

Prosperity, Adversity, & Providence

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

By Pastor Desmond Gilmore

I think we can all agree that 2020 has been a very interesting year. My wife and I would talk about 2019 and sort of lament, thinking that that was a really hard year. But then 2020 happened. From wildfires in Australia, to the impeachment of President Donald Trump, to tensions in Iran, to the sudden death of an NBA legend, to COVID-19, national protests, to racial tensions. And this is just a small fraction of what this year has been. Not to mention what may be going on in our own personal lives.

I feel like a lot of us are weary, or just trying to make sense of the last six months. But we need something to inform our perspectives. Something that will keep us from becoming cynical and resentful about this season. If you have your Bibles with you, the passage I'll be preaching this morning is Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14. In these verses the author, the wise Teacher, who most Bible scholars consider to be Solomon, gives us instruction and wisdom on how to navigate life in a complex and fallen world. Life is unpredictable and circumstances are uncertain at times.

But what we learn in this portion of Ecclesiastes is this: God is sovereign and has set times of prosperity and times of adversity. Man is limited and does not know what tomorrow holds. So, as we experience both good and bad in this life, we should look for what is good and remember divine providence.

Let's read **Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14**. You might be wondering why we're starting at the end of chapter six. Well, it seems that 6:10-7:14 is a unit—one connected thought. So, we'll start with 6:10 and end with 7:14.

When you initially read this section, it can seem like the Teacher isn't mindful of God until the last couple verses when he says, "consider the work of God (v. 13)." But he opens this section by saying the same thing in a different way. In Eccl. 6:10, the Teacher begins this passage with these words, "whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is". In the OT, to name a thing meant that you had knowledge or control of something. God named things at creation: Day, Night, Sky. Genesis 1:10 says, God *called* the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he *called* Seas.

To name something was to give it existence or dependence. In other words, v. 10 is saying that what happens in the present has already been predetermined by God. And so, by this same God, "it is known what man is". He knows human beings: our stature and our nature. The end of verse 10 tells us that "he (man) is not able to dispute with one stronger than he." The One stronger than him is the One who created him and his seasons.

God is the sovereign and powerful Creator of the universe. He named man, made them human being, gave them their dwellings and mere man cannot dispute with Him. **Acts 17:25-26** says that God himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything...And he's determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. The natural man protests against God's fixed purposes. But Ecclesiastes 6:11 says that with more words is more vanity, and what advantage is that to man.

It's vain to dispute with God. In other words, it doesn't profit to argue with God because He has sovereignly set your times and seasons. What has come has already been named. Job tried to dispute with God in Job 42:6. But after God rebuked him by

reminding him that he created the universe, Job said “I repent in dust and ashes.” The more words we use to argue with God, the more vanity.

The Preacher here in Ecclesiastes is still setting us up for what he really wants to say. He does this in verse 12 by asking a rhetorical 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?”

The word “vain” here is not talking about the *aim* of man’s life but the *breadth* of man’s life. The span of man’s life. If you can imagine stepping out of a house on a winter day in Chicago and blowing your breath into the air to watch it disappear. That is the span of man’s life. It’s here, then it’s gone. Then the Preacher asks another rhetorical question, “For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”

That language “what will be after him” will come up later at the end of this section in chapter 7 v. 14. There he gives the answer, here he just leaves us with the question. Who knows what is good for man and who can tell him what tomorrow will bring? Will it be prosperity, or will it be adversity? Will he get a pay raise, or will he lose his job? Will he get evicted or will he buy a house? Will the results of the MRI come back negative or reveal that the cancer has spread to the lungs? These are the realities that the wise Teacher is pressing on us. He’s saying, tell me who has the answer to these questions. He's asking and the assumed answer is that no man can tell you what tomorrow holds for you. The future is veiled, and the secret things belong to God (Deut. 29:29).

And so, while we are here groping and grappling with life in an unpredictable and sin-cursed world, we’re given wisdom from the Teacher. It’s instruction that’s not meant to lead us to despair and pessimism. Actually, it’s supposed to do the

opposite. It's meant to impart wisdom so that we recognize some good, even in times of adversity. And so, he leads us into this series of proverbs where there's a repeated theme of "good" and "better."

We'll look at chapter 7:1-14 in sections. The first section is verses 1-4 and the theme is this...

Thinking about death is better than denying its reality.

Ointment may not have the same weight for us today as it did in biblical times. But in the Bible ointment was a very expensive and extremely precious thing that kings kept as a luxury item. This proverb is saying that your good name is more important than great wealth. It's more precious than ointment. The phrase "good name" here is referring to your reputation which is linked to your character. As a Christian, your name is connected to who you represent, Christ. And so, there are some things that you've chosen not to do and shortcuts that you've chosen not to take for the sake of your good name.

Some ruin their name in order to get what they see as more valuable—money or fame or honor. Solomon, the wealthiest man to have ever lived, was himself surrounded by those who had riches and great wealth but gained them through injustice, manipulating others, lying, and hurting people. There is a lot to lament over in a world that's filled with things like this. And this seems to be why he says *the day of death is better than the day of birth*. The birth of my first-born child was filled with joy and happiness. My wife and I had been waiting nine months to meet our baby and this was going to be the start of a new chapter in our lives together. There was so much to rejoice about.

But birth also brings us to think about another reality as well. Birth brings us into a world filled with bad things. We're ushered into a world filled with trouble, sorrows, trials, deceit, and those pursuing vain glory. And one's experience of pain in this life is inescapable, except by death. Death adds the period to the cares and trials and sorrows under the sun. The Wise Teacher says that it is better for you to think about the reality of what is inevitable. And so, in verse 2 he goes on to say that there's something better about a house of mourning and sorrow, over that of feasting and laughter.

I doubt that any of us have said to ourselves, "you know what, today I want to go to a funeral." Most people, if they have the choice between a wedding reception and funeral, they will choose to go to the wedding reception. Now, one is not inherently evil and the other inherently good. Christ attended both and both are good as we have occasion. But why does this passage seem to be reversing what we naturally like (the wedding reception) and what we naturally dislike (the funeral)? Notice that verse 2 doesn't say that it is *sweeter* to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, but it says that it is *better*. The question is why?

Here's an exercise: What do you think about at a New Year's Eve party or a wedding reception? It's not likely that you're thinking about the fleeting nature of life, or whether or not you're living wisely. You probably avoid conversations like that at a party because you don't want to be a kill joy. But something unique and profitable happens at a funeral—a house of mourning. We tend to wonder how we're spending our lives, or how we can be more productive and not waste the time we have.

The reality that life is a vapor is closer when you're sitting at the bedside of someone with a terminal disease or attending a wake. The house of mourning invites us to sit, be still, and meditate more deeply over the reality of our inevitable end. If you

become a student at the funeral instead of a cynic, you will “lay it to heart.” In other words, you will keep the reality of death in your mind and live as if you know it’s true.

James 4:13 expresses the same idea. “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — 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. 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

It is wise for you to live with your mortality on your mind. And it is wiser to consider what will happen after your life passes. We should pray, “Lord teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Wisdom considers the shortness of man’s life.

In verses 3-4 we see a similar expression of what’s already been said. He says in verse 3, *sorrow is better than laughter and sadness makes the heart glad*. This sounds like another oxymoron. How is sorrow better than laughing and how can sadness make me happy? There’s this strange reversal. To understand this, we have to remember what the Preacher is emphasizing: it’s better to think about death than to deny its reality. We know that he’s not anti-enjoyment and laughter because we see it talked about positively in other verses.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 says...And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

This book is filled with this type of language. But what the Preacher is opposing is a type of frivolous laughter. A type of laughter that makes a joke out of weightier matters in order to blunt the reality of life. It's better for that person that he feels the weight of sadness and death because it may perhaps teach him to make his life count, to value and treasure the days that he has been given, which is a good thing. The punch of that sadness and sorrow may even turn him to seek true happiness.

Those who have been spiritually reborn know this deep and true happiness. Jesus says to them, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (**Luke 6:21**). He also says *those who mourn shall be comforted* (**Matt. 5:4**). The fool mocks the reality of sin and death, later to embrace eternal sorrow and mourning. The wise man mourns over his sin and the reality of death, later to embrace the fullness of joy.

This little section closes out in verse 4 by reminding us again that the heart of *the wise is in the house of mourning and the heart of fools in the house of mirth*. The heart represents the seat of volition and intelligence. It's the center of our being. The spring of our wills. Essentially, Eccl 7:4 is saying that a wise person has a healthy obsession with death—*his heart is in the house of mourning*. I know that sounds strange. But this isn't, as you would imagine, just someone who's wearing all black clothes with black dyed hair who's influenced by the gothic culture. This verse is describing someone who thinks introspectively and skillfully about mournful situations. He finds occasions of mourning a classroom of wisdom. He's not wasting the lessons that are taught during those times.

These verses are contrasting one who's deeply aware of his fleeting nature with one who is obsessed with a constant and persistent desire to just laugh, party, and live as though nothing else matters. His *heart* is in the house of mirth. Mirth is pointing to pleasure. His obsession with frivolous living and pursuing pleasure is shown by

his constantly seeking whatever he can do to drown out the thoughts of death and sadness. Scripture says that that man is foolish.

Matthew 3:38 says..."For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away."

They were blunting the preaching and warnings from Noah because their hearts were in the house of mirth. They were obsessed with frivolous laughter and pleasure seeking, drowning out the noise of the message of salvation, until the judgement of God was revealed.

Gain a heart of wisdom during this season. God has providentially brought sickness and death to the doorstep of our minds, if not our bodies. Be a student of this season. Repent and believe the gospel. The wrath of God has been revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness, which characterizes all of us. Jesus Christ is the ark of God's salvation from the terrifying floodwaters of the wrath of God. Do you want to be wise unto salvation? Repent and turn to God.

The next little section in this passage are verses 5-6. These verses remind us that...

Rebuke is better than the song of fools: vv. 7:5-6

Graham Ogden in his commentary said that "the rebuke of the wise is constructive criticism whose purpose is to correct a behavior pattern that is morally questionable or detrimental." We don't naturally like to be rebuked. We don't want to be on the receiving end of criticism. We love compliments, but not critique. But Scripture tells us about the benefits of rebuke.

Proverbs 12:21 says... Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.

Psalms 141:5 says... Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it.

There's almost this posture that says, let me lean into rebuke—let my head not refuse it. It may not always feel like it, but wise rebuke is a gift. And so, in Ecclesiastes 7, hearing rebuke is contrasted with the song of fools, the house of feasting, and the house of mirth. Instruction (or rebuke) that warns you of a destructive path or a better way to live is set at odds with those who will complement you all the way into the grave. One of these is better than the other. One hurts initially but has long-term benefits. The other feels good but will lead to your destruction.

And so, the laughter of fools, which also is vanity, is like *the crackling of thorns under a pot (v. 6)*. What does that mean? This is imagery that points to the silliness of the laughter of fools that stirs up and erupts into a flame, but then dies down quickly leaving only smoke—emptiness. That frivolous laughter that blunts reality is an experience that you want to carry with you. But as soon as you go to grab it, it slips through your fingers like smoke. The Preacher says it's vanity.

So, where you can hear something worth holding onto, the blessing of open rebuke that has long-term dividends? The preaching and counsel of the Word of God. When the saints gather together the prayers and the preaching and the songs graciously rebuke our selfishness, our apathy, our pride, and points us to the eternal dividends of entrusting ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. And hopefully it's never just smoke.

It always brings us face to face with substantial, weighty, eternal, truths. Despite what the culture says in all of its anti-Christian rhetoric, those who are wise enter into the place that reminds them of eternal realities. And it's not the house of mirth, but the house of the Lord.

This next set of verses teach us that...

The end is better than the beginning: vv. 7:7-10

This section starts by telling us that the wise are not immune to oppression (or extortion) when tempted by riches. Eccl. 7:10 says *oppression drives the wise into madness*. What he's saying is that even a wise man can start to have unwholesome business practices (oppression and bribery) because of his covetous heart. He's speaking about the person who wants a quick fix. A quick "come-up" in what they're pursuing.

This leads him to emphasize *the patient in spirit over the proud in spirit*. Patience takes the long road and upholds integrity rather than the quick fix of dishonest gain (oppression, extortion, bribes). And so, the "end of a thing", or the *outcome*, is better. When one oppresses his neighbor to get ahead it may appear at the beginning to benefit him. But it will not ultimately serve him in the end. The Teacher says be patient in spirit. Don't look for the quick-fix and don't be quick tempered. This is connected with verse 9. *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools*.

We act like fools when we're quick-tempered, quick to become angry when we don't get what we want. That type of person is praised by some people. It's almost seen as

a virtue—something respectable and honorable. But **Proverbs 29:11** warns us that a fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

James 1:20 tells us that the anger of man—that lack of self-control and quick temperedness—does not produce the righteousness of God. Again, there's this divine reversal. What's often seen as good and profitable by man is turned upside down. People see patience and self-control as weak things. But the heart of the man who has uncontrolled anger as his constant companion is a fool.

Of course, Scripture doesn't call us to abandon the emotion of anger all together. Anger is good and profitable when it's appropriate to the occasion and is wielded righteously. Aristotle said, "Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person...to the right degree...at the right time...for the right purpose...in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.

Only one person's anger produced the righteousness that God requires. Anger that was sinless—not tinted with pride, impatience, or lack of control. In John 2:15 Jesus' righteous anger led him to make a whip of cords, and force money changers out of a temple of worship. Psalm 69:9 talking about the occasion of Christ's righteous anger said, *For zeal for your house has consumed me.* At the heart and seat of Christ's being was zeal to glorify his Father. So, all of the virtues of his affections were perfect. Ecclesiastes, with the witness of the rest of Scripture, calls us to look for and model Christ. The perfect human of perfect anger.

Back to our text here; Ecclesiastes 7:10 points to a quick-tempered attitude in connection with impatience and discontentment. Charles Bridges said impatience often produces a querulous spirit, or a whining person. Their impatience with their present lot from God leads them to complain about his providence. "Why are the

former days better than these.” In other words, “things were so much better then.” We say that at times when we are under God’s frowning providence—when we’re in a season of adversity, or sorrow, or dealing with some trial. We wish we were in another season—another time—anything but this present, hard circumstance.

We often look back, whether it’s 6 months ago, 10 years ago or 30 years ago, with a sort of nostalgia. We think that every time before our present time is better. But nostalgia is really just a combination of a bad memory and a strong imagination. We tend to glamorize our past and put out of our minds the unique struggles that came with those supposedly glorious seasons. We think, “back then it was so easy, I didn’t have to deal with this or that.”

The wise Preacher in Ecclesiastes knows that each season had its own unique challenges and opportunities. We can’t make progress in wisdom with one eye to our falsely glamorized past and one eye to the future. Praising our past like that shows our impatience with God’s perfect and providential present. The past had the same things to complain about today. You just forgot what they were. It’s not wise to ask, why were the former days better than these. We can complain about the badness of our times or we can reflect on the badness of our hearts and turn to God with thanksgiving and gratitude.

Psalm 119:68 says, You (Lord) are good and do good; teach me your statutes. Pray that the Word would inform your perspective and fight for joy in your present situation.

The next section brings us to consider that...

Wisdom is an advantage: vv. 7:11-12

This section starts by talking about an inheritance. This makes us think about land. When God brought Israel into the promised land, it was an inheritance. In the agricultural context of Ecclesiastes, land meant, food, security, and stability. An inheritance of land provided some protection in times of adversity. This verse is simply saying that just like an inheritance provides protection and security, wisdom also provides protection and security through life's various adversities.

This flows into the next verse. *The protection of wisdom is like the protection of money.* We see the idea of the protection (or advantage) of money in **Proverbs 10:15**. A rich man's wealth is his strong city. And **Ecclesiastes 10:19** says "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything." The thought here is that there are advantages to having money. If you're hungry, money can buy you food. If you're about to be evicted, money can keep you from losing your house.

But having wisdom is the greater advantage. How? I don't think we should think about this in terms of money vs wisdom, but rather good and better. Money is good and useful. The issue isn't money, the issue is whether we have a heart of wisdom. Wisdom says, don't exhaust yourself to get wealth; be discerning enough to know when what you have is sufficient (Proverbs 23:4).

Psalm 62:10 - Put no **trust** in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your **heart** on them.

So how is wisdom the greater advantage? Money may bring you many friends or acquaintances, but wisdom will teach you how to manage those relationships. Money can keep you from losing your house, but wisdom will teach you how to

manage your affairs, so your lifestyle doesn't exceed your income. Knowledge also makes people very resourceful.

Verse 12 says that wisdom has the advantage because it can *preserve the life of the one who has it*. The context of the book of Ecclesiastes is a vantage point from life *under the sun*. We're thinking about the advantage of wisdom while we're alive, not after death. In other words, I don't think he's referring to a wisdom that leads to eternal life but a wisdom that allows a person to preserve and manage his life here on earth—his affairs while he is alive. In that way *wisdom preserves the life of him who has it*.

But there is one greater than Solomon and greater than David who tells us about how to preserve one's life beyond the grave. Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God, and in **John 17:3** He tells us that "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." He gives life that will overcome death. That death that swallows both the rich and the poor.

But in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 the author concludes these wise sayings by telling us to...

Consider the Work of God: vv. 7:13-14

Consider, observe, discern, perceive God's appointments and providence. Under the sun, at the same time, there are people in prosperity and people in adversity. The same person in this season can be prospering and in the next season dealing with trials and adversity. And then there are times where that same person, in the same season, at the same time is experiencing prosperity in one area of his life and deep sorrow or adversity in another area. His business is doing great, but his marriage is failing. Her son just got accepted to Harvard, but she just found out that she has

cancer. Ecclesiastes tells us to sit back and observe these realities, and remember, both come from the hand of God. Both are under his divine providence.

Isaiah 45:7

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.

We cannot correct what God has divinely preordained for our various seasons of life. We might disapprove of the lot that He gives to us, but it's ours. And God has made both to assure us that no man knows what will happen to him under the sun. This section of Ecclesiastes ends how it started if you remember. What happens has already been named. The rhetorical question is given an answer. Who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his quickly fading life? God does.

*In the day of joy be joyful, and in the day of affliction, be still and consider—remember God. Thomas Boston wrote a book that he based off Ecclesiastes 7:13. It's called *The Crook in the Lot*. In that book he said this...*

Over time, our lot and condition will involve difficult events as well as agreeable ones. At times things are smoothly and agreeably gliding along; but, eventually, there is some incident which alters our course and pains us. It is like taking a wrong step that causes you to limp...(but) There is no perfection here and no lot without a crook this side of heaven.

As Christians, whether our lot seems straight and pleasant or crooked and hard, we can rest knowing that it's ordered and smooth in the sovereign, good, and all-wise mind of God. God is not a man. He doesn't have one gaze that's focused solely on some national crisis to the neglect of your personal, individual, cares and concerns.

He's not rallying up for an election while forgetting to answer the cries and prayers of each of his beloved children. God is sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, the source of all wisdom, the Fountain of pure love, and in case we've forgotten, He's good.

Our lot under God's frowning providence or seasons of prosperity should cause us to turn to Him. Life is complex and circumstances can be complicated. But God's purposes are fixed, predetermined, and—for His children—only ever, ultimately, for their good. That has to be taken and believed regardless if He reveals his purposes for your affliction or not. We live by faith in his promises and not just by what we see.

In closing, be hopeful, not cynical and pessimistic. Don't harden your heart in hard seasons. Don't look for the easy way out by seeking self-gratification. Sit under God's instructive providence and let seasons of prosperity and seasons of sorrow teach you to look for what is good and praiseworthy. Remember the unfailing, covenantal love of God for his elect.

The Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, is the God of Joy. If you do not know Christ may these seasons of adversity cause you to turn to him in repentance in faith. For those who have union with Christ, continue to entrust yourself and your circumstance to Him. Your light momentary affliction is preparing for you an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Let's pray.