

The King's Classroom: Studies in the Book of Ecclesiastes

BETTER THINGS FOR A BETTER LIFE

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

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I. Good vs. Better.

A. Have you ever noticed how some things are good, but other things are better? Let me illustrate:

1. Oreos are good. Double Stuf Oreos are better.
2. PCs are good. Macs are better.
3. This baseball team is good. This baseball team is better.
 - a). Now, you see where I'm going with this.
 - b). There's always something better.
 - c). And we are always looking for better things - better things for a better life.

B. Now, have you ever noticed how some things are good, but other things are better for you? This game's not as fun to play; let me illustrate:

1. Eating a Big Mac is good. Eating a grilled tofu and zucchini sandwich is better for you.
2. Playing video games is good. Exercising while playing video games is better for you.
3. Cheering for this baseball team is good. Cheering for this baseball team is better for you.

C. That's just the way life is.

1. Things are always getting better.
2. Fortunately, most of the time the better things are better for us - better things for a better life.
3. Unfortunately, sometimes the better things are not the things we would prefer.
4. That is certainly the Teacher's experience.

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5. Turn your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 7.

II. Better Things for a Better Life

A. When we arrive at Ecclesiastes 7, we've crossed the mid-point of the book.

1. The mid-point is Ecclesiastes 6:12, which reads, "For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?"

2. The MT contains a marginal note at this verse that informs us that half of the book has passed in verses.

3. In the first half of the book we learned some valuable lessons.

a. We learned that everything is *hevel*, that it is meaningless, and a chasing after the wind.

b. We learned that there is nothing new under the sun.

c. And we learned that there is no profit to be gained in the pursuits of work, education, and pleasure, nor in the manipulation of our times, our neighbors, or our God.

d. The wise man's words echo on throughout the first half of the book: "Vanity of vanities . . . vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

e. With such a verdict rendered, one would think that the Teacher would despair of living and pursue death.

1). But he doesn't. In fact, he does just the opposite.

2). His observations about the inconsistencies and uncertainties of life

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cause him to see what is most important in life.

3). So he observes that "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment" (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25).

B. In the first half of the book, the Teacher offers his observations on life and living. In the second half of the book, he begins to dole out advice on how to live.

1. Much of what follows appears in response to the questions that are raised in 6:12.

2. The questions are these: "Who knows what is good?" and "Who knows what the future holds?"

3. This morning, we'll consider the question: **"Who knows what is good?"**

C. Ecclesiastes 7:1-14:

A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death than the day of birth.
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.
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.
Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.
Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than the
proud in spirit.

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Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
Say not, "Why were the former days better than
these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.
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.
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.

D. Although the Teacher ends the first half of his course with a lament that no human truly knows what is good for him, he begins the second half with a declaration that he can know what is better for him.

1. In this lesson the Teacher employs a type of proverb known as the "better than" proverb to teach his students a lesson on how to live wisely in this *hevel* world.
2. At first glance, these proverbs are strung together without rhyme or reason.
3. But upon closer examination I believe we see a brilliantly argued treatise concerning coming to terms with reality.
4. You see, only when we face head-on the sometimes harsh realities of life are we really be able to live a better life.
5. What are these better things that lead to a better life? There are three that I want you to consider this morning.

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a). First, funerals are better than parties.

1). Look again at verses 1-4:

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

2). These verses focus our attention on the reality of death.

3). It may sound morbid, but the fact of the matter is that much more is gained from the experiences of sorrow and death than from the experiences of mirth and birth.

4). I know that dads hand out cigars when their children are born, and friends plan elaborate get-togethers for years to follow.

i). But what is there to celebrate, really?

ii). Life is short, and then we die. Furthermore, life is full of injustice and oppression. It is meaningless and a chasing after the wind.

iii). Who would drink to that?

5). According to the Teacher, it is only at the end of life that there is any reason to celebrate.

i). That's what he means when he says, "A good name is better than precious ointment."

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ii). "A good name" refers to one's reputation.

iii). At the funeral, that's where the real evaluation takes place, that's where "the living will lay it to heart."

6). You see, funerals are better than parties because funerals force us to come to grips with our own mortality, which causes us to do some things differently, to live life more fully.

7). We used to sing a song where I grew up that said, "After I leave for worlds unknown, Over the boarder line, Never again on earth to roam, What will I leave behind?" That question has to be asked now, while there's still time to change the answer.

8). Now, if this wisdom seems counter-cultural, it is. No one in their right mind would rather attend a funeral than a party. But remember, the Teacher is not as concerned with what is most enjoyable, but what is most profitable.

b). Second, wise counsel is better than wisecracks.

1). Look again at verses 5-7:

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
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.

2). These verses emphasize value of wisdom.

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3). Earlier in the class the Teacher lamented the vanity of wisdom, but that doesn't mean that wisdom is of no value.

4). In 2:14 the Teacher says, "Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness."

5). Wisdom is much better than the alternative, and especially valuable is the counsel of the one who has wisdom.

6). Fools will tell you whatever you want to hear, but wise people will set you straight. They might not say what you want to hear, but what you need to hear to have a better life.

i). I'm reminded of Kings Rehoboam and Ahab.

ii). Both refused to listen to sage advice and paid dearly for it. Rehoboam lost his kingdom, and Ahab his life.

iii). Perhaps you're thinking even now of someone who's ignored wise counsel of their parents, their spouses, their friends, their doctors, etc., to their detriment. Perhaps that person is you. You need to listen now, before it's too late.

7). This is a major theme of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature. Those who listen to wise, constructive criticism will be better off for it.

i). Proverbs 15:31-32 states:

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.
Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,

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but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.

ii). And Proverbs 19:8 says,
"Whoever gets sense loves his own soul;
he who keeps understanding will discover good.."

c). Finally, the wise Teacher says that the end is better than the beginning.

1). Look again at verses 8-10:

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.
Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

2). Verses 8-10 place a high priority on patience while living life under the sun.

3). Only at the end can we see the whole picture.

4). At the beginning it is hard to tell how something will turn out.

i). How many parents have welcomed children into the world with great delight, only to be heartbroken later on?

ii). How many marriages have begun amidst great fanfare and hope for the future, only to end tragically?

iii). How many people started walking with the Lord, only to drop out in the middle of the journey?

5). It takes great patience to navigate this life successfully.

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6). The inconsistencies and uncertainties of this existence threaten to make us angry and frustrated and desirous of something different.

7). But life has never been any different than it is right now. If you think the old days were better, then you have forgotten the old days. There is nothing new under the sun. Things are now as they have always been.

8). Wise people must have the patience to see the important things in their lives through to completion. Old King Ahab learned at least one wise lesson in his life. He told the king of Syria, "One who puts on his armor should not boast like one to takes it off" (1 Kings 20:11).

III. Conclusion

A. The Teacher offers much more for us to consider in this lesson, and many of you will be discussing those things in your heart groups tonight.

B. I believe these three ideas that we've considered this morning give us a fair representation of what this lesson is about.

C. The bottom line is this: Some things in this life are better than others, because they help us to come to terms with the realities of life, and then to focus our attention on the things that are truly important. Like it or not . . .

1. Funerals are better than parties, because they force us to face our own mortality.

2. Wise advice is better than wisecracking, because the wise have our best interests at heart.

3. And the end is better than beginning, because only at the end is the true verdict rendered.

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D. These may not be the easiest things for us to hear, but we will be better off for having heard them. We will live better because of them.

E. At the end of the passage the Teacher once again counsels joyous living in the face of such realities: **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.**

F. That's our lesson this morning. Listen to the teacher. It is time to face reality, and to live righteously before it's too late. What do you need to do differently to experience the joyous life that God has given you?

G. The Teacher does a great job in this text of covering all of life. There's only one thing I would add, from one of my favorite contemporary Christian bands, Stellar Kart - Life is good; eternal life is better.