

## Week 9 - A Turn Toward Wisdom - Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 90:1-12

#### Introduction

Our study of Ecclesiastes has thus far lived up to its reputation as a frustrating and depressing look at life under the sun.

We've followed along with Qoheleth as he plumbed the depths of human existence and traveled every path to its ultimate conclusion in search of the meaning of life, only to discover at every turn that all is vanity.

In Chapter 5, Qoheleth gave us a glimpse of hope as he briefly considered God's place in things but it was short-lived as he quickly returned to his exposition of our empty lives under the sun.

As the first half of the book comes to a close, we see how, when we limit ourselves to the horizontal plane, we can't significantly improve our lot.

We have no permanence or even a satisfactory goal to aim for.

We're born, we live, and then we die.

There may be times of enjoyment along the way, but, for the most part, life's a frustration because we long for more than it has to offer.

But now, at the halfway point of the book, we see a subtle turn as Qoheleth wrestles with God's sovereignty and man's limitations.

And with how he begins, we are led to expect much the same as we've seen before as he looks at our limited perspective.

#### **I. Our Limited Perspective**

Let's look at **Ecclesiastes 6:10-12** together as we begin:

*Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? 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?*

To name something in the Old Testament meant demonstrating rule over it and responsibility for it.

So Qoheleth here is saying that everything, including our circumstances and destiny, has been established by God.

God is sovereign and in complete control.

Furthermore, Qoheleth continues to say that we are neither.

God is the potter; we are the clay and if we don't like things the way they are, there is no point in arguing with God about it.

Still, some people like to think they can contend with God and maybe tell him a thing or two.

Job certainly fell into that category until God answered him from out of the whirlwind.

I encourage you to read how the Lord answered Job's complaint in Job 38-41.

When God was finished, we see Job reply [**Job 42:2-6**] saying:

*"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."*

*"I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."*

*"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."*

Still, it's not unusual to hear someone express, in effect, that they believe they could do a better job than God.

Pastor and author Charles Swindoll likens our perspective to the view of the backside of a fine tapestry that is all knots, tangles, and frayed ends that lack any sense of meaning or beauty.

But from God's perspective, the apparent chaos harmonizes and comes together to make a beautiful design.

We simply don't know what God knows or see what he sees, and we need to know our limitations.

And one of our limitations is that we can't out-argue God.

Look at Nebuchadnezzar's confession after God restored his sanity in **Daniel 4:35** –

*"All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and [God] does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can say to him, "What have you done?"*

Disputing with God is to argue with the one who makes it possible to argue in the first place - it's a waste of time and effort, and the more we talk, the more foolish we reveal ourselves to be.

Admittedly, it's easier to acknowledge that truth and accept God's sovereignty when things make sense to us.

But, if we're honest, we have to admit there are times when we want to scream at God, "What are you doing?"

We want to believe **Romans 8:28**, which tells us that all things work together for good, but we know that many of the "things" are not good in themselves - in fact, they're downright horrible.

When I was a kid, my dad occasionally offered me food that I thought tasted bad - at least to my childhood palate.

And when I would turn it down, he always said the same thing, "You don't know what's good."

Qoheleth says the same thing, but he does so with a question, [**Ecclesiastes 6:12a**] *"Who knows what is good for a man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?"*

To be sure, we *think* we know what's good for us, but we don't.

We only know enough to know if a thing is pleasant or not in the present.

Otherwise, we'd never regret our choices or rejoice that God didn't answer our prayers the way we desperately wanted him to - and I've done plenty of both and suspect you have as well.

Our knowledge is so limited that we can't even be sure what's good.

We also don't know how long we'll be here or what will happen once we're gone.

Qoheleth looked at life and saw it as futile, having no more impact than a passing shadow.

Then, he looked at the end of life and saw only questions without answers.

While we've seen in our earlier studies that Qoheleth had a rudimentary understanding of life after death, it was murky at best.

And that's understandable, as we only get a clear picture of it in the New Testament.

But when he viewed life from the perspective of "under the sun," Qoheleth saw nothing absolute to live for and nothing concrete to plan for, and the book's first half ends with his questions unanswered.

It would be difficult to deny that it's pretty much a downer.

But, we need to understand that Qoheleth's purpose in pointing out the inevitable disappointment with life under the sun is to awaken a longing for God.

Only as we look to God's complete Word can we understand the life to come, and only by taking him at his word and accepting his promises can we obtain eternal life spent with him.

And, if this brief life is preparation for the eternal life to come, the emptiness that causes us to yearn for God and leads us to discover the truth about his Son and into a relationship with him is the most essential thing in life.

So, it was essential to begin there and linger for a while despite the discomfort because what Qoheleth describes is reality for most people.

In a sense, Qoheleth has been our travel guide who led us down the blind alleys of “under the sun” so that we might understand the territory, meet people where they are, and show them the better way.

Qoheleth moves on in Chapter 7 to look for a better perspective, and as he turns from the gritty, hopeless reality of life under the sun, his writing style and perspective both change.

To this point, he has employed a narrative style, but now he switches to using short statements of comparison more akin to the book of Proverbs.

Qoheleth reveals seven “better than” couplets that point to a superior way of living.

## II. Seven “better thans”

**First**, he says, “*a good name is better than precious ointment*” [Ecclesiastes 7:1a].

What he’s saying is that a good reputation is better than a fine perfume.

Typically, we think of perfume or cologne as something we use to enhance our appearance.

I suppose it also served that purpose in Qoheleth’s day.

However, it was primarily used to cover up the bad smells of living in a dry, dusty country without access to the daily showers we’re used to.

In those days, a good perfume was a valuable commodity; however, it was still only a coverup.

I think we can agree it would be preferable not to have a foul odor than to have the best means of hiding one.

Likewise, a good name that’s the product of a life of character is better than a façade.

Character is as character does, and sooner or later, everyone has the reputation they have earned.

Time and truth walk hand-in-hand, so covering up a rotten core forever is impossible.

Think about someone you know who has a good name - put a face to that thought.

Think about how they don’t need to cover up and how they can simply be themselves in all situations.

It’s far better to be solid than to put on a mask and hope not to be found out - better to *be* than to *appear*.

Beginning on such a positive note does nothing to prepare us for his **second** statement, which comes out of left field to smack us.

Qoheleth says [Ecclesiastes 7:1b], “*The day of death [is better] than the day of birth.*”

It isn’t easy to know precisely what Qoheleth meant by this statement.

To some, it appears to be a dark, cynical comment about the emptiness of our existence and how it is a relief just to get it over with.

We’ve seen Qoheleth express the thought that he would be better off dead or that it would be better not to be born at all before, so it’s plausible that he means that here.

Or, we could take a leap into the New Testament and look at Paul’s dilemma in Philippians 1, where he debated whether it was better to remain here and continue to minister or die and be at home with the Lord.

Without a doubt, death is gloriously sweet for the Christ-follower as all the troubles, uncertainties, and struggles of this life have ended, all things are new, and we aren’t just free from the power and penalty of sin but even from its presence.

Or, we could land somewhere in the middle and understand Qoheleth to mean that with all the hardship some people face, death comes as a relief - whether or not they are believers - at least from an earth-bound perspective.

There’s a reason it’s so common to express that those who have died are in a better place, and their suffering is over.

However, I think he means something much more basic as he expands upon his thought in the next verse and his **third** “better than” statement.

Look with me at verse 2 [**Ecclesiastes 7:2**], where he writes:

*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.*

In plain words, Qoheleth says it’s better to attend a funeral than a feast because funerals make us think, and what they make us think about is our own mortality.

We have the tendency to ignore death or wish it away.

These days, we don’t even like to call a funeral a funeral.

Instead, we have a celebration of life where the atmosphere is more like a party, and death is barely mentioned.

I have a cousin who recently officiated a funeral for a relative and told me that the tailgate party was still in full swing as he was leaving the venue.

I’m not sure that attempting to make funerals fun to the degree we fail to consider our own mortality is a positive move.

Qoheleth certainly didn’t, as he declares in verse 3 [**Ecclesiastes 7:3**], “*sorrow is better than laughter*” and says that facing sadness makes our hearts glad.

Jesus taught in John 16 how sorrow turns to joy, saying about his pending death [**John 16:20**],

*Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.*

Then, he goes on to analogize the sorrow that leads to joy with the pain and resulting joy of childbirth.

If you’re like me, you have a hard time remembering jokes.

I hear a good joke, and, as I’m laughing, I determine to remember it so I can pass it along - but I seldom succeed.

But sorrow and sadness have a way of sticking with us and, in time, are not only replaced by joy but, in some way, are the preparation for it.

Qoheleth continues on this theme in verse 4 [**Ecclesiastes 7:4**], saying that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning while fools dwell in the house of mirth.

What I’m about to say is likely to sound odd, but bear with me.

Most pastors like preaching funerals.

It’s not that we are happy to see folks die or because we don’t grieve over the death of those around us, but because you will never find a more attentive audience than those who are at a funeral.

Death focuses our thoughts and opens our ears.

People at a funeral are seeking comfort and looking for answers.

Consequently, they are more likely to be open to the gospel at a funeral than at any other time.

Dwelling in the shadow of death sharpens our thinking and causes us to focus on what is truly important.

That’s why there is more wisdom at a funeral than at a comedy club.

We find Qoheleth’s **fifth** “better than” statement in verses 5-6 [**Ecclesiastes 7:5-6**], where he writes,

*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.*

I doubt any of us relishes being corrected, let alone reprimanded.

At best, being rebuked brings a sense of shame at the necessity of it, and, at worst, we rebel against it and feel the need to defend ourselves.

However, Scripture is clear about the value of correction when it comes from the right place in the right spirit.

**Proverbs 12:1** says, “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”

**Proverbs 15:32** says, “Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.”

Many other passages say much the same thing.

But Qoheleth simply says hearing rebuke from the wise is better than hearing the merriment of fools.

Fires built from thornbushes are frivolous things.

They crackle nicely and flare brightly, but their heat is short-lived and of little benefit.

So it is with foolish laughter that is momentary, leaving nothing of substance behind.

One of the best ways to learn how to live is to receive correction from those who are wiser than we are.

Verse 7 [**Ecclesiastes 7:7**] seems out of place as it interrupts Qoheleth’s list of “better thans.”

In it, he takes a moment to warn about the danger of the abuse of power before continuing on with the final two “better thans” in his list of seven.

We find the **sixth** one in the first part of verse 8 [**Ecclesiastes 7:8a**], where he writes:

*Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.*

The gist of Qoheleth’s meaning is that many things that don’t initially appear all that promising at their beginning turn out well in the end, so it pays to take a long-term view.

We certainly know that’s true in God’s economy, where even things that are bad at the moment are being used by God to ultimately result in good [**Romans 8:28**].

Therefore, as verse 8 continues [**Ecclesiastes 7:8b**], we see it’s better to be patient than overly sure we know best.

Frequently, it’s the arrogance of spirit that causes us to chafe for something different.

But, as Qoheleth pointed out in 6:11, we don’t know enough to know what is good.

Therefore, patience is a virtue we would do well to practice because, as we read in verse 9 [**Ecclesiastes 7:9**],

*Anger lodges in the heart of fools.*

The picture he paints is of pride pushing wisdom aside, leading to anger, and making us play the fool.

If the temptation of verse 8 is to be impatient about the future, the message in verse 10 is to avoid its counterpart, nostalgia for the past [**Ecclesiastes 7:10**].

Longing for the “good old days” is normal for us as we grow older, but it’s unwise.

We tend to romanticize the past as we look back through rose-colored glasses and convince ourselves that things were better back then than they are now when it’s more likely we have simply forgotten the challenges of the past.

Here’s the hard truth: even if the past was better, those conditions are never coming back.

Jesus himself taught his disciples in **Luke 9:62** that the person who is constantly looking backward is unfit for the kingdom of God.

Life is like a ratchet; it only moves in one direction, and wisdom accepts that.

Without a doubt, we should learn from the past but never yearn for the past because the future is in front of us.

God is still working through his plan, and the best is yet to come.

### **III. Life in the Shadow of God's Sovereignty**

The reality of life under the sun is that it's lived in the shade of God's sovereignty - whether we recognize it or not.

So Qoheleth closes out this section by stating some basic facts.

First, he extols the value of wisdom, saying [**Ecclesiastes 7:11-12**] it's good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun, and offers protection the way money does in preserving the life of one who has it.

Qoheleth's comparison of wisdom and money is somewhat surprising.

Especially given how he has previously shown how money fails to satisfy and the value placed on wisdom elsewhere in the Bible.

However, money does afford some protection against life's difficulties under the sun, as does wisdom.

And, like money, earthly wisdom is of limited utility because it also doesn't last forever, whereas true spiritual wisdom not only gives life to our days here but, when our time here is over, will lead us to everlasting life.

Wisdom also allows us to have the proper perspective.

Verse 13 reads [**Ecclesiastes 7:13**]:

*Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?*

I am continually amused by mankind's hubris in thinking not only that we can contend with God in thought and successfully debate him but also in deed as we try to undo what he has done.

Consider the current gender madness that's going on as people are being convinced they can determine their gender and become something different than God has made them.

For many, it's a form of mental illness, but for others and probably more, it's a form of spiritual illness.

When he mentions things God has made crooked, Qoheleth isn't talking about moral crookedness.

He's talking about how God has ordered things, the shapes of things, and events we find awkward.

He could have just as easily said no one can bend what God has made straight to the same effect.

Things are the way God ordered them because he's so ordered them, and wisdom tells us to accept that fact and not fight against it.

Earlier, in 1:15, Qoheleth made the same statement, but back then, he left God out of the picture, and we were left with a feeling of impotence and fatalism.

But now, he attributes the same condition to God and places the crookedness and straightness of things under the umbrella of God's sovereignty, which is a totally different matter.

True, we still can't change things, which may frustrate us most severely.

But we can have confidence through the trials of life because we know God loves us and is working through all things for our ultimate good.

And trusting in God's sovereign goodness allows us to know how to respond to the crooked and straight things of life.

Whether we're experiencing joys or trials, we can always find a way to glorify God when we recognize those events have come from his hand.

After all, only God has the perspective needed to prosecute his plans.

We don't fully understand what's good, and none of us can see the future, so putting our trust in our sovereign God is our only wise move.

## Conclusion

I suspect we've all had occasion to wonder what God is up to in our lives.

I suspect many of us have even contended with God at one time or another because our finite human nature and limited sight caused us to lash out and demand things be different.

But Qoheleth tells us we need to recognize our limitations and accept our place.

We need to recognize God's sovereignty and trust him to do what is best.

Then, we need to live our best lives under the umbrella of his sovereignty, knowing we are safe in his hand.

We need to live to obtain a good reputation - not just for our name's sake but also, as Christ-followers, for the sake of his name.

We need to recognize our mortality and live in such a way that we can face death with confidence.

We need to keep merriment in its place, strive to live sober, reflective lives, and receive instruction from wiser and more mature individuals.

We need to be patient and forward-looking as we work today and anticipate the completion of God's plan.

And we need to take life in stride because he has promised us good.

Because doing those things would demonstrate our own turn toward wisdom.

Let's pray.