

## “Pursue God’s Good in Life”

*Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1*

Isaiah lived in the late 600’s BC and this is what he wrote to the people of Israel 2600 years ago about their behaviour:

*Is. 5:20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.*

*21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.*

We too live in a day where what is ‘good’ is called evil and that which is evil is called good. Not much has changed ‘under the sun’. And Solomon, who lived 300 years before Isaiah observed the same as we have seen. Ecclesiastes is about all kinds of things Solomon observed and tried to understand. When he looked at the things people experienced in life he saw it from two perspectives; the ‘under-the-sun’ humanistic/without God perspective and it is meaningless or short-lived or purpose-less. Life looked from God’s ‘above-the-sun’ perspective results in joy, peace and contentment if one knows God and pursues a wise life. Solomon closed off Ch. 6:12 by saying,

*12 For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?*

God of course knows what is good and He tells us in His Word what is good. Solomon now builds off the idea of ‘good’ in Ch. 7 in a series of proverbial statements in vv.1-14 about that which is ‘better’ [same Hebrew word for good] than something else. He works towards telling us that pursuing wisdom is the best and then the second half of Ch. 7 focuses on wisdom. This is what Solomon is most known for.

But what is good? Or as our English Bibles translate it here in Ch. 7 ‘better’ since gooder isn’t good English? The Hebrew word ‘tov’ describes that which is practically beneficial or has qualities that make something desirable. It’s not talking so much about physical appearance but spiritual or practical benefits. This is not only spiritually good-for-you but also has mental, emotional and even physical benefits. So in these proverbs Solomon describes those things which are ‘tov’ better for you, so that we would

### **Choose God’s Long Term Good Over Worldly Short-Term Attractions (7:1-14)**

This is the context in which we need to understand what he’s contrasting here. Because there are some odd things he says in these first 6 verses.

*1 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.*

*2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.*

*3 Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.*

*4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.*

*5 It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke than to listen to the song of fools.*

<sup>6</sup> *Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.*

Solomon is not morbid or a party pooper (go back and read Ch. 2!) but he is comparing the benefits of one over the other and all these have to do with how we will be remembered, how we will finish life. There's nothing wrong with feasting and fun, however, it rarely has any long-term benefit other than a short period of fun. A funeral and mourning are sober times of reflection. And if you're spending too much time exploring mindless fun and a wise person rebukes you because you're not taking life seriously, listen to them. In v.6 he says the person who wastes too much of their life pursuing fun is like a dried-up brush burning; you make a lot of noise but its over pretty quick and what remains? Reflect on life. That's why he begins these 6 verses with 'A good name is better than perfume [oil] and the day of death better than the day of birth because when life ends we are done having to work, prove ourselves, build our reputation, etc.

The beginning of life is wonderful. How can you not love an innocent cute baby? But Adolph Hitler was once a baby. Saddam Hussein was once a baby. The Taliban were once babies as were mafia leaders, gang members. Their reputation is marred because of how they lived their life and refused to change before it ended.

Solomon is speaking to people who are living, who can still read his words and change their reputation, their testimony. Even as believers, we can still have negative reputations. What comes to people's minds when they hear our names? Gracious or gruff? Flexible or unmoving? Responsible or unreliable? Patient or impatient? Compassionate or hard-hearted. Solomon is reminding us of our own finish here under the sun. Will we end it with the reputation that we lived for God's long term good for others or more for our own short-term attractions?

What else does Solomon say is good that helps promote God's good, in vv.7-14?

### ***Wisdom and patience [are good because they] produce character (vv.7-9)***

Why do people extort/bribe others (v.7)? Because they want money/success/control now and don't care how they get it. He pleads for patience and integrity. Waiting out for the end of a matter. Don't prejudge things and people. Don't try to push your own agenda. Life isn't about you or me. We're impatient because we're proud. We think we know the answer or the solution, so we don't listen to others or try to fix something fast that requires time, a long view. V. 8 literally reads 'patience of spirit is better than arrogance of spirit.'

Impatience leads to anger (v.9) and anger, Solomon says resides in the heart of fools. Why do we get angry? Because something didn't happen the way we wanted it that we wanted then and there. So sparks and words fly.

*"Be quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to become angry,<sup>20</sup> for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. (James 1:19-20)*

Impatience and anger happen when things don't go our way. So Solomon next talks about that very thing; life has great times but also bad times.

### ***Trust God in prosperity and calamity looking forward to our sure future (vv.10-14)***

Life is not perfect. Each season of life has its positives and negatives. *Don't say 'Why were the old days better than these? (v.10).* Why not? For one, you can't go back to them, ever. Secondly, there were negatives then too, we just choose to forget them. Thirdly, our ultimate future is better by

far than anything this world offered, if we know God and Jesus. This is wisdom (v.11). Wisdom, like money Solomon says, is a shelter, it reminds us that we're okay, we're protected, we know where we're going. But then he says in v.12 that wisdom is a better shelter than money because money doesn't last. Only true wisdom in God preserves our life in the middle of turmoil when we're unsure of God's plan but not His presence or to balance the good times by saying 'Thank you Lord for this right now' knowing that it too is temporal and tomorrow things change.

*God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.*

Our earthly future. We don't know what tomorrow brings but we know who holds tomorrow in His hand.

Solomon wasn't saying don't have fun and don't go to feasts. He wasn't saying throw all your money away. He wasn't saying don't make plans; he was saying don't make these your focus. Think more of what matters eternally. Make good choices that produce better results, that work toward ending life with a good and Godly reputation. Maintain a healthy balanced perspective. He continues along this line of thinking in vv.15-8:1 by talking about avoiding extremes in life. Again he tells us that

## **A Healthy Fear of God Results in a Balanced Perspective in Life (7:15-8:1)**

Solomon returns to one of life's perplexities; a righteous person dying too early and a wicked person living too long. Why is this a problem? Because we think the God-honouring person should live a long life while the wicked person should pay for his sins early. But this is how we see things and not the way God sees things. This is just another reminder that

### ***We don't have all the answers (v.15)***

None of us do. We are temporal and God is eternal. We are earth and time bound; God is not bound to either. We are not the Creator or sustainer of life. We are unable to see things the way God sees them. Our way of thinking is that righteous people should be blessed with longevity while unrighteous people should depart early. And those who think they have or have to have all the answers now God says in vv.16-18 chill out.

<sup>16</sup> *Do not be over righteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?*

<sup>17</sup> *Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?*

<sup>18</sup> *It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes*

Fearing God, as Solomon points out in Ecclesiastes, is trusting God by doing what God says and enjoy what God has given you in this all-too-soon-gone life. Trusting God involves leaving life's perplexities to God. When He wants us in v.16 not to be overly righteous or wise I think he's encouraging us to

### ***Avoid the pendulum swings of legalism and liberalism (vv.16-22)***

Since being overly righteous and overly wise are spoken of negatively he must mean appearing to be more righteous and wiser than we really are. Judgmental, superior. A legalistic, inflexible theology about people, issues and maybe even an unhealthy perspective on Scripture. It's not too hard to take a verse of Scripture and make it say things it wasn't meant to say and declaring 'Thus says the Lord' as if we have all the answers (see v.15 again!).

And I don't think the warning to not be overly wicked in v.17 is endorsing a little bit of wickedness! But what happens to us in our tendency to have pendulum swings in our walk with God is to just throw in the towel and forget God just because we blew it temporarily. A healthy view of God is soaked in grace, patience and love. An unhealthy view of God is usually an extremist view of God. Waiting to pounce on us if we sin. Over analyzing every little thing as a sign from God and beating ourselves up because we missed the will of God. Or thinking how blessed God must be because He's so fortunate to have us in His family. What would He do without us? He'd do fine.

These are some of the extremes we seem to seem swing towards when we don't have a healthy, balanced view of God and of ourselves. Solomon says when we have a healthy fear of God we avoid extremes.

Fearing God and being wise are synonymous to Solomon. Wisdom is better than 10 powerful rulers he says in v.19. Just because you are a leader doesn't guarantee you are wise! Wisdom recognizes no one is perfect (v.20) and don't take what others say about you too seriously because you've thought bad things about others too. And – I think what's he implying here is – we were wrong, as they might be too because they or we don't have the full picture. They are sinners making unwise assessments or generalizations possibly because they have a tendency to overreact to legalism or liberalism.

Yet since we live under the sun and non of us are perfect, Solomon continues to emphasize balance:

### ***Pursue wisdom but 'under the sun' it too has limits (vv.23-8:1)***

<sup>23</sup> *All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"— but this was beyond me.*

<sup>24</sup> *Whatever exists is far off and most profound— who can discover it? <sup>25</sup> So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.*

Solomon said I sought to know as best I can to understand all these puzzles to the human mind, why people do what they do and don't do what they do. *'But wisdom was far from me'*. And then he makes, what seems on the surface, a couple of strange conclusions.

<sup>26</sup> *I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. <sup>27</sup> "Look," says the Teacher, <sup>c</sup> "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things— <sup>28</sup> while I was still searching but not finding— I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. <sup>29</sup> This only have I found: God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes."*

**8:1** *Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.*

I think the best way to understand what he's saying is to work backwards from 8:1. In 8:1 he asks the rhetorical question in summarizing this section, 'Who is wise? Who knows the explanation of all things?' Obviously, none of us. Only God knows everything, but still pursue wisdom because that is the best option to living a balanced life. The reason why he concluded this was because in v.29 he discovered that God originally made us 'upright' [Adam and Eve] but we all scheme; trying to figure things out from our own perspective. We all sin and fall short of God's standards. So when he says

That while he was searching but not finding upright people, he could only find one amongst both men and women. The reason why I say that he's not saying men are more righteous than women is because the word for man is Adamah, not 'Ish'. If he meant to say there was a difference between men and women then he would have said Ish and Isha. But instead he used the general term for mankind (Adamah) instead of male. The other reason I think he means finding any righteous person is a rare find is because Ecclesiastes is poetry and proverbial. So Solomon is using a familiar Hebrew poetic way of saying all mankind by saying men and women. Also, in Prov. 30 we have a stretch of sayings that go there are 3, even 4...

*"There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': <sup>16</sup> the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!'*

<sup>18</sup> *"There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: <sup>19</sup> the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a young woman.*

<sup>21</sup> *"Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: <sup>22</sup> a servant who becomes king, a godless fool who gets plenty to eat, <sup>23</sup> a contemptible woman who gets married, and a servant who displaces her mistress.*

Each time he says there are 3, then he says there are 4, and he lists 4 things. Here the author is describing all kinds of things that never say enough, that are too amazing and cannot bear up. Four, typically represents the 4 directions; east, west, north and south. These 4 represent a large number of things we can't understand.

So here in Ecc. 7, Solomon says there's one, actually none. So when you go the opposite way (4-3, 1-0) you're saying it's a rare find when you discover even one righteous person among all earth's (male and female) population. And so the woman in v.26 that he says is more bitter than death, whose heart is a snare, that only the one who pleases God will escape, is I believe not an adulterous woman but again in Proverbs lady foolishness who is depicted as an adulterous. But that the person who follows lady wisdom (fearing God) will overcome. In the wisdom books, wisdom and foolishness are both depicted as females, one to follow and one to avoid. I believe, this makes the most sense in the context of the chapter, the book as whole and wisdom language. I do not believe God through Solomon is running down women!

If a good name is better than the nice things of life that don't last, let's pursue biblical wisdom by a healthy knowledge of who God is and what He can do, but also by what He's done for us (the cross) and does for us (give us joy, meeting our needs) now and in eternity. The more mature we are in Christ, the less pendulum swings we'll have in life; jumping to wrong conclusions less about people and God's purposes and being more patient and trusting when life throws us a curve. Solomon says he hadn't found many who live that way in his day. Let's prove him wrong in our day.

\* \* \* \* \*

If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at [olivet@rideau.net](mailto:olivet@rideau.net)