"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." —*Ecclesiastes 7:13–14 (NASB)*

Ecclesiastes 7 marks the start of the second half of the book. Jewish tradition divided the book into four sections for reading: 1:1–3:12 and 3:13–6:12 for the first half of Ecclesiastes; 7:1–9:6 and 9:7–12:14 for the second half. From a strict literary standpoint, Ecclesiastes 6:10 marks the center. But in general, 6:10–12 provides the hinge in Solomon's argument as he transitions into the homeward stretch, which now will drive steadily toward the conclusion of 12:13–14. Ecclesiastes 6:10–12 reads as follows:

> Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. For there are many words which increase futility. What *then* is the advantage to a man? For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

The key idea that Solomon uses to transition into the second half of Ecclesiastes is the question of **6:12**, **"For who knows what is good for a man?"** The question poignantly summarizes the entire book. In a world stained by sin, groaning under the curse, and filled with adversity, *who knows what is good for man?* Finding an answer to that question is one of Solomon's most important quests.

Here in the very middle of the book, Solomon gives this question special attention. Although he implicitly answered it in the context of 6:10–12, he takes it up again beginning in 7:1 in order to lead the reader to a more definitive response. Solomon repeats or alludes to the term **"good"** frequently in 7:1–12. He even uses a particular formula to express the many proverbs he records in this section—the **"better-than"** formula, which is a way of saying, **"more *gooder* than"**—in order to emphasize the notion of *goodness.* As an expert in the collection and arrangement of proverbs (12:9–10), Solomon does this to lead the reader to the answer to this all-important question, which he provides in 7:13–14,

> 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.

The consideration of this question continues to be vitally important for us today. Outside the tranquility that was once known as the Garden of Eden, we face **adversity**—whether because of our own actions or because of actions beyond our control. Adam broke the law of God, and the consequences of that transgression have been visited upon all of creation. As the Apostle Paul described it centuries after Solomon, "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it" (Romans 8:20; see Genesis 3:17–19).

A common response to this adversity is to practice forms of *escapism.* Some people try to escape from suffering through *denial*. Others attempt to silence their sorrows through *pleasure*. In still other cases, some pine away in *nostalgia* for days gone by, while others respond to their adversities with *anger*. Solomon gives us 7:1–14 to direct us away from the futile efforts to escape and toward a pathway of learning—one which embraces this adversity and harnesses if for advantage. In particular, Solomon directs us to learn from three sources: *the dead, the wise,* and *the Creator*.

I. Learn from the Dead (7:1–4)

To understand what is good in a life of adversity, Solomon compels his readers to go to an unlikely source—*to death itself.* True, death is an *enemy*—a consequence of sin and judgment (see Genesis 2:17; 3:19; 5:5). But it can

be turned into a *teacher*—a herald of important lessons for those seeking the "good" in life outside of the Garden:

> A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes *it* to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for when a face is sad a heart may be happy. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure. (Ecclesiastes 7:1–4)

The whole focus of this section relates in one way or another to *death.* Solomon wants us to picture the scene of a funeral. In the middle is a casket containing a dead body. All around are mourners weeping over their loss. Such a spectacle is admittedly disturbing. We shouldn't feel comfortable in such a place—but that's the point. Trying to escape from what is inescapable—*death*—will never serve any good. So, let's think about it with Solomon.

He begins with his first proverb, stating that a **"good name is better than good ointment"** (v. 1a). In the Ancient Near East, *names* had a lot more significance than they do for us today. Names not only identified people, they *described* them. As such, new names were even ascribed to people years after their births. In other cases, the very name of the individual became synonymous with his character. To say the one was to assume the other. Consequently, for Solomon, it was far better to have earned a good name by the time of death's visitation than to have expensive perfume poured all over your body to mask the smell. As David Gibson puts it, "There's no point smelling like a bed of roses if every time your name is mentioned at the dinner party people feel the emotional equivalent of nails screeching down a blackboard" (*Living Life Backwards*, 95). But to get there, you have to think of your own death and consider life in retrospect. You have to ask, "How do I get to the point where my name would be cherished as I lay in that coffin?"

Similarly, Solomon states that **"the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth"** (v. 1b). Indeed, there is an appointed time in God's plan for both "birth" and "death" (see Ecclesiastes 3:1–2). But a person's "birth" only shows *potential* while his "death" displays *fulfillment*. In the words of William Barrick, "One's name accrues value and has the potential of being more valuable at death than at birth. The good, therefore, comes at death" (*Ecclesiastes*, 118). Solomon's challenge is to recognize that the end of life is more important than the beginning. It represents finality. No more potential exists. Therefore, learn from death, and steward your life accordingly.

Solomon adds another *better-than* proverb: **"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting"** (7:2). The first house is the funeral home; it is a place where people weep as they contemplate the loss of their loved one. The second house is the party house; it is a place where people go to escape from their adversity through amusement and gratification. Solomon's lesson is clear: No one *learns* how to live by watching a clown, listening to a comedian, or attending a circus. A person *learns* by contemplating the adversity and loss he encounters. In fact, death **"is the end of every man,"** meaning it is a guaranteed experience. Those who seek *the good*, who want to learn how to live in *the present*, look to death's visitation of others and **"take it to heart."** They recognize that "every funeral anticipates our own" (Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 109), and live accordingly.

Continuing his emphasis on the lessons to learn from death, Solomon asserts that **"sorrow is better than laughter"** (7:3a). Certainly, both have a role in human experience (see 3:4). But in terms of *instruction,* the sorrow that comes from adversity teaches many more lessons than the laughter that comes from prosperity. For Solomon, the best and most necessary lessons to learn will come from mourning. Thus, even with **"a face that is sad,"** even when one is wincing under the pain of affliction, one can have a healthy heart—**"a heart that is happy"** (v. 3b)—if he's learning the right lessons. Repeating the message of v. 2, Solomon then closes the section by contrasting **"the house of mourning"** with **"the house of pleasure"** (v. 4). The wise go to the former while fools seek escape in the latter.

II. Learn from the Wise (7:5–12)

But not only should we learn from the dead; we must also learn from the living—particularly, *from the wise.* Solomon emphasizes four lessons to learn from them:

A. **Pursue Correction over Carousal (7:5–6).** Solomon states, "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 thorn bushes under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool; and this too is futility." In the treacherous world outside the Garden, we stumble and fall. Thus, a crucial part of learning to live is dealing appropriately with our transgression. Since "we become like that to which we listen" (Barrick, *Ecclesiastes,* 122), the proper response is **"to listen to the rebuke of a wise man"** (v. 5). This may be a form of painful adversity in itself, but it is exactly what we need (see Psalm 141:5; Proverbs 15:31). Conversely, to listen to **"the songs of fools"**—the lyrics they compose in order to sooth us into complacency—is destructive. Their frivolity is like the voices of the Sirens in Greek mythology. Solomon himself comes up with the analogy: their laughter is like a thornbush lit on fire. It burns quickly and with loud noise. But it produces no heat and is consumed in an instant. It is the essence of **"futility"**—a puff of smoke.

B. **Pursue Humility over Hubris (7:7–9).** Solomon states, "For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit. Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools." Solomon acknowledges the fallibility of wise men in the face of adversity—a reminder to keep our heads down. The pressure of **"oppression"** can leave even a wise man **"mad"** (v. 7a; see 4:1), and the pressure of a **"bribe"** can **"corrupt"** even a wise man's **"heart"** (v. 7b). In this world outside the garden, even the best of men are men at best.

   Therefore, *endings* are much better than *beginnings* (v. 8a). It is easy at the beginning to make brazen claims and promises, but it is a whole other affair to bring something to its proper end. As Daniel Estes states, "The only measure that counts is the finish line, and in life it often takes considerable time until the wise course is vindicated" (*Handbook on the Wisdom Books*, 343). Along the path from the starting tape to the finish line there will be adversity. Count on it. Therefore, **"patience"** (*lit.*, "length of spirit") is better than **"haughtiness"** (*lit.,* "height of spirit"; v. 8b). The virtue of patience and plodding surpasses passion and pride (see Proverbs 14:30). This is especially important because adversity will often tempt you toward **"anger,"** but the wise one will not surrender to its soul-corrupting influence (v. 9; see Proverbs 14:20; 1 Peter 5:6).

C. **Pursue Contentment over Complaint (7:10).** Solomon states, "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." In the face of adversity, some escape to *nostalgia.* The complaining is constant: "Things are not like they once were!" "The good ol' days are gone!" What is the problem with such pining for the past? It takes advantage of selective memory; it idolizes past experiences; it deflects responsibility for current incompetence; it wallows in self-pity; it manifests an inability to seize opportunities in the present; and it fails to prepare rightly for the future. Ultimately, it denies God's sovereignty. On the other hand, tracing out proper lessons from adversity, wisdom runs on contentment, emphasizes present responsibility, and looks to the future.

D. **Pursue Reason over Recklessness (7:11–12)**. Solomon states, "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 is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors." Solomon sets **"wisdom"** alongside **"an inheritance"** as things which are both **"good"** and provide a practical **"advantage"** in mortal life—particularly in times of adversity (v. 11; see Proverbs 13:22a). Both these possessions are described in their *utilitarian* sense—in their ability to provide practical help. On the contrary, the hedonist has neither wisdom nor money. His motto is "Let's eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!"

   Solomon's point is straightforward: You will fare much better in adversity at a practical level if you have material and intellectual resources. But even more important are the resources that come from knowledge acquired for practical application—wisdom.

III. Learn from the Creator (6:13–14)

Lessons from the dead (7:1–4) and from the wise (7:5–12) are helpful, but they are not infallible or absolute. Solomon is left with the need for a better, more definitive answer to the question, **"For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime?"** (6:12). He provides this in 7:13–14,

> 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.

Solomon leaves the format of the proverbs (vv. 1–12) to provide instruction with a focus on one repeated imperative: **"consider!"** ("see!," "observe!"). The first object of this *compelled observation* is **"the work of God"** (v. 13)—i.e., God's *sovereign providence.* What is "providence"? John Calvin helpfully defines it as follows: "There is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by Him" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.201). Solomon describes this providence as something which God **"has bent"** (v. 13)—a reference not to *moral bending* (corruption, transgression) but *adverse circumstances.* He has used this metaphor already back in 1:15, "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted." Ultimately, in the midst of adversity, you cannot demand an answer or eliminate the enigma. You must *trust* that *God knows best* (see Job 2:10; Romans 8:28; James 1:2–4; etc.).

The second object of this *required observation* is that **"God has made the one as well as the other"**—i.e., **"the day of prosperity"** as well as **"the day of adversity"** (v. 14a). The "bent" days and the "straight" days equally come from God's hand. He has not explained why, but keeps His providential will *secret:* **"so that man will not discover anything after him"** (v. 14b). But as Solomon implies, God does not need to tell us *why*. He knows what is good, and that should be enough for us. Living by faith is how we will endure "life under the sun."

Hear the Preacher!

1. *Take death seriously.* It can be your teacher. When you hear it has visited a loved one, neighbor, or stranger, seize the opportunity to examine your own life. Death will visit you someday. Do you live in light of this fact?
2. *Welcome correction humbly*. Those who don't learn the priceless lessons that adversity teaches are always prideful. So, take aim at your pride, mortify it, and submit to adversity's lessons.
3. *Resist escapism firmly*. Trying to deny adversity's existence, attempting to drown adversity's sorrows, or yearning to relive better days of the past forfeits the lessons that can be learned and stunts growth.
4. *Trust God implicitly*. He is the sovereign Lord over all, who alone has the authority, power, and wisdom to determine your circumstances. The sooner you submit to the reality that you cannot limit His authority, change His ways, or challenge His will, the sooner you will find rest.

For Discussion

1. How do you relate to death? Are funerals a thing that cause you to *flee* or lead you to *ponder?*
2. In response to Solomon's teaching in 7:1–4, how can you use the news of someone's passing as a way to examine your own life?
3. If the person closest to you (your spouse, a parent, a sibling) perished in a tragic accident, would you be able to lead others around you to appreciate the redemptive lessons of that person's death?
4. Why can reoccurring nostalgia be detrimental to finding satisfaction in life? What are its dangers?
5. How comfortable are you in living with unanswered questions? Are you one to get angry at God for not giving you answers to your "why?" questions? Or are you one to rest peacefully in the thought that "God knows what is good *for me*"?

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw
Next meeting: February 28, "Know Your Limits" (Ecclesiastes 7:15–29)