

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 13

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What the Preacher does next is turn to a literary form which is fitted for the task of imparting wisdom in the face of the mystery of life, a form the Preacher knows well, namely, proverbs. You'll note that the first half of Ecclesiastes 7 is a collection of proverbs. Now, while some proverbs can be relatively straightforward, these most definitely are not. This is proverbs with an ironic twist.

Now, the value of proverbs for the preachers' task lies precisely in the fact that proverbs are not geometric theorems, they are not inexorable laws (don't over specify). They are often themselves enigmatic. And, thus, what we have here are riddles, enigmas, to help us be wise in the face of the enigma that is life. And this brings us back to something we said much earlier: wisdom is complex.

It has to be, because life itself is complex. To put it in the words of a traditional proverb: it is the glory of God to CONCEAL a matter; it is our glory as kings with king Solomon to search it out. God has concealed some things here; let us seek to search them out. I'll make four points: death, rebuke and folly, hope and impatience, and wisdom.

I. Death

First, then, death. In v.1 the Preacher says: A good name is better than precious oil. At the outset, we should note that Solomon will use this A is better than B formula six times in our text. It is a RELATIVE comparison. It does not mean A is good and B is bad. After all, in v.1, precious ointment is a very valuable item, it is a good thing. But a good name, or a sound reputation, is better than the best ointment. This is not controversial or difficult, but a problem appears immediately in the second half of v.1: and the day of death is better than the day of birth. Solomon is not saying that the day of birth is bad and that death is good. He is not a member of the Hemlock Society, or some prototypical Jack Kevorkian. The day of birth is a good thing, but the day of death is better. Now that is not something you'd find in the book of proverbs. What does the preacher mean?

First, as the next verse indicates, he is almost certainly not talking about one's personal day of death here. His point is that funerals are better than births because they afford more of an opportunity to grow in wisdom. At a birth

everyone's mood is bright and expansive, and that's a wonderful thing, but it doesn't impart a lot of wisdom. Everyone just basks in a sort of hopeful optimism, and almost instinctively filters out thoughts of all the hardship and agony that will attend any life. No minister, who baptizes a baby, precedes it with a discourse on how we all know this child is going to die someday. That's not what the day of birth is about.

The day of death, on the other hand is discussed in v.2 with another "better than" saying: It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. The house of feasting can be a very good thing, but the house of mourning, the funeral home, which you go to on the day of a loved one's death, is a better thing. And the reason is given in the second half of v.2: for this is the end of all mankind. This is where the waterslide is going. Every funeral is an anticipation of your own. Our very consciousness plays tricks on us here. Think of it this way: you have no consciousness of yourself as anything but alive. You know yourself as nothing but a living being... 27 million minutes living, zero minutes dead. Seems like the death thing is taking a beating. It's pretty much a rout for the living minutes.

On top of that you have eternity in your heart as we saw in chapter 3. You have the imaginative capacity to read books from before you existed and actually place yourself there, you FEEL like you are living in the past. You feel like you know John Calvin or St. Augustine when you read them. You can do the same thing with books on the future. Your consciousness is virtually incapable of imagining the world without you in it, at least as an observer.

So here you are, alive, and knowing nothing but being alive, ranging over the past and the future with the ability seemingly to transcend even your own time. And this is a wonderful gift in many ways, but it plays tricks on us. We forget the fragility of the whole thing. The same is true of your loved ones. How much time to you spend thinking of the world without them? It's too traumatic, and in a very real way we are NOT made to do it, we are made for eternal life. So we are naturally, and deeply, self-deceived here.

In Rome, there is a famous church known as the church of the bones. The crypt of the church is decorated - if that is the right word - decorated, with the bones of 4K monks. As one walks thru the crypt at the back you come upon a sign on top of a stack of skeletons which reads: *Where you are, I once stood, where I am, you will soon be.*

That is the value of the funeral home for wisdom. It's a local, cosmetically enhanced version, of the church of the bones. This is the end of all mankind and, the text continues, the living will lay it to heart. The funeral home, unlike the maternity ward, is a place for shattering illusions, and thus a place for wisdom. It is where, if we are wise, God will teach us to number our days that we may present to him a heart of wisdom.

This does not mean you should become a funeral crasher. The world is full of fools who seem to attend funerals without ever laying it to heart. They walk away unchanged. There is nothing automatic about wisdom, but the funeral home at least puts you in the classroom. Verse 3, still on the funeral home theme, says: sorrow is better than laughter. Again, laughter is a great thing, but the sorrow of the funeral home will bring more wisdom. Blessed, Jesus said, are those who mourn.

The sadness of the funeral home, however, is not to lead to permanent morbidity. It actually, and paradoxically, leads to deeper joy. You can see that in the second half of v.3: For by sadness of face the heart is made well, or glad in some translations. Sadness and sorrow heal the heart. They make it well. This is the power of the blues. They embrace the misery; they confront the suffering head on. Wail and moan, document the trauma, and strangely, comfort comes. There is no comfort in aversion.

This is another key lesson of this book: sorrow IS the path to joy; perplexity IS the path to wisdom. Thus, the summary of the matter in v.4: the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. A wise man thinks about, meditates on his end. His heart is in the house of mourning. The fool is a perpetual frat boy: he wants to know where the next party is.

II. Rebuke and Folly

Our second point is rebuke and folly. Verse 5: It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. Augustine said: Far rather would I be censured by anyone whatsoever, than be praised by either the erring or the flatterer. A man is tested by the praise accorded him, but a wise man listens to rebuke. Here the choice is between hearing rebuke from a wise man, and listening to the latest pop radio nonsense, the songs of fools.

Solomon doesn't have a hard time saying which is better. Fools want to entertain the wise man, when they are not flattering or praising him. They, and their silly songs, want to anesthetize the wise. They want everyone to live in their distracted and shallow world. They want to whitewash suffering and death. But a rebuke goes deeper into a wise man than a hundred blows into a fool. Verse 6: For as the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of the fools. Thorns burn quickly and are not good heat sources, but they make a lot of irritating and unproductive noise, which is what the laughter of fools is. This too is vanity. Verse 7 gives us another aspect of folly. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. If fools don't subvert the wise, sometimes trials, oppression, or a bribe, will do it. Even wise men are fragile. They are susceptible to corruption. And the issues here, oppression and a bribe,

are ones which tempt us to short-circuit the perplexity of wisdom, and to give way to fools. We often capitulate because we lack endurance.

III. Hope and Impatience

This brings us to our third point: hope and impatience. Verse 8: Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. It is easy to start stuff, hard to finish. Everyone's a visionary and an optimist at the first meeting for a new project. Our lives are filled with barely started and half-finished projects. It takes stamina to finish. It just takes a larynx to pontificate about what you will do. The difference is patience. And patience is the handmaiden of hope.

The second half of v.8 says: The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Patience is contrasted with pride here. Which means patient people are humble. Impatience is a form of pride, it happens when the venture meets obstacles and we feel we are losing control. Impatient people always think they are expressing some sort of righteous indignation. They always see the facts as being completely on their side. Thus, they become angry with the inevitable delays and frustrations of life. v.9: Be not quick in your spirit to become angry. James says the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Which is a way of saying it accomplishes nothing, and often, it is positively destructive.

Anger lodges, it takes up residence, the text says, in the bosom of fools. Angry men are fools. But they think everyone else is a fool. And one of the great causes of anger and impatience is in v.10: say not, "why were the former days better than these?" it is not from wisdom that you ask this. This is a great conservative temptation. Conservatives mainline nostalgia like its morphine. Things were so much better back then.

There are three errors here:

First, Solomon has already told us that history repeats itself and little if anything is really new. If we believed this we'd stop whining. The problems in the present, belong to the past as well.

Second, this is grumbling against God who orders the times and has caused the former times to cease and placed us in this time.

Third, this whining nostalgia for the past is often woefully uninformed. It idealizes the past.

You don't like abortion on demand? The Roman's practiced widespread infanticide. You don't like the homosexual agenda? Wide swaths of Greek society celebrated it. You can idealize the colonial era, but I doubt you want to bury half your children because of the infant mortality rate. Maybe the 1950's

were great. Unless you were black and had to drink out of separate water fountains, and sit in the back of the bus, and couldn't eat in the same restaurants as whites. Maybe the 1970's were better, if you forget Vietnam and the fact that the top marginal tax rates were 90%. You don't like statist governments? The history of the world is full of them. Ours is tepid by comparison. Everybody remembers the leeks and onions in Egypt; nobody remembers the slavery and oppression. Whiny, nostalgic types are guilty of selective filtering. They end up as the impatient and angry men of vv. 8 and 9. History really doesn't change that much. We are to labor in patient hope for the divine future and not pine for the past.

Finally, Solomon will tell us what is good. Verse 11: Wisdom is good with an inheritance. Without wisdom, as we've seen, inheritances are regularly squandered. Since an inheritance is future, this means wisdom comes with patience, it takes the long-term view. Notice Solomon says wisdom is an advantage to those who see the sun. Finally, he says it plainly! Wisdom is gain. It DOES bring advantage. In v.12 the text says: the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money. Solomon, despite all his critiques of wealth, is not so naïve as to think that money can't protect you from certain things in life. It can.

But the point here is that while wisdom's protection is LIKE the protection of money, it far surpasses it as the second half of v.12 shows: The advantage – the gain of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. Wisdom is better than money, because it enhances and enriches life; it preserves it in the fullest way possible in the vaporous world. So, v.12 is something of a breakthrough in the book. Wisdom is celebrated without qualification. But we must recall just what kind of wisdom we are talking about.

It is the complex, riddle-like wisdom of a passage like this one that the Preacher has in mind. It is wisdom hidden in texts which must be minded and dug out if we are to confront the bewildering enigma of the world. And that means it is the wisdom of the funeral home, the wisdom of men who receive the rebuke of the wise, and forsake the songs and laughter of fools, the wisdom of patient, humble men, who labor in hope and don't indulge in foolish nostalgia. This is pure and peaceable wisdom from above.

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