



Following the Best Advice

Pursuing Wisdom...Under the Sun Part 1

Ecclesiastes 7: 1-14

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On several occasions in my reading, I've come across different authors who've retold essentially the same story — no doubt a legend — that seems to have originated in the Far East. It goes like this:

A wise old Chinese woodcutter lived a rather humble life in China, right near the troubled Mongolian border. One day, his favorite horse, a beautiful gray mare, jumped the fence, galloped away and was seized as it crossed the border into Mongolia. His neighbors and friends came to him and tried to console him about this unfortunate development. He responded, "It might be bad that it ran away, but it might be good for some reason . . . we just don't know."

Sure enough, a week later, the woodcutter looked out his window to see his mare galloping back home beside a magnificent stallion. As he put both horses into his barn, his neighbors came to admire his good fortune. But he said, "It might be good that she returned with this stallion, but we just don't know."

The next day, the man's only son decided to ride the stallion and it bucked him off, breaking the young man's leg. Back came the friends to sympathize over such bad news. The woodcutter said, "It might be bad news, but it might turn out to be good news after all."

Within a month, war erupted between China and Mongolia and Chinese officials came to this village to force all able-bodied young men into service. All of them perished in the war, except for the woodcutter's son, who couldn't serve in the army because of his broken leg.

The truth remains — and this is where legend becomes reality for believers — life is filled with the unexpected, the unanticipated, the arrival of bad news, which might bear good things. The experience of something that appears to be good might open the door to something difficult or challenging or even tempting.

The truth is, we need discernment to interpret the events of life around us wisely; we need wisdom to walk through life in a way that ultimately brings glory and honor to God.

That's exactly the kind of transition Solomon makes in his journal, we call Ecclesiastes. We arrive today at the halfway mark in Ecclesiastes, where he essentially stops asking cynical questions and begins giving wise counsel.

The first half of his journal was more man-centered and now his focus becomes more God-centered.

In fact, two words are going to appear 35 times in the last 6 chapters – the words wise and wisdom.

As we begin the second half with chapter 7, you will immediately notice that chapter 7 looks a lot like Solomon's Book of Proverbs. He's going to deliver a series of comparisons and contrasts.

Solomon is going to tell us a better way to live; if you want to pursue wisdom down here under the sun, here's a better way to walk through life.

He will use the word "**better**" 11 times in this chapter.



Do you stay constantly motivated to improve, to become "better," or are you often content being stagnant in your Christian faith?

Now in order to navigate our way through these proverbs, I've organized Solomon's inspired advice into 4 categories for our study.

And I've given each of these four categories four categorical statements – and I want you to think of it this way: God, through Solomon, is going to give us four pieces of good advice.

Here's the first piece of advice:

Contemplate your casket seriously.

Now notice verse 1;

A good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death [is better] than the day of birth.

Ecclesiastes 7:1

Now you might not think that this would be the best way to start giving advice on life and how to live. But wisdom tells us that we are not prepared to live until we are really prepared to die.

Solomon contrasts here for us a good name – that is, your reputation – with your physical appearance or impression.

You might have the best ointment — you could translate that perfume or cologne, in our modern vocabulary.

You can even broaden this to include anything related to your physical appearance: your clothing, your jewelry, your physical stature; all of it cannot be compared to a good name.

A good name is better.

There's an old adage that says, "Everyone has three names in life: one given to them by their parents, the name or nickname they are called by others, and a third: the name they earn by the way they live.

"He's an honest man."

"She's a hard worker."

"He's a liar."

"She's a gossip."

"He's a cheater."

And so on.

That's the name Solomon is referring to here — the name you earn by the way you live.



How do you think people would describe you? What is your reputation? Is it what you want it to be?

Better is a good name than smelling like a bed of roses.

Then notice, again in **verse 1, the day of your death is better (is more important, more significant) than the day of your birth.**

Let me paraphrase Solomon's thought this way:

Your obituary is more important than the announcement of your birth.

The day you were born ushered you into a world where you will live for a few brief years; but the day you die ushers you into eternal life where you will live in Heaven or in Hell forever.

Solomon is an evangelist here, urging us to look forward to something that most people do not want to talk about: their obituary.

Death is an evangelist; it looks us in the eye and asks us if we're ready to meet God.

That baby crib will never preach as good a sermon as a casket.

And if you think Solomon doesn't want us to miss the point, he takes us on a field trip to a funeral home in the next 3 verses.

Notice 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. 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.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

In other words, fools waste their lives on fun and games; they never think beyond the moment.

And in Solomon's mind, nothing is more instructive than going to the house of mourning — in our culture that would be a funeral home.

Funerals are a clear wake-up call to everyone. And everyone there is a captive audience.

I tell my students at Shepherds Seminary in a course I teach on Pastoral Theology that there is one event in their ministry life where whenever they stand to preach, everyone will listen to every word they say — and that's at a funeral.

It's as if God has arrived and He holds up picket signs that read:

“Death is inevitable!”

“Life is brief!”

“Walk wisely!”

“Redeem the time”

“Live for Christ”

“Relationships matter most!”

It's as if Solomon says, “Let me give you a great piece of advice: go to a funeral home, or out to a cemetery and sit there for a while and contemplate your own life; contemplate the direction of your life; think about the fact that one day people will gather and remember you.

Solomon isn't telling us this because he wants us to become melancholy and morbid; he isn't against laughter and fun and a great birthday party.

But in this context, he's telling us something that is better and will take us deeper.

The Psalmist prayed, “Teach us to number our days that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12).

There's a connection between the brevity of life and the beauty of life, and those who offer to God their lives get the most out of life.

Thinking about death invites us to become people of depth.



What are the things you want to be said about you at your funeral? How do you want your time on earth to be remembered?

The shallow person never gets past the party life — the deepest thought they have ever had is how to get a better Wi-Fi connection.

Their hearts are shallow and their minds are stunted — their only thought is how to survive until the next weekend.

They will never become people of depth because they refuse to contemplate their future death.

And because of that, this second piece of advice is now going to come into play for those who want to pursue wisdom.

Here's the second piece of good advice:

Choose your companions carefully.

Notice verse 5;

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 (a fleeting, passing pleasure).

Ecclesiastes 7:5-6

In Solomon's day, if you threw some branches of a thorn bush on a fire, it would flame up quickly and provide a short burst of heat.

And he's making a play on words here in that the words for thorn and pot are similar in the Hebrew language. He's saying that the crackling of a fire is like the cackling of fools.

In other words, enjoying the company of shallow God-deniers might be entertaining in the moment, but the show does not last very long.

A world of fools presents us our mission field, so we do not run from it. But we also don't embrace it or strive to become like it. Remember, Solomon writes that it's vanity; it isn't going to last long.

But you are surrounded by foolish people, Solomon hints here.

Did you notice in **verse 4** a reference to ***the heart of fools***; then in **verse 5 – *the song of fools***; and then in **verse 6 *the laughter of fools***.

They're all around you.

And it's tempting to listen to them — to listen to their music on the top 40, to listen to their idle chatter on talk radio — they're never going to rebuke you or sharpen you or challenge you.



Do the noises of life distract you from your mission? How do you drown out the heart of fools and focus your undivided attention on the commands of Christ?

Solomon often refers in his Book of Proverbs to the importance of friends who challenge and strengthen one another.

The principle of iron sharpening iron is the idea correcting and improving one another's character (***Proverbs 27:17***).

We become like those we allow to influence us the most. Solomon writes:

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm

Proverbs 13:20.

And keep in mind that in Solomon's mind, a fool isn't somebody who couldn't pass driver's ed.

A fool in scripture is someone who denies and defies the reality and authority of God. That kind of fool shows up in all kinds of contexts; in fact, the fool is described by Solomon in the **Book of Proverbs** 71 different ways.

David described a fool categorically in **Psalm 14:1** as someone who believes there is no God.

If you want to pursue wisdom under the sun, during your brief life, choose your companions — those whom you allow to influence your life — carefully.

Notice again Solomon's piece of better advice:

It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:5a

Here's what he's saying:

Having someone challenge your life is more helpful than having them sing your praises.

Don't be deceived by flattery. Rebuke according to God's truth is far better than empty, silly, short-lived accolades.

I'm always fearful when I see someone inducted in some Hall of Fame, or when they win an Oscar or a Pulitzer or Nobel Prize, or Kennedy Center Honors ceremony.

And I know from what I've read or observed over the years that their lives are anything but honorable, and the fame they are realizing is like the flame of the thorn bush that bursts into flame but doesn't last.

I often wonder if, for some of them, honor or that Emmy or that Oscar or that #1 hit or that best seller on the New York Times list or that Pulitzer Prize was effectively the last nail in their coffin, blinding them to believe that if so many people applauded them, that their lives must be heading in the right direction, when in reality they are on the broad path which leads to everlasting destruction.

They were surrounded by the songs of fools; they refused to listen to that one person who was willing to tell them the truth.

A member of Congress was traveling through town a couple of weeks ago and called my office to see if we could meet, and we arranged to meet and had a fascinating conversation for about 30 minutes and then prayed together. That afternoon he was to meet with the president. He's a committed believer. After hearing his testimony, I plied him with some questions about Washington, the state of affairs, promising I would not mention his name. He told me that over the years, he was able to deliver the

gospel to many different individuals in high places. And he said, “On occasion, it’s pretty clear that they don’t even hear me, there are so many other competing voices.”

Can you imagine hearing from a thousand people who told you what you wanted to hear but refusing to hear that one person who told you the truth?

Solomon effectively says, “don’t be like that. Have open ears to the rebuke, the truth, from someone who delivers the wisdom of God to your heart and life. Don’t turn them off. They are better for you, and they will do better for you than a roomful of people who are singing your praises.”

Contemplate your casket honestly.

Choose your companions carefully.

Here’s the third piece of good advice:

Cultivate your character wisely

Notice verse 7:

*Surely oppression drives
the wise man into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the
heart.*

Ecclesiastes 7:7

Let’s put this proverb in the form of a question:

How do I handle the temptation to cut corners?

Do you have a price? Can you be bought off?

When the pressures of doing the right thing is driving you mad, why not slack off? Do you always have to take the high road? Why not go along with the flow? Everybody else is doing it. Why not take a little something under the table?

Solomon is warning us all of chasing after the quick fix, compromising in order to get a little more comfortable in life.

And with that, Solomon reminds us with verse 8:

*Better is the end of a thing
than its beginning, and the
patient in spirit is better
than the proud in spirit.*

Ecclesiastes 7:8

In other words, keep doing the right thing; the quick fix is not better.

Develop the character of perseverance and patience, even when life is maddening; even when the project is longer than you thought; even when living a life of integrity and purity was more taxing and more exhausting than you ever imagined.

Now verse 9:

*Be not quick in your spirit to
become angry; for anger
lodges in the heart of fools.*

Ecclesiastes 7:9

Anger, you could translate it, constantly lurks in the heart.

Solomon is saying, “don’t be as quick to become angry, because when you do, you’re really acting like a fool.”

Let’s turn this proverb into a principle – convicting as it might be, here’s what Solomon is saying:

An angry spirit is a reality check: I might not be as distinctive from the world as I think I am.

Nowhere does this show up more for me than on the road.

I was driving my grandson home the other day, going south down 401 toward Fuquay Varina.

And we were driving along and suddenly a guy pulls in front of me.

And 5-year old Micah, who evidently was watching from his car seat in the back, just blurted out, “Really people?”

“Really people?” I said, “Where did you learn that?” He said, “My mother.” Then I decided not to ask any other questions!

Actually, I’m more worried that he might pick up bad things from me. Something takes over when I’m driving: I have to catch every light green; I get irritated with slow drivers; I honk at people and then hope they don’t go to Colonial and recognize me.

My daughter said to me a few months ago, “You know Daddy, in every respect you are the most sanctified man I know, until you get behind the wheel.”

That was convicting! I’m a pastor — I’m supposed to be sanctified; you pay me to be sanctified. “You are the most sanctified man I know, until you get behind the wheel of your pick-up truck and start driving.” Being open to rebuke, how convicting that truth from my daughter was.

But Solomon is not done yet. He says in verse 10:

Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

Ecclesiastes 7:10

Why were the former days better than these?

Let’s talk about the good old days! Were they ever good — why can’t we get them good old days back?

Think about this here: Solomon’s generation was talking about the good old days in 970 BC.

Every generation thinks they have the right to do this, and that is because this happens to be natural bent of a discontented heart.

“Oh, for the leeks and onions of Egypt,” the Israelites said long before.

Besides, one author wrote, the good old days are the combination of a good imagination and a bad memory.

If I could put this proverb into a principle it would read:

Pining for the past doesn't solve any problems in the present.

Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that God is still as involved today as much as He was in 970 BC or 1957 AD. or 2007.

We tend to airbrush the past, glorify the past and miss the opportunity to bring God glory in the present.

Now verse 11:

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.

Ecclesiastes 7:11-12

The word here for **inheritance** is a word that refers to wealth or possession passed down for generations.

Solomon is delivering a warning here that receiving an inheritance is a good thing, but without wisdom, that inheritance is more than likely going to destroy that person's life.

Think of how many lives have been destroyed by receiving some immense inheritance; you've read about it in the papers and tabloids; their lives disintegrate simply because they now had wealth without wisdom.

A wealthy multi-millionaire once told me in confidence, a few years before he died, that he was going to leave his millions to ministry causes, because if he left it all to his children, he knew it would ruin their lives.



Which of these temptations (cutting corners, anger, wealth) are most likely to impact you? How do you fight against them and remain committed to God in all times?

Solomon doesn't say here that an inheritance is a bad thing. But if you get it, without getting a boat load of wisdom, you will more than likely not be protected or preserved with any kind of life worth living.

Let's cultivate the character traits of integrity and patience and trust and wisdom.

Solomon has delivered life changing counsel here as the Spirit of God has led him to challenge us to:

First: contemplate your casket seriously

Second: choose your companions carefully

Third: cultivate your character wisely

The final category of good advice now clearly lands at the throne of God:

Consider your Creator humbly.

Verse 13:

*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.*

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14

Let me put this text into the form of two principled statements:

1. God constructed the twists and turns of life to strengthen our spiritual confidence in Him.

*Consider the word of God:
who can make straight what
He has made crooked?*

Ecclesiastes 7:13

Do you get the implication here? God has created crooked, winding paths — your race isn't all downhill. It isn't one straight line from earth to Heaven.



Do you trust God with your path, even when it feels crooked and unsafe?

God did that. He created that winding road. He did that. For reasons He may never explain. And so, with humility, we bow at His throne.

2. God created the ups and downs of life to stabilize our dependence on Him.

In the day of prosperity, be joyful, [in the day] of adversity consider: God has made one as well as the other.

Ecclesiastes 7:14

He creates the ups and downs of life — it isn't always uphill, and it isn't always downhill. Just like riding a bike up and down the hills of North Carolina, it strengthens your spiritual muscles and stabilizes your dependence — not on the path but on Him.

The truth is — as Solomon adds here — we don't know what is going to happen the day after tomorrow. We don't even know what's going to happen an hour from now.

God is in control of all of that: the day of our birth, the day of our death, and the winding crooked road with the ups and downs of life.

George Young, a carpenter during the week and a preacher on the weekends, the Midwest holding revivals in small country churches.

One weekend while he and his wife and children were away from home, a man who had been offended by his preaching slipped over to where George had just

built their new cottage. He set it on fire.
When the Young family returned, their
home was a pile of ashes.

None of his sermons have survived, but in
1903, a few months after that fire
destroyed everything they had, he wrote
a song that eventually was published
years later.

The lyrics sound a lot like Solomon's
closing advice to those who pursue
wisdom by following their Creator God:

“Sometimes on the mount where the sun
shines so bright,
God leads His dear children along;
Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of
night,
God leads His dear children along.

Some through the waters, some through
the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the
blood;
Some through great sorrow, but God
gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.”

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