

Adversity and Prosperity

📖 Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

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We are studying the very practical truths of Ecclesiastes. Last time we moved into the third section, in chapter 6, where he continues to show us that all of life is vanity when we live life as if God is not there. Solomon is making further observations, as well as some speculations about life in a fallen world and the kinds of things people face and their responses. To review Ecclesiastes 6, the issue here is wealth and blessing and yet the lack of enjoyment of wealth and blessing. In 6:1 Solomon says that he observed a misfortune that is experienced by those living without God, something that is a great burden or weight upon them, namely, verse 2, that God would give a person great wealth but would not allow them to enjoy the wealth, but instead someone else enjoys it. Why would God do such a thing? Because the person whom God gave the wealth doesn't thank God for the wealth. Wealth does not intrinsically make someone enjoy life. Both the wealth and the enjoyment of it come from God. So, we must put God at the center of the wealth and give Him thanks for it, if we are to enjoy it. In verses 3-6, Solomon hypothesized about a similar misfortune that is a great burden upon man. In this one, a man has great blessing as interpreted in Jewish culture; one hundred children and many years of life, and yet he doesn't get to enjoy this blessing. At the end of verse 3, Solomon says it would be better to be a miscarriage than to be that man. His reasoning in verse 4; at least the miscarriage never comes into this world and knew all its troubles, and was never known, and in verse 5, never saw the light of the sun. And even more so, in verse 6 even if the man lived a thousand years twice, if he does not enjoy good things, and all go to the grave, then it is better to be a miscarriage than to be that man that had so many sorrows. Then, in verses 7-12 Solomon gives us ten proverbial lessons. First, verse 7, "All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied." This lesson is that temporal and material things will never satisfy you, only the eternal and spiritual. Second, verse 8a, "For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool?" The lesson here is that intellectual pursuits will never satisfy you, apart from the pursuit of God. Third, verse 8b, "What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living?" The lesson here is that your life does not consist of what you possess. Fourth, verse 9, "What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires." The lesson here is that it is better to be content with what you have than to always be wanting more. Fifth, verse 10a, "Whatever exists has already been named." That is, your circumstances are already determined by God. How you respond to them will determine your quality of life. Sixth, verse 10b, "and it is known what man is." We know that man is a fallen creature, we are not to forget

that. Seventh, verse 10c, “for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is.” That is, the creature cannot contend with the Creator. Eighth, verse 11, “For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man?” The lesson is that arguing with God about your life is not going to change anything. Ninth, verse 12a, “For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime.” The lesson here is you don’t know what ultimate good God is accomplishing with your life, so you should just be quiet. Tenth, verse 12b, “For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?” And the lesson here is you can’t see what’s in the future. When you put all these questions together, as a Christian, and you are tempted to get mad at God or question His plan for your life, the important thing is to say something like this, “I may not know what is going on in my life or be able to see where it is going and what good could come out of it, but I do know the One who has a plan for my life and I do know that He is good, and that He has a purpose for all the troubles and difficulties I’m having in this fallen world and that it is somehow working together for good.” So, chapter 6 gives us several lessons about how to have satisfaction in life, even when we know that our existence in a fallen world is riddled by troubles.

We come today to Ecclesiastes 7 and the key to chapter 7 is verse 14, so we are going to start with verse 14, otherwise if we begin in verse 1 it will be difficult to follow Solomon’s argument. The topic is prosperity and adversity, and how God is the author of both, and why that is and how we should respond to it. In verse 14, **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.** There are two basic circumstances we find ourselves in: **prosperity** and **adversity**. It is important to understand that God is the author of both of them. And the reason is so that we can’t predict what will happen in our lives. God doesn’t want our lives to be predictable, because if our lives were predictable, we could know what was coming, and we wouldn’t have to live by faith. And that would mean we could try to live without God. But God doesn’t want us to try to live without Him. He wants us to trust Him moment by moment. Now as far as our response to prosperity, Solomon says **be happy**, enjoy it. And as far as our response to adversity he says **consider**, be thoughtful. And both of these are for our own good. God has put both in our lives to improve us, but the key to that improvement is to respond properly. Glenn said, “The key to this section is found in verse 14a where Solomon declared that God is the author of both adversity and prosperity and that He so mingles them together that man in his finite understanding cannot discover anything about his future. The ramifications of this for Solomon were that adversity might have positive benefits and prosperity might have ill effects. But the effects of either depend on how one responds to them, whether wisely or foolishly.”¹

Another thing you’ll note throughout the section is the use of the adjective “better.” In verse 1, **A good name is better than good ointment.** Verse 2, **It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting.** In verse 5, **It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the praise of fools.** And so forth and so on. Eight times Solomon says **it is better** to show us that one situation is preferred over another. And sometimes it is prosperity that is preferred over adversity, as in vv 11-12, but at other times adversity is preferred over prosperity, as in vv 1-4. But he sees both as coming from the hand of God and both of them for

our ultimate good. And the goal is to get us to respond properly to both prosperity and adversity. And what is the proper response? To prosperity it is to be happy; to adversity it is to be thoughtful.

A final observation before we start is that these are proverbs. A proverb is a short, pithy saying that captures some truth. Clearly Solomon wrote more proverbs than are recorded in the Book of Proverbs. These are some of them. In verse 1, **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.** Basically, what Solomon is saying here is that if one dies with a good reputation, it is better than the day of his birth when there is only promise of a good reputation at the end of life. It's poetic and there's a play on words as well as a chiasm. So let's break it down. He says **A good name is better than good ointment.** By **a good name** Solomon is referring to one's reputation. One develops a good reputation by living a wise life. He says this is **better than good ointment.** **Good ointment** is what the mother would put on a baby. It would give the child a good start on life. But since it could not ensure that the life would be wisely lived, it is better to have a good reputation than it is to have good ointment. The next phrase uses a comparative in the Hebrew to show a complementary truth to the first truth and to clarify the truth. We might translate, "And likewise," **the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.** The **day of one's death** is the day that his reputation is etched in stone. Since this man had a good reputation, that day **is better than the day of his birth.** So it is quite clear why the day of his death is better than the day of his birth. On the day of his birth he had good ointment applied, but that only gave hope for a good reputation developed through life, but on the day of one's death that good reputation is sealed "so that his life has a continuing influence."² Ryrie said, "The day of death is better if one has made a good name for himself during life so that his life has a continuing influence." Of course, the only way to have a good name or reputation during life is to live wisely, responding to adversity with thoughtfulness and to prosperity with joy, in recognition that both come from God and have a purpose.

In verse 2 he gives another proverb. **It is better to go to the 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.** What is the **house of mourning**? It is a funeral and I have used this at many funerals for the exact reason Solomon said **it is better to go to the house of mourning than a house of feasting**, namely, because the living take it to heart. Now very few people, if anyone, would say that it is better to go to a funeral than to a party, but Solomon says so. What did the wise man Solomon see? Wiersbe said, "...given the choice, most people would rather go to a birthday party than to a funeral; but Solomon advised against it. Why? Because sorrow can do more good for the heart than laughter can."³ That's what Solomon means when he says, **the living takes it to heart.** At a funeral most people reflect on the shortness of life and the importance of life. They are forced to number their days, to remember that the grave is just inches below their feet. It is good to think about that. It makes us more appreciative, it makes us more loving, it makes us more giving. In Psalm 90 Moses said, "So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom." If we're not numbering our days, reflecting on the shortness of life and so forth, then we are not developing a heart of wisdom to present to God. So, the one who would choose to

go to a party over a funeral is one who is not developing a heart of wisdom. But the big point is that adversity is better than prosperity, because only it can develop wisdom within us whereas prosperity cannot. That is why it is better to go to a funeral than to a party. At the same time, it does not mean that there cannot be any good that comes out of a party. Going to a party can produce some existential happiness. But what a party cannot produce is wisdom.

In verse 3 we see a similar proverb that few would dare utter. **Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.** Note the word **better** again. Over and over Solomon will say one is **better** than another. They are comparisons of one thing relative to another thing. In this case, **sorrow is better than laughter.** Why? Because **sorrow** can do more good for the heart than laughter can. What kind of good can sorrow produce? The good of reflection that develops wisdom. We don't reflect on life and gain wisdom when we are laughing. We only do so when we are in sorrow. It's not to say laughing doesn't do other things for us. Solomon said in Prov 17:22 that "A joyful heart is good medicine." But sorrow can do more for the heart because it provokes us to thought and thought produces wisdom.

The last part of the verse is a further explanation, or it's supposed to be, but the translation is more confusing than anything. **For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.** In other words, a person can look sad on the outside but be happy on the inside. That's what the English words mean. But that's not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew says, "For in sadness of heart there is good for the heart." And that means something different. That means that when we go through something sorrowful it is good for our heart, because it produces in us wisdom.

So in vv 1-4 Solomon has shown us the advantages of adversity over prosperity, as in why the day of one's death could be better than the day of one's birth, or how going to a funeral is better than going to a party or how going through something sorrowful is better than laughing. And the basic reason the adverse situation is better is because it makes us thoughtful and it develops wisdom in us.

In verse 5 he continues to show why adversity is better. **It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man Than for one to listen to the song of fools.** The basic lesson here is that it is better to get corrected than it is to get praise. The words **listen to the song of fools** is metonymy for "praise" or "flattery." We all like to hear words of praise. It is like music to the ears. But this is praise that is coming from a fool. And in that case Solomon says **it is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man.** Not many people like a rebuke. Most people disdain correction because they are very arrogant. They never think they are wrong and even when they are wrong they don't hear it. But that attitude is that of a fool. It may be hurtful to be rebuked, but it is better in that it is something they probably need to hear. And it is necessary for their improvement. As Wiersbe said, **the rebuke of a wise man** "will accomplish far more in our lives than will the flattery of fools."⁴ That is why God has sent the wise man with the rebuke. He has sent it to improve our lives. The flattering praise of a fool cannot do that.

Verse 6 likens the flattering words of a fool to laughter and describes it as useless **as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot**. The **thorn bushes** were the kindling used to start a fire **under a cooking pot**. The kindling **crackled** as it caught fire, but it burned out quickly so that it was no use in heating the pot. **So is the laughter of the fool**, says Solomon. It is useless. It doesn't develop anything in you. It makes a lot of noise but it doesn't do anything for you. Solomon says, **this too is futility**. **Futility** from the Hebrew *hevel*, sometimes translated "vanity," but here it should be translated "useless." Wallace said, "In comparison to the sober reflection of the wise, the laughter of fools is morally useless: the burning of thorns, like the laughter of fools, makes a lot of noise but accomplishes nothing;"⁵ Therefore, it is better to receive a rebuke from a wise man than to constantly be flattered by fools.

In verses 7-10, Solomon now gives some warnings to a man who is on the right track in life, a man who is wise, because someone who is wise may become wise in his own eyes and abandon a truly wise lifestyle in search of an easier way, in favor of a shortcut, and thereby become a fool. The wise man will have to learn that the right way through life is almost never the easiest. But if he is to maintain his good reputation, he must respond to these temptations correctly, by resisting them and trusting the Lord (v 1, 14). **For oppression makes a wise man mad, And a bribe corrupts the heart**. Both oppression and bribery seem like simple solutions when in an adverse situation, but they don't respect the truth that God sent the adversity. The temptation to oppress others is strong for a wise man, since it promises an easy solution to a difficult problem. But if a **wise man** falls into this temptation his reputation will be destroyed and he will become a **madman**, a crazy fool. Accepting a bribe would destroy him. Thus, bribery and oppression should be resisted and the man should accept the adversity as part of the plan of God. If he does eventually, God will provide a solution and the man will preserve his good name in the sight of both God and man.

In verse 8, Solomon gives another example of a temptation in adverse times that could lead a wise man to abandon that lifestyle for a foolish one. **The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit**. When you have some difficult matter you are trying to solve, the end of that is always better than the beginning. Because of that there is a great temptation to try to solve it as quickly as possible. This will mean solving it with pride; forcing our will upon everyone else just to get to the end of the matter. But dealing with that adverse situation in such a way is not accepting adversity from God and it will destroy our reputation before both God and men. Therefore, we should exercise **patience**, trusting God for a solution. In this way the adversity is accepted as from the hand of God and a solution will present itself in God's timing, and our reputation will be preserved before both God and man.

In verse 9, Solomon speaks about those who are angry about adversity. They show it by always being on the verge of blowing up. But Solomon says, **Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, For anger resides in the bosom of fools**. Of course, it is tempting to get angry when we face adversity. But if we get angry we only reveal that we are not accepting adversity from God. We want prosperity from God but not adversity. Job said it this

way when he was discussing it with his wife. "Shall we accept good from God and not difficulty?" You cannot have your cake and eat it too. This is what the fool wants. But the fool is not living in reality. In reality, both come from God and both are for our own good. And if we do not accept adversity from God our anger will destroy our reputation before both God and men. It is not other people or God that are the problem. It is our response to adversity from God that is a problem. We are bringing trouble on ourselves.

In verse 10 Solomon says adversity in the later years can tempt us to try to live in the past, but we shouldn't. **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.** Adversity is common as we get older. It may be tempting to long for the "good ole days" when we think life was easier, but it really was not. Wiersbe said, "It has been said that "the good old days" are the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination, and often this is true."⁶ The truth of the matter is that we are living today, and the plan of God is today, and we must live in that plan today. We cannot sit around and talk about the former days just to avoid the adversity we are having to live through today. That is not accepting the adversity today as part of the plan of God today. It is trying to avoid it. It is living in the past, not the present. So, it is not **from wisdom that** we try to live in the past. Wisdom is living in the present. Glenn summarized vv 7-10 this way, "Oppression of others, impatience, angry and living in the good old days are all "actions and attitudes...essentially contrary to the submissive attitude Solomon later implied in view of God's sovereignty (v. 13). Therefore, they are foolish (v. 9b) and unwise (v. 10b)."⁷

So far Solomon has given instruction in vv 1-6 about the advantages of adversity over prosperity, and in vv 7-10 some warnings to the wise man not to become a fool when he faces adversity. Now in vv 11-13 he reveals advantages of prosperity over adversity and then summarizes the whole scope in v 14 by making sure we understand that both are from God and serve a purpose in the plan of God.

Verse 11, **Wisdom along with an inheritance is good And an advantage to those who see the sun.** Those **who see the sun** are the living. There's debate whether this should be translated **wisdom along with an inheritance**, so that the two together are viewed as **good**, or whether it should be translated **wisdom** is "better" than **an inheritance**, since the word translated **good** is the same Hebrew word used repeatedly for "better" in this passage. To me it seems that the latter is best in the context. Solomon would be saying that **wisdom** is better in this life than **an inheritance**, since if one received an **inheritance** it would likely ruin them if they didn't have **wisdom**. Therefore, **wisdom is** better than **an inheritance**. It provides the person with **an advantage** while they are alive, whereas **an inheritance** may destroy them.

Verse 12 is his explanation. **For wisdom is a protection just as money is protection.** The Hebrew says, "wisdom is a shade; money is a shade." The meaning of the relationship is not entirely clear. It may be that **wisdom** is being compared to **money** as both provide a shade for the bearer. Wisdom does serve as a protection for us in life. Without it we may destroy our life. Money can serve as a protection too. But without wisdom to manage it we may destroy our life. Ultimately wisdom is superior.

Solomon says in the middle of verse 12, **But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.** Solomon seems to be saying that when you have **knowledge** you have **an advantage**, and the knowledge he has in mind is **that wisdom preserves the lives of** those who possess it. Therefore, wisdom reigns supreme. This wisdom is the skill to live well. And to live well is to accept every adversity and prosperity as coming from the hand of God.

Yet, up to this time Solomon has not mentioned God. All that has been said about adversity and prosperity has been said without a grand explanation. But in verse 13 he begins that explanation saying, **Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent?** In other words, think about your prosperity and think about your adversity. That is the work of God in your life. That is His plan for your life. And **who is able to straighten what He has bent?** Who is able to change His plan for your life. You can't change it. You can try to make your life better by correcting wrongs and relieving suffering, but we can't change the plan that He has for our life. To make something **bent, straight** was trying to make a road that was very crooked straight. The reason would be for smooth passage. We all want life to be easy, but when God has made it difficult, who is able to make it easy. You can't. You have to think about this. That's the reason He made it difficult. He wants you to think about it.

And verse 14 should be your response. **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 right response to **prosperity** is to **be happy** about it. Everyone is going to have some days of **prosperity**. But everyone is also going to have some **days of adversity**. The proper response is to **consider**. That means to think deeply about what God is trying to do with your life, what He is trying to instill in us. This is not too far different from what we try to do with our own children, so why do we think it strange that He would do this with us, His children. The bottom line is that **God has made** the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. And the purpose laid out is **So that we will not discover anything that will come** after; so, we can't tell the future of our lives. If we could tell the future based on past or present circumstances, we could live by sight rather than by faith. But God wants us to walk day by day in dependence upon Him, and respond accordingly, being happy when it's a day of prosperity and thoughtful when it's a day of adversity. If we are able to accept this and live this way, when we come to the day of our death we will be pleasing to God and leave behind a good reputation that will have continuing influence.

In conclusion then, what can we learn? First, that God is sovereign over the circumstances of our lives. We don't control our circumstances. God has set those up for a purpose. Second, that we are responsible to respond to the circumstances in the proper way. We can control how we respond. We can respond positively or negatively. If we respond positively it will be for our own good and further development in wisdom. If we respond negatively it will be to our own detriment and further develop foolishness. Third, we can give thanks for adversities and prosperities, because God is using them to accomplish something far greater than we can

imagine. There is no use fighting Him. He is not going to change His plan for your life or my life just because we want smooth passage. There is something to the truth that nothing good comes easily.

¹ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 991.

² Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1024.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 84.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 86.

⁵ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 88.

⁷ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 993.