to find than most men imagine... none can show it to us but the Holy Ghost." He came to realize that Jesus saves us by grace, nothing we can do on our own, so stop trying to earn your salvation with good works. But that salvation requires true belief and true repentance. That's the gospel road that does not fall into a ditch on either side.<sup>3</sup>

Our final section reminds us that despite God's good design,

### **III. Wisdom and Righteousness are Far from Man (vv. 20-29)**

*<sup>20</sup> Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. <sup>21</sup> Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup> Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. <sup>23</sup> All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup> That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? <sup>25</sup> I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. <sup>26</sup> And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. <sup>27</sup> Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—<sup>28</sup> which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. <sup>29</sup> See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*

This whole chapter is filled with words like "wicked" "sins" "evildoing" "schemes" "foolishness." And this last section is bookended (verses 20 and 29) with an important theological doctrine: the

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Ray C. Stedman, *Is This All There Is to Life? Finding Wisdom for Life in Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1999), pp. 88-90.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Josh Black's sermon "Form Follows Function" preached on September 25, 2016, found at [firstfreewichita.org](http://firstfreewichita.org)

total depravity of humanity. Depravity means sinful, being turned away from God; the total refers to the fact that it applies to our whole being (our wills, thoughts, and actions), not that we are as terrible as we could ever be. Verse 20 reminds us of Paul's teaching in Romans 3:10-11 – *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."* And verse 29 tells us that it's not because they were made that way: *"God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."* So we have fallen far from the righteousness of God, or as Isaiah 53:6 says it, *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way."* And so Solomon says, "This is why my search has been so hard, this is why I've struggled to understand humanity and what satisfies us and gives us meaning. I've been seeking out wisdom among humans, but all I find is wickedness, folly, and madness." We don't really seek out what's good for us, we run away from God and embrace the schemes and sins of the world.

That helps us understand the other parts of this section: verses 21-22 remind us that we shouldn't get too upset or angry when people gossip about us or curse us behind our backs, because we do the same thing. In other words, don't let other people's sins disturb you too much, you're just as wicked as they are. And verses 26-28, we can't find salvation in other people because they are deceitful and will take you down as well. You may find one who pleases God occasionally, but more often than not, you will find sinful folly and madness.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

There are a lot of little points of application we can make from this chapter, some of which I've skipped over in the interest of time: embrace patience over anger, avoid bribes, learn from well-intentioned rebukes but ignore malicious gossip, things like that. But it's more important that we pull some of the big spiritual ideas from this chapter together with other Scriptural teaching: We are all unrighteous, scheming, sinful creatures who have strayed from the design of our Creator. Our wickedness separates us from a holy God and we can't earn our salvation by being too righteous and doing enough good things. We will die someday - it could be many years from now or it could be tomorrow - and when that happens we will face God's judgment. Rather than avoiding any mention or thoughts of death, we need to face it head on and be sure that we are ready for it. When we stand before God on the day of judgment either we will pay for our sins by being cast away from His presence forever or we can have someone else pay for our sins. For that to happen, they would have to die on our behalf with no sins of their own to pay for. Thank God that is the case. Romans 5:6-8 says, *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* There is no other way for fallen humanity to please God. Jesus Christ is the One who perfectly pleased the Father and never sinned, and His death on the cross perfectly satisfied God's justice for all those who believe in Him.

➔ Transition to communion

Benediction - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it."*

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<sup>4</sup> A good explanation of these verses is on pp. 104-106 of Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2019).