July 20/21, 2024

Prosperity and Adversity

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 7:1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

I think a lot of Christians have convinced themselves that if they try really hard to be really good Christians, that that means nothing bad will happen to them. So here's the question, "Is that true? Did God make that deal?" Well, let's see what the Preacher has to say. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 7. If you're visiting with us, we've been working our way through the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, and when I refer to the Preacher, I'm not referring to me. I'm referring to the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, who is on a journey, a quest to try to figure out what it is that gives life meaning and purpose. He's tried about everything imaginable, and keeps coming up empty: Vanity…chasing the wind. So we've joined him in this quest, and we find ourselves this morning in Chapter 7. At the end of chapter 6, verse 12, he says: ***For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime?***

So, he's on this quest to figure it all out. And what he's going to tell us is, he still can't figure it out. But what he has come to realize is, there are some things that are better than other things. There are some things he knows are good. So chapter 7, verses 1-12, is a series of proverbs. If you notice, just by looking at your Bible, it's set apart differently. You can tell it's poetry, just by the way it's actually presented on the page. So, it's a series of proverbs that are kind of organized around this idea: "I don't know everything, but I do know "this" is better than "that"." So, verse 1:

> **A good name is better than a good ointment,** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 7:1a)

A good name—integrity, reputation, character—**is better than a good ointment.** This is almost identical to Proverbs, chapter 22, verse 1: ***A good name is better than wealth*.** The idea of **ointment** could be translated as *an expensive perfume*, or an *oil*. It was *something of great value*. So he's saying, "What I do know is living a life of character and integrity is better than this expensive perfume." We might summarize it by saying, "Being good is better than smelling good." How about that? *(laughter)* So, moving forward, I think the proverbs that he's going to deliver are trying to help us process, "Okay, how do we do that?" The second part of verse 1:

> **…And the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth.** (Vs. 1b)

Now, there are some commentators that think he's just back in a really dark place again, and what he's saying is, "I'd rather be at the end of my life—let's get it over with—than at the beginning of my life, and still have all this futility to live." He has said a couple of things similar to that, but I don't think that's what he's saying here in chapter 7. As a matter of fact, as we read on, it's clear that's not his intent. What he is saying is, "If you're going to live a life of integrity—with a good name—you will have to understand the difference between what matters and doesn't matter. You have to understand what you should live for." And what he's saying is, "Seeing the end of the story

is far more important than the beginning of the story." So, when you're born, there's lots of happiness and joy and celebration, but nobody's probably sitting around thinking deep thoughts about the meaning of life. But the closer you get to the finish line, the more it becomes evident that life is a gift, and it's short. You have a brief time, and you better sort out the difference between what matters and doesn't matter.

Years ago, I read a book by Ernest Becker. It was first published in the mid-70s, called *The Denial of Death,* actually a Pulitzer Prize winning book. It was all of his research that showed that we, as Americans, are absolutely determined to deny the fact that someday we're going to die. And what his research showed is, as long as we do that, we're going to live meaningless, trivial, shallow lives. It's only when we come to grips with the fact that life is temporary—we're all going to die—that we start to think about what really matters, and what we should be living for. I think that's what the Preacher is trying to say. Verse 2:

It is better to go to a house of mourning
(I think for our purposes, we're just going to call this a funeral because that's what they mean. So, it's better to go to a funeral…)
Than to go to a house of feasting.

The Hebrew word that's translated **feasting** is a pretty strong word, a pretty graphic word. It doesn't really mean just going to a banquet, but it carries much more the idea of *kind of a raucous, carousing-type party with lots of alcohol.* Just like today, people in the ancient world used alcohol as a way to escape their pain. So, when they couldn't find meaning, they couldn't find purpose in their misery, then they party, because it at least gives them a couple of hours of escape from the meaninglessness of life. So what he's saying is, "If you're serious about a good name; if you're serious about a life that has meaning and purpose, you'll learn a whole lot more at a funeral than you're going to learn at a drunken party.

Having done a lot of funerals over the years, I can say that is certainly true. I have often referred to what I call *the funeral perspective.* There's just something clarifying when somebody dies. There's a realization of what matters and what doesn't matter. I call it *the funeral perspective*, and my conclusion would be that what matters in that moment is what matters. There's just great clarity there. So that's what he's saying. He ends that verse by saying:

Because that is the end of every man,
And the living take *it* to heart.
Sorrow is better than laughter,
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy. (Vs. 2b-3)

Now, again, you have to take all these proverbs within the context in which they're given. Would I rather be happy than sad? Of course! Would I rather be laughing than crying? Of course! But he's identifying this laughter with this raucous, carousing, drinking type of party. So, you imagine people who have no meaning. They have no purpose; they don't know what to do. They grind it out all week, and they party on the weekends. That's kind of the idea. They're just full of this empty, trivial laughter. And he says that, actually, those that are experiencing sorrow—they're

going to the funeral—can experience joy in the midst of their sorrow, because it's a moment of clarity around what matters.

I would say, as I look back over my own life, and the griefs and sorrows I've experienced, those have often been moments of deep joy, in the sense that there's something clarifying in that moment, where you realize, "This is what really matters." And there's probably no time when the hope of the gospel is more meaningful than when you're going through something that's breaking your heart, and you realize the only chance we have is the hope of the gospel for something more. It's entirely possible that, in your sorrow, there can be deep happiness. Verse 4, I think is kind of a summary then of this discussion:

> **The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,**
> **While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.** (Vs. 4)

Ultimately, if you're serious about a good name, living your life with character and integrity, you're going to learn a whole lot more at a funeral than you're going to learn at a wild party. Verse 5:

> **It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man**
> **Than for one to listen to the song of fools.**
> **For as the crackling of the thorn bushes under a pot,**
> **So is the laughter of the fool;** (Vs. 5-6)

Again, within the context, do I want to be ***rebuked***? No! Nobody likes to be confronted; nobody likes to be rebuked. Nobody likes hard conversations. But if I'm serious about having a good name, then I, if I'm traveling off the path, I would hope that there's someone around me that cares enough, as a wise person, to correct me…to rebuke me…to get back on the path. So I would rather get rebuked to get back on the right path than **to** just **listen to the song of the fools**. It's just a poetic way of saying, *all the foolish voices that come at us every day*. Whether those come through the radio, whether they come through the television, whether they come through the internet and social media, would I rather listen to these foolish voices that lead me astray, or be corrected by somebody wise, who cares about me?

His description, then, of the song of the fools is these **crackling thorn bushes**. They would take these dry thorn bushes, in order to ignite the fire, in order to cook their food. They would ignite immediately; they would flash; they would burn quickly, and then the fire was out. It was just enough to get the fire started. But while these thorn bushes were burning, they would crack and pop. So what he says is, "That's like the voices of the song of the fools. It starts a fire. It quickly burns; then it's over. You've got nothing to show for it, and that crackling, popping, is like the voices that he's hearing of the fools. So, it's a good imagery. He says:

> **And this too is futility.** (It's empty; there's no point to it.) Verse 7:
>
> **For oppression makes a wise man mad,** (**Mad,** meaning foolish.)
> **And a bribe corrupts the heart.**

I think most Old Testament scholars see the word **oppression** as meaning *oppression for gain*. That's consistently how he's used it in Ecclesiastes. The idea is going back to verse 1: if you think the **ointment**—the precious oil—is better than a good name. In other words, if you start to think money is the path to happiness—money is going to deliver the goods; money is more important to me than my reputation—then you are certainly going to do what is necessary to get what you want. So the idea of *oppression for gain*, is: "I will disadvantage others to advantage myself to get what I want, because I think that will make me happy." The whole idea then of ***bribery*** is the same thing.

Over the years, over the four decades that I've been a pastor, it would be hard for me to name something else that I think has led people astray more than the pursuit of money. You see it start… you see it coming. You see people change, and pretty soon they drift away. They're down a different path, and somewhere along the way, they concluded that the precious oil is better than a good name…and they've traveled down a path of destruction. It's interesting how money changes people. I've seen so many people that, otherwise seemed like reasonable people, until something happens that has to do with money, and then they become crazy people. And it's like, "Who are you?" That's what the proverb is talking about. Verse 8:

> **The end of a matter is better than its beginning;**
> **Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.**

To just rephrase this: "Starting something is way easier than finishing something." It takes character; it takes perseverance to finish what you've started. So he says, "Better is long suffering." Better is **patience**—which is long suffering. It's endurance; it's staying power. It's a willingness to go through the ups and downs and challenges to finish what you've started, rather than the spirit of the ***haughty***, which is somebody that's *arrogant*, somebody that's *just into themselves, someone who keeps starting but can't finish…starting and starting and starting, but not finishing.* And it's always everyone else's fault. They're always pointing fingers. They're always blaming somebody else. It's always everybody else's fault that I can't finish what I start. So it's better to have patience and finish. Verse 9:

> **Do not be eager or hasty in your heart to be angry,**
> **For anger resides in the bosom of fools.**

I think this is a great proverb for our culture today. ***Don't be so hasty to be angry***. Don't be so hasty to be offended. That isn't skillful living. It seems like, today, everybody is offended by everything. All it takes is one wrong word, one wrong move, and people blow up. And what the proverb is saying is, "It's the fool that harbors that kind of anger." The imagery is very interesting. The imagery is of a woman who has an infant on her lap. She's feeding the child; she's nursing the child; she's caressing the child; she's holding the child. And the imagery is that child is the anger that people get to be, where that's their baby. They're caressing it, they're feeding it; they're nursing it; they're hugging it. And what the proverb is saying is, "That's a very unskillful, a very foolish way to live." Verse 10:

> **Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"**
> **For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.**

Maybe some people are angry, because they keep remembering the good old days. People like to dwell on a romanticized version of the good old days, and they're mad because the good old days are gone. And often, if it's us in the older generation, we want to blame the younger generation, because they've ruined everything! What the proverb is saying is that it's not a very skillful way to live. So here's the newsflash of the morning! "The good old days are gone." They're gone; they aren't coming back. So, rather than pining for a romanticized version of what used to be, what we have is *today*. So, skillful living is, "We face what is today!" You can wish all day long it was different, but it's not different. This is what it is. So, instead of constantly complaining, why not roll up our sleeves, get involved, and try to make a difference? That's the most skillful way to live. Verse 11:

> **Wisdom along with an inheritance is good.**
> **And an advantage to those who see the sun.**
> **For wisdom is protection *just as* money is protection,**
> **But the advantage of knowledge (**And knowledge is the application of wisdom.) **is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.** (Vs. 11-12)

So what he's saying is this. Wisdom is a really important thing, but also so is an inheritance. So he's talking about money. He's talking about a house; he's just talking about having what you need. And if you combine wisdom with what you need, that's a great advantage.

I understand that life has become very expensive, and a lot of people are struggling; I understand that. But what the proverb is saying is, "If we lived more skillfully with what we do have, we could often live much better than we do. When there's no wisdom, we spend money on ridiculous things, and then end up in a mess." Wisdom and inheritance, together, make for skillful living. Verse 13:

> **Consider the work of God,**
> **For who is able to straighten what He has bent?**
> **In the day of prosperity be happy,**
> **But in the day of adversity consider—**
> **God has made the one as well as the other**
> **So that man will not discover anything *that will be* after him.** (Vs. 13-14)

Last week, Ryan mentioned that the way some of these texts are organized, work their way up to a peak—which is the point of focus—and then back down the other side of the mountain. It's called a *chiastic structure*. That's how this text is also written. So, the top of the mountain is verses 13 and 14. This is the focal point of the conversation. So what he's saying is, ***"Consider the work of the Creator: that the world is fallen; the world is broken; literally it's twisted."*** We talked about this in chapter 1, and there is not a human on the face of the earth that can straighten out what is twisted by the Fall. So what do we do? Do we all just give up? The answer is, "No!"

Here's what you do. In the day of prosperity…this doesn't have to be money…it just means on a good day, "Be happy; it is a good day!" He's talked about this before. "This is a gift from God! Remember, it's to be celebrated. Be happy." But on the day of adversity, that is also a gift from God. And you only get a limited number of days, so on the hard days, I still see it as a gift from God, and I seek to do the best I can on my hard days. He ends the conversation by saying…*because*

you don't know what tomorrow brings. If I'm having a good day, be happy. If I'm having a lousy day, see it as a gift from God, and make the best of it. I don't know but, "Tomorrow might be a good day; tomorrow might be a lousy day, but I have today, and I can make the best of what I have today!" Verse 15:

> **I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness. Do not be excessively righteous, do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked. Do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.** (Vs. 15-18)

So what in the world does that mean? So, here's what it means. What the Preacher is saying is, "What I've seen is sometimes the righteous suffer and die, and sometimes the wicked prosper and live long lives." It's very similar to Psalm 73. It's that nagging question, "Why does it seem like the wicked prosper and the righteous struggle?" And what he's saying is, "No amount of skillful living, no amount of being excessively wise, no amount of being excessively righteous, is a guarantee I'll always have good days." God never made that deal. The world is fallen. And even the righteous are going to have good days, and they're going to have lousy days. If you don't understand that, you're going to try to be excessively good. You're going to try to be so righteous, so good, so wise, that you're going to convince yourself that surely that will end in all good days, and no trouble. But you're going to ruin yourself, because God never made that deal. And when the bad days come, you're going to feel like you've been ripped off, and God didn't keep His end of the deal. So then the conclusion would be, "Well, if that's the case, I might as well eat, drink and be merry…and be a fool." He is saying, "No, because that is certainly a path of destruction." The right path is to seek to live skillfully, to do the right thing, but to understand it is not a guarantee that bad things won't happen to you. To fear God is to understand this reality. Verse 19:

> **Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth, who *continually* does good and who never sins. Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.** (Vs. 19-21)

So here's what he's saying. First of all, I think he's a little concerned that people may have misunderstood and heard him say that wisdom isn't that important. So he's like, "It's really important. *One wise person is more valuable than ten rulers*, but the righteous are not perfect." There's nobody that's perfectly righteous all the time. Everybody messes up. Everybody sins. So the next time your servant gets mad and cusses you out, remember, it wasn't that long ago that you cussed somebody else out. So, like, we're all sinners. We're all messed up, and we need to understand that perspective.

It's very similar to Jesus at the end of Matthew 18 when He says, "Let's never forget how much God had to forgive you, when you are asked to forgive others." We're all sinners in need of a Savior. Skillful living requires that we never forget that. Verse 23:

> **I tested all this with wisdom, *and* I said, "I will be wise"…** (I'm going to figure it out.) **…but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation…**(By **explanation,** the Hebrew word means *to pull everything together and make sense of it*. So they can't do it.) **…and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her.** (Vs. 23-26)

So he said, "I've tried to figure it out; I've tried to sort it out. I can't figure it out." There are still so many things he doesn't know, but he's still back to saying, "But there are some things I do know." There are some things that are better than other things. And he said, "One thing I figured out is there's something **more bitter than death itself** and that is this **woman**." So what does he mean? A lot of scholars think he's referring to a prostitute, the seductress, the adulterous, the strange woman that is talked about in the book of Proverbs. There's a lot of linkage between this text and the book of Proverbs. While that is possible, that just doesn't make sense to me, because it comes out of nowhere. It has nothing to do with the current conversation. I think what makes more sense, is, when you read the book of Proverbs, the writer of Proverbs often refers to *Lady Wisdom*. It's just personifying wisdom. As long as you listen to Lady Wisdom, as long as you follow Lady Wisdom, you're going to live skillfully, and define the life you search for. That's what he's been talking about. But also in the book of Proverbs is the woman of folly—*Lady Folly*—the woman of foolishness. And again, and again, we're warned, "If you follow Lady Folly, you're going to make a mess of your life." I think that's what he's referring to here. There is a bitterness worse than death, and that is listening to Lady Folly, because if you travel her path, what are you going to find?" **Snares, nets, chains…**in other words, bondage. So the one who follows God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. Verse 27:

> **"Behold,** (That's very expressive. **Behold**, I'm going to tell you something really important here!) **I have discovered this," says the Preacher "*adding* one thing to another to find an explanation, which I am still seeking, but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these."** (Vs. 27-28)

So he hasn't figured it all out. But again, there's some things he has figured out. And one thing he has figured out, is when it comes to living skillfully, *"There's one in a thousand men* that find it and *zero women that find it*." So, what does that mean? Well, hey, we're out of time. Thanks for coming this morning. *(laughter)*

So, a lot of scholars think it means just what it sounds like, because men in the ancient world had a very low view of women. This idea of *one in a thousand* was a common ancient saying. It shows up several times in the book of Job, and just means it's very rare. I don't think that's what he is saying. One of the reasons I don't think that, is because where the text says**, "I have found one man**," it's not the Hebrew word *for male*. It's the generic term *for mankind*. So, if you're going to draw a comparison between a man and a woman, you would use the Hebrew term for male and female. So here's what I think he's saying. He's searched the world over, and one thing he has concluded is that wisdom and skillful living are hard to find—maybe among mankind, one in a thousand. But for those who follow the Woman of Folly—none! I think that's what he is saying.

That is consistent with the flow of the text. “For those who listen to the voices of fools, there's no chance you're ever going to find what you're looking for.” Then he closes by saying,

> **“Behold, I have found only this, that God made men** (mankind) **upright, but they have sought out many devices.”** (Schemes gone their own way.) (Vs. 29)

So here's what he's saying. This is the core of a Christian worldview: that God made the world good. He originally made people in His image…upright…good! But those people decided they wanted to be their own gods and go their own ways. So, they decided to follow their own schemes, their own devices, to travel their own paths. And the result of that is we've made a mess of everything. So it's confusing; it's hurtful; it's painful; it's a struggle. All this struggle he is going through, roots back to a decision to rebel against God and go his own way. Therefore, more of the same. In other words, “Following the Woman of Folly is only going to result in more of the same.” Of course it is. “But for those who choose to listen to Lady Wisdom, there's no guarantee that every day is going to be good.” There’s going to be good days, and there are going to be bad days…because it's a fallen world. But for those who follow Lady Wisdom, at least you're on the path for skillful living and finding the life that you long for. You just have to listen to what she says.

> *Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You have not left us without guidance in a very confused world. Lord, may we have ears to hear the words of Lady Wisdom, that we might travel the skillful path. Lord, this we ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988, 1995
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2024–Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.