



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Lessons Made by Comparisons

Ecclesiastes 7:1-12

In the first fourteen verses of Ecclesiastes 7, Qoheleth teaches what is “good” or “better” through the use of a number of comparisons. On the surface these comparisons may seem to be contradictory to the natural order, but understood in context they help the reader to understand what is really valuable in life.

Qoheleth will use three themes in the first twelve verses of Ecclesiastes 7: the themes of death, the contrast between the wise and the fool, and the value found in wise living.

A good name or reputation is reflected in the respect that others have when they think of you. This “good name” is comparatively better than precious ointment. In Solomon’s day ointment was an expensive luxury that was used to produce a good and fragrant smell. It was highly prized and popularly used at times of feasts and celebrations. While ointment was valuable a good name was better.

What might at first seem puzzling, Qoheleth claims that the day of death is better than the day of birth and similarly it is better to go the “house of mourning” than the “house of feasting.” Death is in some ways better than birth for the godly person since they have finished their life victoriously and with a good name. At birth a person does not know what difficulties and challenges await them in the future.

The house of mourning forces one to consider the important details of life and to reflect on righteous living while feasting, merriment, and mirth do not usually bring reflective thinking. The house of mourning causes each to remember his own mortality and to take those steps necessary to assure a good name. (See Psalm 90:12)



- 1. Describe some reasons why death may be more welcome than birth. (See also Rev. 14:13)**
- 2. What lessons can be learned through mourning?**

Sorrow is described as better than laughter. This is so because sorrow has the ability to bring repentance which in turn brings true joy. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 7:10, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” Sorrow causes a man to reflect on his life and the brevity of his existence in this world while the pleasantness of laughter does not lead to contemplative thinking. The goal is to gain and keep a good name and to live a wise life.

Rebuke from the wise is better than the music and songs of the foolish. The word translated as rebuke means: “that grave admonition which heals and strengthens even while it wounds.”¹ While rebuke may be painful, it can help the wise person develop and keep a good name. The laughter of the fool is much like the crackling of thorns under a pot. These thorns were used when good wood was not available for the fire. They burn quickly with a burst of flame, and make a lot of noise, but are quickly consumed with little gained from their use. They are a “flash in the pan.”

3. Why is rebuke so painful and why can it be necessary? (Compare Titus 2:15)

Two threats to wise living are found in verse 7. The wise man can be driven into madness by oppression or through the corruption that comes through bribery. The man who is oppressed can be driven to madness as he endures day after day the onslaught of an oppressive man who has power over him. Perhaps Solomon has in mind the potential that the wise man himself could become an oppressor. We have witnessed many ruthless dictators in the history of our world who have become “mad.” On a smaller and more relevant scale we sometimes see employers, lower level government officials, or even church leaders seem to lose touch with reality as they abuse and oppress those under them. In either case corruption, greed, bribery, and the like can lead a person from wise living. This illustrates why rebuke can be beneficial as it keeps a man on the right course to keep his good name and finish life’s course righteously.

The words of verses 8-9 point out the value of patience. The patient man can look back to reflect upon an undertaking and work through any problems along the way. The proud man runs ahead and then becomes angry when things do not go his way. He foolishly holds this anger in his heart.



4. Why do people become angry?

5. What does anger do to the heart of a man?

People have the tendency to believe the past was better than the present. As people age, they often remember the “good old days,” and while some parts of life may have been better in the past constantly reflecting on a golden past can lead one to live with negativity. Qoheleth says that this is not wise living. Any difficulty with the present should cause the believer to look forward to his future with the Lord not back to the past to which he cannot return.

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 762.

6. What problems can arise from a desire to live in the past?

Solomon describes three signs of a lack of wisdom: impatience, a willingness to harbour anger, and a failure to look at the present circumstances wisely.²

Verse 11 can be translated as either: wisdom along with an inheritance is good or wisdom is good like an inheritance. As one gains and then possesses an inheritance, one can also gain and then possess wisdom. Both are advantageous to those who “see the sun” (are alive) and both provide a degree of protection, but wisdom is greater because wisdom “preserves life.” A wise person makes choices that tend to lead to a longer physical lifespan, but more important, the wise person will find eternal life with the Lord.



7. Describe the protection and the limitations of what money can provide.

8. Describe the protection that wise living can provide.

Learning the Limits of Human Influence

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14

Human beings have a limited ability to change the circumstances of life or the plans of God. In verse 13, Qoheleth points out that man cannot make straight what God made crooked. The word “crooked” has the idea of being “inscrutable” “instead of an ethical sense of ‘wicked’ or ‘corrupt.’”³

In other words, there are many things in life which are difficult and seem out of alignment and these are impossible for man to change. Man does not have the power to travel a straight and untangled road free from problems. Therefore, he should be joyful “in the day of prosperity” as well as in the “day of adversity.”

Our God is the God who made every day. He is in complete control of the world He created. The days of prosperity should bring us joy and cause us to praise Him. The days of adversity should cause us to seek Him and learn to depend upon Him. While we may never know what good comes from bad days we are reminded that he always cares for us. (Read 1 Peter 5:7)

In verse 10, Solomon had warned against thinking too much about the past and now in verse 14 he warns against thinking too much about the future. Man cannot change or return to the past and he does not know what is coming in the future.

9. How does Romans 8:28 along with Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 help us to look at our past, present, and future?

² Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 165.

³ ESV Study Bible. Online edition.