

God Gives Counsel for Living

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14 – *“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth; ² Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. ³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. ⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. ⁵ It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools. ⁶ For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity. ⁷ Surely oppression destroys a wise man’s reason, and a bribe debases the heart.*

⁸ The end of a thing is better than its beginning; the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. ⁹ Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools. ¹⁰ Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” for you do not inquire wisely concerning this. ¹¹ Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and profitable to those who see the sun. ¹² For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. ¹³ Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? ¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him.”

Background Notes

The last verse of Ecclesiastes 6 said, *“For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?”* In context, this verse means that while God knows everything, and has determined all times and events, He has not revealed all that information to us. We know the general big picture, because God has revealed it to us in prophetic Scripture, but God has chosen not to reveal the details of times and specific events to us.

The same is true in our personal lives. We know the big picture. If we are believers, we know that we will reign with Christ in His future earthly kingdom, and that we will live forever with Him. We know that in this life, nothing happens by chance. God has a reason for everything that happens in our lives, and He can work all things together for our good (Romans 8:28).

But we don’t know all the details. We don’t know what a day may bring forth, or whether our plans for the day will actually happen (see James 4:13-15). We don’t know if tomorrow will bring sudden adversity or unexpected prosperity - or be exactly the same as today. The Lord has purposely not shown us the details.

Some folks wish that they could see the blueprint of their lives, including all the details of the future. If the Lord offered that to you, would you want it? I don't think so. However, although God has not given us a blueprint of our lives, He has not left us to grope through life without guidance.

Doctrinal Point

God gives the believer counsel for living, but not a blueprint of life.

A "blueprint of life" would be a detailed plan of your life, past, present and future. Although the Lord does not provide us with a detailed blueprint for our lives, He does give us insight and guidance for living our lives as believers. In the first half of Ecclesiastes 7, there are a number of proverbs that give us counsel for living. Some things are "good," and some are "better" than others. The words "good" and "better" occur in Ecclesiastes 7 more times than in any other chapter of the Old Testament.

Verse 1 says, *"A good name is better than precious ointment."* Costly perfume can make you smell good temporarily, but a good name communicates your character for life. *"And the day of death than the day of one's birth."* If you've established the good name of the first half of the verse, then your good influence will continue on after death. The newborn has not yet been tested by life's trials and temptations.

Why is it better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting? Why not try to avoid sorrow and suffering? Verses 2-4 tell us why: *"For that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."*

When you're at a party, you're not thinking of death and dying, but at a funeral you're forced to face the reality that life is short, and you will die. A funeral helps us to think more seriously about life, and this is good. Psalm 90:12 tells us to "number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." It's certainly not wrong to laugh and enjoy life -as we know from the book of Ecclesiastes - but character is built and strengthened in times of sorrow more than in times of mirth.

Verses 5-6 teach us that a short-spoken word of corrective criticism from a wise person is far better than the continuous frivolous song of fools: *"It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools. For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity."*

Remember, in scripture a “fool” is not a person of low IQ, but rather a person with a low view of God and His Word. The many words and laughter of a fool are like the crackling of thorns under a pot -- lots of snap, crackle, and pop, but no heat and no sustaining fire. Anyone who has ever built a campfire can appreciate this proverb.

People in places of authority can be led astray by their power, and end up ruining themselves and hurting others (v7). One way is to use power and authority to oppress others, and the other way is to accept bribes. Both are an abuse of power and authority. And remember - if you are a parent or church leader, you are in a place of authority. It's very important to use your authority wisely.

Verse 8 says, *“The end of a thing is better than its beginning; the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”* It seems to me that both of these proverbs go together and it is assumed that a good thing (like a mission or a project) is in view. You may start with all kinds of energy, zeal and prideful self-confidence, but will you lose heart and quit, or fail to finish in some other way? It's far better to finish strong, having learned patience through the tough times. This counsel can be applied to the Christian life. In 2 Timothy 4:7 the apostle Paul was able to say: *“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.”*

Verse 9 is very practical. *“Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools.”* Fools do not control their emotions. They get angry and lash out whenever things don't go their way. Are you a fool? Ephesians 4:26 says it's okay to have “righteous anger,” but that even righteous emotion must be kept under control.

Did you ever long for the good old days? Verse 10 encourages us to face reality, and not live in a nostalgic and imaginary world of the past. *“Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.”* There were problems and trials to be faced in the old days, just as there are problems and trials to face today.

Verses 11-12 indicate that prosperity is not a sin - if you use your money wisely! *“Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and profitable to those who see the sun. For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it.”* The wise use of our material things can actually be a great blessing in life. If we use our money with wisdom, we will be using our money as God intended.

In verse 13, the phrase “what God has made crooked” refers to difficulties and adversities that our sovereign God allows to come into our lives: *“Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?”* What should our response be, since we'll face both good days and bad days; times of prosperity, and times of adversity?

Verse 14 gives us the godly counsel that we need: *“In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him.”*

So, in times of prosperity, we can be glad and joyful, and we can thank the Lord, and we can use what God has given us for His glory. In times of adversity, we should consider and learn the lessons that God has for us. Both times of prosperity and times of adversity are appointed by God, and we don't know ahead of time what a day will bring forth.

No one gets a "blueprint of life," but we do get the Bible. It has plenty of counsel - if we will listen! God gives the believer counsel for living, but not a blueprint of life.

Practical Application

Picture your life as a campfire.

Verse 6 says that the frivolous life of the fool is like the short flare-up when thorns and briars are tossed on a campfire. A quick flare-up fire is useless for cooking food or boiling water in a pot.

Let's ask ourselves the following question: If God were to paint a picture of a campfire that represented our lives, what would it look like? Would it be a good steady fire, giving enough heat to boil water and cook food? Would it give warmth to those who are gathered around the fire? Would our fire be made of good-sized, seasoned logs? Or would it just be made up of little sticks, pine needles and thorns that give a quick flare-up and lots of snap, crackle, and pop - but no real, useful, long lasting heat?

If we all had to hang the pictures of our campfires on the wall for everyone to see, would we be ashamed?

Think about it. Picture your life as a campfire.