

## The Futility of Life Without God

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

Rev. Brian Bill

September 21-22, 2024

Sometimes people ask me if I'd rather officiate at a wedding or a funeral. A wedding celebrates a beginning, a funeral acknowledges an ending. Both are occasions where friends and family gather together to share an important event in someone's life. While I've not been doing weddings because of other responsibilities, a wedding is a joyful celebration and an opportunity to affirm God's design of one man and one woman uniting in a covenant commitment before a holy God.

But when I'm asked the question which one I'd rather do, my answer often surprises people because I'd rather lead a funeral service. It's because a funeral helps us realize death is our destiny and gives me an opportunity to present the gospel. We actually find biblical support for a funeral being better than a festival in Ecclesiastes 7. We'll get to that in a bit.

Before we read this passage together, let's make some observations.

1. Chapters 1-6 deal with the pursuit of meaning, while in chapters 7-12 we're given principles for living.
2. This chapter begins with a number of practical proverbs, much like we find in the Book of Proverbs, also written by Solomon.
3. Wisdom literature often shifts topics rapidly, which we will see in this chapter.
4. This chapter serves to answer the two questions asked in 6:12: ***“For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”*** We'll learn what is good and what will last.
5. The key word in this chapter is ***“better,”*** used seven times in the first 14 verses. This word literally means, *“much more better”* and can be translated as, *“to a greater advantage and degree, superior in quality, more excellent.”*

Let's read 7:1-14, giving special emphasis to the word ***“better.”***

***“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.***

*Sorrow is **better** than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is **better** for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. **Better** is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is **better** than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools. Say not, ‘Why were the former days **better** than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”*

After reflecting on this passage, I wrote down this summary statement: *Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**1. It’s better to have a good reputation than to have great riches.** We see this in verse 1: *“A good name is **better** than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.”* The word *“name”* in Hebrew refers to reputation or character. Proverbs 22:1 says, *“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.”*

In that culture, *“precious ointment”* was pricey perfume or costly cologne, often used to make people smell good in hot weather when baths were infrequent and deodorant nonexistent. The idea is your name is either sweet or smelly, fragrant or foul. Proverbs 27:9 says, *“Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”* Our reputation travels further than the scent of perfume. In that culture, dead bodies were anointed with costly perfume to mask the smell of death. Solomon is saying something like this: *“It’s better to finish out life with a good reputation than to have lots of money for a fancy funeral.”*

There’s a difference between character and reputation. John Wooden, arguably the most successful basketball coach in the NCAA after winning 10 championships in 12 seasons, would give the following speech to his players: *“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation. Character is what you really are.”*

*Reputation is what people say you are.*” D.L. Moody said that character is “*what you are in the dark*” when no one but God sees you. Solomon tells us to wear the cologne of good character.

There are two days in our lives when our name is prominent: the day we receive our name at birth, and the day our name appears in an obituary. Have you ever wondered how your obituary will read? Alfred Nobel had that opportunity. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Alfred’s brother died and when he picked up the morning paper to see what was written about his brother, he was stunned to discover his own obituary had been printed! The newspaper had mistakenly reported that Alfred had died, describing him as the inventor of dynamite. When Nobel realized his name was associated with death and destruction, he decided to invest his wealth to further the cause of peace in the world. Instead of being known for inventing dynamite, his legacy has now become the Nobel Peace Prize.

Do people smile when they hear your name? Do you give off a good scent? Does the mention of your name bring peace, or does it cause things to blow up?

If you visit old churches in New England, you’ll see that many of them have a cemetery right next to them. I’m told that instead of using stained glass in their windows, these churches would install clear glass so the pastor could see the graveyard as he preached. This was a constant reminder that those who filled the pews would eventually fill a place in the cemetery. This reminds me of something the Puritan preacher Richard Baxter often said, “*I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.*” Pastors must preach with a sense of gospel gravity, knowing that preaching is literally a life-or-death matter.

*Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**2. It’s better to participate in a funeral than to party at a feast.** We see this in verse 2: “***It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.***” In that culture, people would gather in a house and grieve together for seven days. Solomon says it’s better to ponder the departed than to go to a party because each of our lives will end one day. One translation says, “***death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.***”

While death is our destiny (if the Rapture doesn’t come first), most Americans are in denial about death, leaving it to hospitals and funeral homes and not for everyday conversation.

In order to keep death at a safe distance, we often use euphemisms for it. A euphemism is a polite expression for an unpleasant reality, or a “*good way to talk about a bad thing.*” One of my favorites is, “*This car isn’t used...it’s pre-owned.*”

There are a lot of euphemisms employed for death today.

- Passed away.
- Went over to the other side.
- Bought the farm.
- Kicked the bucket.
- Met an untimely demise.
- No longer here.
- Departed.

The Bible is blunt in its teaching as Hebrews 9:27 says so clearly, “***It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.***” I checked the death rate in the Quad Cities – it’s 100 percent. In addition, the global death rate remains constant at 100 percent.

This week, my dad, who is in his late 80’s, went to his 70<sup>th</sup> high school class reunion. Out of his graduating class of 125, 87 of his classmates have passed away. I could hear the sadness in his voice when he told me about it. In typical fashion, he turned to humor and said, “*Man, those people looked really old!*”

When I was working on this part of the message at a coffee shop, two guys came up to me and asked me what the good word was for the day. I smiled and quoted this verse: “***death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.***” Then I said, “*Since you asked, here’s the good word: ‘We’re all going to die.’*” One of the guys turned to his buddy and said, “*On that happy note, let’s get out of here and go get some lunch.*”

I often begin a funeral service like this: “*A funeral is a good time for us to look at our own lives because each of us will die one day. We’re forced to ask some of the tough questions which often don’t get asked. Questions like:*

- “*Am I ready to die?*”
- “*Where will I go when my life is over?*”

- If you are a Christian, and you've been drifting, this is a good time to ask this question, *"Am I living for Christ so I'm ready to meet Him when He returns, or when I die?"*

Going to a "celebration of life" service should help us think soberly about death, which in turn should teach us how to live. While funerals are not fun, they are foundational for us to be reminded of the finality of life and the futility of living our lives apart from faith in Christ. Here are some ways we can take death *"to heart."*

- It forces us to remember how death comes to all because of the sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:17; Genesis 6:23).
- It reminds us life is brief and eternity is long.
- It teaches us to number our days (Psalm 90:12).
- It urges us to evaluate what we're living for and to repent if needed.
- We're reminded of the glorious resurrection and the fact that Jesus has conquered the devil, our depravity, and death itself (1 Corinthians 15:55-58).
- It's only when we are born twice through the new birth that can we avoid the second death in the lake of fire and live forever (Revelation 21:8). When you are born twice, you only die once.

Listen to verses 3-4: ***"Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."*** I'll never forget when Beth and I visited the Holocaust Museum in Israel. I was undone by seeing a mountain of children's shoes that had been collected from Auschwitz. I simply stared and wept at this silent testimony of the ravages of evil unleashed against 6 million Jews. No one was laughing in that museum, and it was good for us to somberly reflect and to remember.

Robert Browning Hamilton wrote these wise words:

*I walked a mile with Pleasure,  
She chattered all the way,  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.*

*I walked a mile with Sorrow,  
And not a word said she,*

*But oh, the things I learned from her  
When Sorrow walked with me!*

Once, John Wesley was asked to explain the courage of Christians. His response was short and sweet, “*Our people die well.*” As I thought about that, I wrote this phrase down: *In order to die well, we have to live wisely.* That’s why Paul could say in Philippians 1:21: “***For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.***”

*Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**3. It’s better to listen to a rebuke than to go through life laughing.** We see this in verse 5: “***It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.*** As hard as it is, it’s good for us to be corrected as Proverbs 9:8 says, “***Reprove a wise man, and he will love you.***” Proverbs 13:18: “***Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is honored.***”

The famous New York Yankee Mickey Mantle tells how as a rookie playing in the minor leagues, he began to struggle. He became discouraged and called his father to come and get him because he was ready to quit. When Charles Mantle arrived, he didn’t give his son any sympathy. Instead, he looked at Mickey and said, “*OK, if that’s all the guts you’ve got, you might as well come home with me right now and work in the mines.*” This was a stinging rebuke to his son, and he got the message. He buckled down, stuck it out, and went on to make baseball history. He batted nearly .300 for his career, hit 536 homeruns, was the American League MVP three times, and was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame.

Verse 6 describes the contrast between the wise and the fool: “***For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.***” When dry thorns were lit under a pot, they burned quickly, made loud irritating sounds, and gave off little heat. Solomon said, a fool cackles like crackling thorns in a fire.

Beth and I experienced this earlier this summer when we went out for our anniversary meal at a Mexican restaurant in Door County. At the far end of the room, a group of friends gathered around a table enjoying margaritas and other forms of liquid nourishment. As time went on, one of the women at this table became louder and louder. Her laugh was like a cackling clamor. She laughed at her friends and at her own jokes. She wasn’t really saying anything, but she was laughing loudly. I thought of Ecclesiastes 2:2: “***I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and***

*of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” Proverbs 29:9 says, “If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet.”*

Ecclesiastes 7:7 is a warning that the wise can fall into madness and corruption if they don’t guard their hearts: **“Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.”** When we were missionaries in Mexico City, we faced some oppression that could have led to corruption in our own hearts. When we first moved there, and didn’t speak Spanish, the most frightening thing was to be pulled over by the police and be asked for a bribe in order to get our license back. This practice is called a *“mordida,”* which literally means, *“the bite.”* The veteran missionaries we served with helped us navigate this and bailed us out a few times. We saw how bribes corrupted the heart.

*Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**4. It’s better to be patient than proud.** So many believers start out strong and end up allowing sin to take them out. Look at verse 8: **“Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”** It’s not just how you begin; it’s how you end that matters.

On Thursday night, I was shaken after hearing about another well-known pastor who committed immorality and has been fired by his church. This man is in his 70s! One younger pastor sent me a message in which he lamented, *“Nearly every pastor that I looked up to has fallen morally.”* Another more seasoned pastor reflected, *“A cautionary warning to all of us in the ministry.”* 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”**

Verse 9 can be applied to the vitriolic culture in which we live right now as everyone just seems so angry: **“Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.”** The word *“lodges”* is vivid as it means, *“to settle or rest”* in the heart. This was our topic at our Pastor’s Table gathering this week as 20 gospel-preaching pastors agreed we need to call our churches back to loving our neighbors and proclaiming the gospel. One of my pastor friends spoke for all of us when he said, *“People are passionate about politics but not passionate enough about evangelism. Our mission and our mandate have not changed.”*

When anger takes up residence and makes its home in our hearts, instead of getting better, we end up getting bitter and biting people’s heads off. Psalms 37:8 says, **“Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.”**

In a NY Times article called, “Why is Everyone So Angry,” Sarah Lyall writes:

*“From across the country, employees (have) told stories of trying to manage customers’ out-of-control petulance. The supermarket clerk who had to deal with a man’s outburst in the dairy aisle because he could not find the Cambozola, a type of blue cheese, he wanted. The flight attendant forced to listen to a political lecture from a passenger who had followed him into the galley, raging about injustice. The supervisor at a Midwest trade association who said that her once-reasonable customers had become just plain mean, berating and, threatening her staff for the pettiest of reasons.”*

Proverbs 15:1 says: ***“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*** One of the best ways to evaporate anger from your conversations is to germinate gentleness. The next time you’re talking to someone who is really torqued, instead of responding in turn, give a gentle answer. Let’s work at getting our points across without raising our voices, whether that’s online or in person. We’ll be much more effective according to Proverbs 25:15: ***“With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.”***

*Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**5. It’s better to live in the present than to be locked into the past.** As our culture continues to crater, it’s tempting to go back to the “good old days” in our minds. Solomon addresses this in verse 10: ***“Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.”***

How many of you can remember the “good old days”? Do you find yourself longing for what used to be, while lamenting how bad things are today? Nostalgia can boost optimism and grow within us a sense of community. That’s the good news. But the bad news is it can create a sense of the past being better (or worse) than it really was or cause us to want to go back and live there. It’s easy to long for the good old days but as someone has said, *“The ‘good old days’ are the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination.”*

Here are some suggestions to help us remember the past while embracing the present so we can be faithful in the future.

- **Let go.** Isaiah 43:18: ***“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.”*** If you stay in the past, whether locked into the good or the

bad, you will look down on the present and you'll forget God's promises for the future. It's been said that if you're still talking about what you did yesterday, you haven't done much today.

- **Look up.** Isaiah 43:19: ***“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*** Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why we call it the present. God wants to do a new thing in your life today.
- **Lean Forward.** You can't bring history back, but you can bring God back. God only sends His people in one direction: Forward! Philippians 3:13-14: ***“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”***

These days right now are the glory days! With Christ at the center of your life, these can be the good “now” days. These are the days in which we are called to live, and this is the culture we are called to impact.

Someone has said that these are the “good old days” we're going to miss in the days ahead. What is God calling you to do today? Don't stay in the past. Take the next step in the present. And then take the next step.

Verses 11-12 celebrate the primacy of wisdom and the necessity we have to protect it in our lives. Proverbs 8:11 says, ***“For wisdom is better than jewels.”***

In order to be equipped to continue speaking into our culture by preaching convictionally and compassionately, Beth and I are going to a Pastor's Conference next week. Dr. Erwin Lutzer is the featured speaker and will be speaking on “Faithful Preaching in Dark Days.” This same event was cancelled during Covid while I was on sabbatical. I am thrilled that we get to go now. Incidentally, I was taught apologetics by Dr. Lutzer when I was in seminary, so, it will be a blast to sit under his teaching again.

BTW, since gender issues and sexual identity make up the number one topic teens and young adults are wrestling with today, we're bringing in Dr. Christopher Yuan in two weeks for our Holy Sexuality Conference. We need to realize we are who God says we are and base our identity on the gospel. As we've been learning in Ecclesiastes, we will not be satisfied until we surrender to the Savior.

*Since God wants better for us, we must give Him our best.*

**6. It's better to have faith in God's providence than to fight against Him.**

Check out verses 13-14: ***“Consider the work of God: who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”*** The word “consider” means, “to observe, experience, and perceive.” We're to give thought to God's deeds and to His workings. God can do anything and there is nothing I can do to thwart His plans as Job 12:14 says, ***“If He tears down, none can rebuild; if He shuts a man in, none can open.”***

Because God has made prosperity and adversity, we must accept the good and the bad. Some of us really need to hear this because we've been fighting against God instead of putting our faith in Him. 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.”***

Let's summarize what we've learned today.

- 1. It's better to have a good reputation than great riches.**
- 2. It's better to participate in a funeral than to party at a feast.**
- 3. It's better to listen to a rebuke than to go through life laughing.**
- 4. It's better to be patient than proud.**
- 5. It's better to live in the present than to be locked into the past.**
- 6. It's better to have faith in God's providence than to fight against Him.**

This week, I did a concordance search and discovered the word “better” is used over 100 times in the Bible, most often in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Other verses include Psalm 63:3: ***“Because your steadfast love is better than life”*** and Psalm 84:10: ***“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”*** The Apostle Paul declared in Philippians 1:23: ***“My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”*** To be “far better” means, “very far better, much, by far.”

The Book of Hebrews celebrates Jesus as superior to everything and to everyone. He is the better hope, the guarantee of a better covenant, the enactor of better promises, the better sacrifice, and the better salvation. Friend, settle this truth and surrender to it: *Jesus is better because He is the best!*

I'm told there's a tombstone in Indiana with these words:

*Pause, Stranger, when you pass me by,  
As you are now, so once was I,  
As I am now, so you will be,  
So, prepare for death and follow me.*

An unknown passerby scratched this reply:

*To follow you I'm not content,  
Until I know which way you went.*

Which way will you go when you die?

### **Invitation**

Listen to part of a poem called, "The Dash" by Linda Ellis.

*I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.  
He referred to the dates on the tombstone from the beginning to the end.  
He noted first came the date of the birth and spoke the following date with tears.  
But he said what mattered most of all was the dash between the years.*

*For that dash represents all the time that they spent life on Earth.  
And now only those who loved them know what that little line is worth.  
For it matters not how much we own, the cars, the house, the cash.  
What matters is how we live and love, and how we spend our dash.*

*So, think about this long and hard. Are there things you'd like to change?  
For you never know how much time is left that can still be rearranged.  
So, when your eulogy is being read with your life's actions to rehash,  
would you be proud of the things they say about how you spent your dash?*

When Pastor Ray spoke at the last SecondWinders, he ended by telling a story he heard from Jim Harbaugh when he was the football coach at Michigan. When he and his brother John were growing up, whenever the family was going through a hard time, their father would say, "Who's got it better than we do?" And the boys would shout back, "No one!"

As a way to make sure they are spending their dash well, and to help them stay positive during Ray's cancer treatments, Ray and his wife Marlene often turn to

each other and ask, “*Who’s got it better than we do?*” To which they both reply, “*No one!*”

Q: Brothers and sisters in Christ, because Jesus is the best, who’s got it better than we do?

A: No one!

### **Closing**

- Welcome reception for new staff.
- New members Saturday night – Carl and Pam Walz