

Wisdom about Life's Painful Experiences Eccl. 7:1-14

Introduction: I must confess that Ecclesiastes is a hard book to subject to analysis; yet it clear that the wise man does arrange his material, at least in the general way, thematically. And as we progress through the book we can see the basic argument of the book being advanced from various points of view.

The preacher advocates a life of faith under God that seeks to enjoy His gifts with fear and submission to His will.

However, there is much in life to cause frustration, disappointment and anger. In this section, Solomon shows how the person of faith and wisdom must also learn to find the good in life's trials and temptations. Thus through a series of proverbs, Solomon teaches us about how to face life when it hurts!

We live in a world of pain.

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. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

Eaton offers an interesting way of connecting the two phrases which he says is allowed in Hebrew grammar. Just as a good name is better than oil, so the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. At face value the first phrase is true and relevant to the theme. It is not our outward fragrance that matters nearly as much as our inward character.

But it appears that the comparison moves more toward the second phrase which sets the stage for this chapter's discussion. Life is filled with much that hurts. The day we are born we live in anticipation of all this. The day we die is the day of relief from all of it. Hence by the proverb Solomon reminds us that we live in a world of pain and that what is most important is not our physical life, but our spiritual life.

Painful experiences can teach us valuable life lessons that will make us better.

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 7:3-4)

Parties don't make people think very seriously about life; but death does. Do you ever ponder what people will say at your funeral when you attend the funeral of another? Sorrow is not an automatic adjuster of attitude; but it certainly may be. Laughter tends to make us less sober and introspective; but sorrow makes us really look inside, see what we are, and try to be better. It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the song of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:5)

In a similar way, the rebuke of the wise, though unpleasant, is preferable to the light-hearted jesting of the fool. There is a play on words in Hebrew

‘sir’ for ‘pot’; ‘sirim’ for ‘thorns’. Old timers know of various kinds of wood that make a lot of noise but put out little heat. So the “laughter of fools” is superficial and of little ultimate use to us. Think about that next time you watch Leno or a sitcom.

Painful experiences can make us vulnerable to attitudes that will make us bitter!

Solomon gives four proverbs that warn of the dangers lurking in times of pain.

For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

Solomon observes for example how the painful experience of oppression may become the occasion for anger that may lead us to madness (inappropriate expressions of anger in sinful activity). Thus, he observes:

The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.

So often in times of pain and difficulty our pride can overcome us. “I deserve better than this” we may say. Instead Solomon urges us to be patient in the face of trials. Thus Solomon exhorts us to be reticent to allow anger to develop in us.

Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools.

For the truly righteous person, anger should not have an abiding place. It should not be a welcomed part of our character. Instead anger resides in those who are ungodly and becomes the motivation for a multitude of transgressions.

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. (Ecclesiastes 7:7-10)

Finally Solomon urges us not to let difficult times cause us to lose perspective. Our present troubles often make us long for a day when things were so much better (or so we think). This kind of nostalgia just reveals a poor memory. All through life we will encounter evil days. Thus, Solomon urges us not to glorify the past and long for it; but instead to profit from our present experiences and avoid sin!

Righteous living is always important no matter what life may bring!

If we could have our preferences we surely would rather deal with prosperity than adversity. This is understandable and Solomon acknowledges this. But even so, it is important to remember that physical prosperity means nothing if it is not accompanied by righteous living.

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. (Ecclesiastes 7:11-12)

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 may not discover anything that will be after him. (Ecclesiastes 7:13-14)

None of us knows what the future may hold for us; but as one person put, we can know who holds the future! We can know only this—that we cannot change the destiny that God in His providence may choose for us. Thus, whether our lot in life is to experience prosperity or adversity we must accept both as a part of God’s plan and both as a part of God’s work. It cannot be changed or altered. (Did you ever try to straighten something that had been bent? No matter hard you try, it seems you can never restore it perfectly to its original form)

It is easy to obey God’s command to “be happy” when we are prospering; but it is much more difficult to acknowledge the providence of God in suffering. But it is very important to do so, because even suffering has a place in God’s plan to cause us to “fear Him and keep His commandments”.

Conclusion: Through this series of proverbs Solomon has shown us the uncertainty of life. He has shown us that we may experience both good and bad. But in the end, the only thing that ultimately matters is whether or not we have respected God and submitted to Him. Have you noticed how that each paragraph and topic in Ecclesiastes keeps bringing us back to this same logical outcome?