

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Lesson 6: Wisdom Better Than Folly in a Crooked World -- Ecclesiastes

7:1-8:17

Walk into the room with the Preacher and notice where he chooses to stand. Not in the banquet hall where the music is loud and the laughter is easy, but in the house of mourning, where the candles are low and the conversation is honest. "A good name is better than precious ointment," he says, "and the day of death than the day of birth." It sounds backward until you have sat by a deathbed and watched a whole life come into focus. "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." Grief has a way of sobering us into wisdom that a party never could. "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad." The Preacher is not gloomy. He is awake, and he wants to wake us up too.

Then he turns and looks at the world the way it actually runs, and what he sees does not always make sense. "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" There are bends in this life that no amount of cleverness can straighten. "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other." That is a hard sentence to swallow, but it is one of the truest in the book. The same God who gave you the bright morning also appointed the dark afternoon, and He did it so that you would not coast through life thinking you had it all figured out. He bends the road on purpose, to bring us to our knees and to Himself.

The Preacher is honest about how slippery wisdom really is. "I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" He has watched bribes corrupt good men and impatience ruin good ends. He warns us not to romanticize the past with that tired sigh, "Why were the former days better than these?" He warns us not to overhear every word our servants say, lest we hear ourselves cursed. And he confesses the great equalizer that runs all the way back to Eden: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." Not one of us has clean hands. Wisdom begins by admitting it.

And here is where it lands in your week. You live in a crooked world too. The wicked sometimes get the reward the righteous deserve, and the righteous sometimes get what the wicked had coming, and justice can feel maddeningly slow. "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil." But do not be fooled by the delay. "It will be well with those who fear God," the Preacher promises, "but it will not be well with the wicked." God is not slow; He is patient, and His verdict is certain. So in the meantime, fear Him, do your work, eat your bread and drink your wine with a glad heart, and trust the One who reigns over the parts of the picture you cannot yet see. That is what it means to be wise in a world you cannot straighten.

Group Discussion: The Preacher says, “In the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other” (Ecclesiastes 7:14). How does it change the way we walk through hard seasons to know that God appoints the day of adversity and not only the day of prosperity, and how can the Lord’s church help one another believe that in the middle of the storm rather than only after it (Romans 8:28; James 1:2–4)?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own heart do you hear that tired sigh, “Why were the former days better than these?” (Ecclesiastes 7:10), and how might that longing for an idealized past be keeping you from trusting God with the day He has actually given you?

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1–8:17

Study Questions

1. In Ecclesiastes 7:1–6 the Preacher says a good name is better than precious ointment, the house of mourning better than the house of feasting, and the rebuke of the wise better than the song of fools. What does this cluster of “better than” sayings teach us about where real wisdom is found, and how does the rest of Scripture confirm that sorrow and correction can do us more good than ease and flattery (Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 27:6; Hebrews 12:11)?
2. When was the last time a season of sorrow or a hard word of correction taught you something that comfort and applause never could, and are you currently running toward the house of feasting or letting the house of mourning lay something to heart?
3. Ecclesiastes 7:7–12 warns that a bribe corrupts the heart, that the patient in spirit is better than the proud, and that wisdom is a shelter just as money is a shelter, but wisdom “preserves the life of him who has it.” What does this passage teach about the superiority of wisdom over wealth and about the danger of impatience and corruption, and how does that compare with the New Testament call to seek wisdom from above (James 3:13–18; 1 Corinthians 1:30)?
4. Where are you most tempted to take a shortcut that compromises your integrity, whether a small “bribe” to your conscience or an impatience that wants the end before the proper means, and what would patience and clean hands cost you right now?
5. In Ecclesiastes 7:13–14 the Preacher tells us to consider the work of God, who has made crooked what we cannot straighten, and that God has appointed the day of adversity as well as the day of prosperity. What does this teach us about God’s sovereignty over both our good days and our hard days, and how does this protect us from the proud assumption that we can control our own future (Job 2:10; Romans 8:28; James 4:13–15)?
6. Think of a “crooked” thing in your own life that you have been straining to straighten by your own effort. What would it look like this week to stop wrestling it into shape and instead bring it to the God who bent it, trusting that He has a purpose you cannot yet see?
7. Ecclesiastes 7:15–22 warns, “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise,” yet also, “Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.” Since Scripture clearly commands true holiness, what is the Preacher actually warning against here, and how do we distinguish

godly righteousness from a self-righteous, presumptuous pretense (Luke 18:9–14; Romans 10:1–3; 1 John 1:8–10)?

8. The Preacher says, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7:20), and warns us not to take to heart every word people say, “lest you hear your servant cursing you,” for your own heart has cursed others too (7:21–22). How does honestly facing your own sinfulness reshape the way you judge and respond to the faults of others?
9. In Ecclesiastes 8:11–13 the Preacher observes that because the sentence against evil is not carried out speedily, people grow bold in sin, yet he insists, “It will be well with those who fear God,” and “it will not be well with the wicked.” How do we hold on to the certainty of God’s judgment when justice seems delayed, and how does the New Testament both confirm this certainty and explain the delay (2 Peter 3:8–10; Romans 2:4–8; Galatians 6:7–9)?
10. Ecclesiastes 8:17 confesses that man “cannot find out the work that is done under the sun,” for even the wise cannot fully grasp it. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is teaching you to trust Him with what you cannot understand, surrendering a worry or a “why” you have been demanding an answer to, and resting instead in the fuller light He has brought (Deuteronomy 29:29; Colossians 2:2–3; 1 Corinthians 13:12)?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 12:11, no discipline seems pleasant at the time but later yields the fruit of righteousness; Job 2:10, shall we receive good from God and not adversity; James 3:17, the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, and gentle; 2 Peter 3:9, the Lord is not slow but patient, not wishing any to perish; Deuteronomy 29:29, the secret things belong to the Lord but the revealed things belong to us

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