

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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Chapter 7

Life Is Complicated: Live with Care

By **application**, the Preacher found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence (6:1–8:15).

The smell of death, the crackling of thorns in a fire, nostalgia for yesteryear, something bent that cannot be straightened, the whispering of servants, and the hardened hearts of fallen mankind—these are some of the images summoned by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7. At the mid-point of the book,¹ he returns to the themes with which he had commenced his spiritual journal (see 1:2–3, 15). Life is transitory (6:12). What advantage do people have in life? In 6:10–12, Solomon depicts death as the reigning king in every individual's life. He moves on in chapter 7 to examine the topic more diversely and deeply. Indeed, **he pulls the reader aside to invite him or her to a funeral**. There they will listen in as the mourners discuss the deaths of friends and loved ones. Readers will observe how such an experience affects the lives of those who have witnessed the state of the deceased person's affairs.

Theological tension permeates the chapter. **How can a sovereign God still be in control of creation when death interrupts the good life He has so graciously granted to a man or a woman?** Solomon's reflection on the Fall of mankind in 6:10–12 comes to the fore again at the end of chapter 7 (v. 29). Life under the sun continues with all of the baggage of Adam's disobedience. This is a fallen, corrupted world.

In Ecclesiastes 7:1's proverb, "A good name is better than a good ointment," the adjective "**good**" **operates as a bridge between chapters 6 and 7**, between the first half of the book and the second half of the book. The author utilizes the phrase "better than" (literally, "more good than") to offer a series of contrasts that argue for the superiority of wisdom over foolishness, righteousness over wickedness:

- In life or death a good reputation is better than smelling good (v. 1a).
- One's dying day is better than the day of his or her birth (v. 1b).

¹ The exact middle of Ecclesiastes actually comes at 6:10. Ancient Jewish tradition divided the book into four *sedarim* (weekly liturgical readings for completing the reading of the Hebrew Bible every three years): 1:1–3:12, 3:13–6:12; 7:1–9:6, and 9:7–12:14.

- A funeral is better than a festival (v. 2).
- Grief is better than laughter (v. 3).
- A wise man's rebuke is better than a fool's song (v. 5).
- The end of something is better than its beginning (v. 8a).
- Patience is better than pride (v. 8b).
- Realism about the present and occupation with the future are better than nostalgia over the past (v. 10).

The wise person will choose that which is better over that which is not; the foolish person will pursue the opposite course of action. The upshot of it all is that Solomon has learned that **the truly godly individual takes life and death seriously**. Remembering that he must stand before the righteous and eternal God to give an account of himself, **a person lives to please God, rather than to please himself.**²

Proverbial wisdom occupies a significant portion of the final half of Ecclesiastes. Solomonic parallels abound. For 7:1–14 alone, readers will find echoes of Proverbs 3:2 and 16a (Eccl 7:12b); 13:1 (Eccl 7:5); 14:13 (Eccl 7:3); 14:17a (Eccl 7:9); 14:29 (Eccl 7:8b, 9); 15:27 (Eccl 7:7); 15:31 (Eccl 7:5); 16:32a (Eccl 7:8b); 22:1 (Eccl 7:1a). Solomon employs these proverbs to advance his observation that an individual's life is all too brief and filled with a multitude of enigmas and contradictions. In other words, life is complicated; therefore, we must learn to live it with great care.

The two sections of chapter 7 examine a person's circumstances (vv. 1–14) and character (vv. 15–29). Solomon looks at the first in the light of eternity and the second in the light of divine revelation. Both sections together proclaim, **“Life Is the Time to Serve the Lord”**—the title of one of Isaac Watts' hymns based upon Ecclesiastes.

A Person's Present Circumstances in the Light of Eternity (7:1–14)

Mature individuals, who are facing their final cycle of years, realize that their bodies are deteriorating rapidly. Increased pain, weakness, and medical issues relative to the aging process all mark the transition. Eventually, if the deterioration affects the quality of one's life significantly, the aging person begins to long for the relief that will come with death. Just as severely oppressed people might look to being freed from their torturous circumstances by death (4:1–3), so too, **even the godliest individuals endure the ravages of time with the hope that passing from this life will bring a desirable release from the effects of the Fall.**

God does not limit the release from suffering, pain, and sorrow to the aged. All too late in life, we come to the realization that an infant's death might well display God's mercy in delivering that child from a traumatic, painful, and sorrow-filled existence (6:3–6; cp. 2 Kgs 22:18–20; Isa 57:1–2). Only the omniscient and sovereign God of the universe can know such things and make such judgments. The power of death is His.

Ecclesiastes 7:1–14 appears to follow up on “the theme of Ecclesiastes as a whole with the question: Will the life of faith survive hard and troublesome times when the ‘good old days’ have gone and the ‘days of adversity’ come?”³ Solomon's answer

² Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 113–14.

³ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 108.

declares that **life remains worth living,⁴ even in this fallen existence**, until our Sovereign Lord determines that the proper time has come for us to make our final exit. With these thoughts in mind, **what is good for a person in life?**

Death Is Good (vv. 1–4)

Solomon now begins his response to the question he voiced at the start of **6:12** (“For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime . . .?”). He mentions two good things: a good reputation and the day of one’s death. At creation, God exercised His authority by naming things like light and darkness, the expanse, the dry land and the collection of waters, and man (Gen 1:5, 9, 10, 26). Adam named the animals and woman (Gen 2:19, 20, 23; 3:20). Parents continue to this day to name their children at or shortly after birth. However, no matter what name a person receives at birth, his or her reputation at the time of death is far more significant. Their reputation testifies to the success or lack of success with which they met life’s challenges.

Verse 1a exhibits Solomon’s poetic skill. The Hebrew exhibits an inverted play on words: *tov shem mishshemen tov*. “Good” (*tov*) appears at the beginning and the end of the statement. The poetic nature of the proverb makes it memorable. At its center are the two entities that produce the auditory and visual imagery (“name” and “ointment”). At the beginning of one’s life, an individual receives a name. Throughout one’s lifetime that name obtains either a good reputation or a bad one—preferably, a good one. In fact, one’s name accrues value and has the potential of being more valuable at death than at birth.

The good, therefore, comes at death.

The “**good ointment**” might refer to any of a number of normal situations in ancient Israel’s culture: (1) the bathing of an infant in oil at birth (cp. Ezek 16:4),⁵ (2) refreshing the body to provide relief from body odor, muscle soreness, dry skin, and other conditions,⁶ (3) a luxury provided by the possession of significant wealth,⁷ or (4) the preparation of a corpse for burial. The fourth setting fits best, since the context speaks of “the day of *one’s* death” (v. 1b) and “a house of mourning” (vv. 2, 4). Fredericks astutely observes that “Ten verses earlier, even a burial plot was in question, much less the attending ointments for a respectable ceremony.”⁸

The second half of 7:1 continues to elevate one’s death above one’s birth. Birth commences a temporary existence “under the sun.” **Death, however, propels a person into an eternal existence.** The former pales in the light of the latter in both time and significance. Paul summed up the concept beautifully for the people of God: “To die is gain. . . . I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better” (Phil 1:21, 23).

⁴ Stuart Olyott highlights this concept in the title of his study of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, *A Life Worth Living and A Lord Worth Loving*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1983).

⁵ Robert Gordis, *Kohleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 267.

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 150.

⁷ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 113.

⁸ Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos, 2010), 166.

Verses 2 and 4 form a proverbial pair sandwiching verse 3:

the house of mourning vs. the house of feasting (v. 2)

sorrow and laughter
sadness and goodness⁹ v. 3

the house of mourning vs. the house of pleasure (v. 4)

“The house of mourning” refers to the home of the deceased, where the family mourns the departure of their loved one. Jacob’s family observed a seven-day period of mourning, a practice still continued among the Jews.¹⁰ Solomon explains that death “is the end of every man, and the living takes *it* to heart” (7:2c,d). Everyone will face the day of their death (cp. Rom 6:23). At “the house of mourning” the living take this ending to heart. Sadly, people do not always give due consideration to the significance of death. During the prophetic ministry of Isaiah, he made the observation that people were not laying it to heart when they saw the righteous die (Isa 57:1). What does an individual gain from visiting a family in mourning, standing beside the open casket and gazing upon the lifeless form of the deceased, or listening to an account or eulogy regarding the life of the dead person? **The benefits of a funeral** include:

- Understanding more clearly the ultimate result of the Fall.
- Giving proper consideration to the brevity of life.
- Being reminded that how we live does count.
- Recommitting ourselves to live life in the light of eternity.
- Preparing to die.
- Learning the value of comfort and being comforted.
- Knowing that no one lives to herself and no one dies to himself.

In other words, **“Every funeral anticipates our own,”** according to Eaton’s laconic summary.¹¹ Only when an individual takes the seriousness (the finality) of death to heart, does he or she benefit from the life-lessons that a funeral imparts.

Interrupting the two parallel proverbs of verses 2 and 4, **verse 3** explicitly identifies why a visit to a funeral proves beneficial. Returning to his meditation on the futility of pleasure, Solomon converts 2:2 (“I said of laughter, ‘It is madness,’ and of pleasure, ‘What does it accomplish?’”) into a concise axiom: “Sorrow is better than laughter.” The reason for the axiom’s truth is that **the sadness that shows in the face results in a better¹² heart, a spiritually healthy heart.**

The apparent contradiction of Proverbs 14:13 with verse 3 immerses Solomon in the complexities of life by providing new questions in an ever-increasing web of arguments and counter-arguments. Estes explains this apparent contradiction between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as the presentation of additional insights in order to bring about

⁹ See the later discussion of v. 3 and the translation of its final phrase.

¹⁰ See Ecclesiasticus 22:12, “Mourning for the dead lasts seven days, but for a fool or an ungodly man it lasts all his life.” When Moses and Aaron died, Israel mourned for thirty days (Num 20:29; Deut 34:8). Jewish practice often practices seven days of greater mourning followed by 23 days of lesser mourning.

¹¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 109.

¹² The translations of NIV, NET, KJV, and NKJV represent the Hebrew better than those translations employing “happy” or “glad.”

“a more comprehensive understanding of how life functions.”¹³ Ecclesiastes supplements Proverbs as Solomon casts his net more widely in his search for the true meaning of life. No single proverb can synthesize the totality of life or its meaning. Life is not simple; it is complicated. Even the wisest man in history struggles to grasp the full picture and to distill it to an understandable description.

Verse 4 provides the transition from verses 1–3 and 5–7 by using the characteristic pairing of “the wise” and “fools.” Biblical wisdom literature majors on contrasting natures, paths, and destinies of two types of people. Ecclesiastes first contrasts them in 2:14–19. A wise youth and a foolish old king depict the dissimilarity in 4:13. Solomon identifies laziness, careless sacrifice, verbosity, and failure to fulfill a vow as the follies of fools (4:5, 17; 5:1–4). Both the wise and the fool experience the equality of death (6:8). The message of the sandwich (7:2–4) is that **the heart of a wise person improves its spiritual health at a funeral**. The fool, on the other hand, dulls the sharp interruption of death by directing his heart to revelry and hilarity.

The Superiority of Wisdom (vv. 5–12)

Receiving rebuke with humility, patience, and a willingness to change marks the wise (7:5). Many people prefer foolish humor to shrug off the rebuke and excuse bad behavior and poor attitudes (7:6). Solomon utilizes a pun to drive the point home in **verses 5 and 6**. He contrasts “the song [*shir*] of fools” with the “crackling of thorn bushes [*sirah*] under a pot [*sir*].” Thorn bushes crackle pleasantly in the fire, but the flames quickly consume them without any enduring heat with which to heat a pot of water or food. The heat they produce is temporary. The humor and laughter of fools possesses an equally fleeting benefit. Indeed, their merriment is *hebel*, transitory and insubstantial. *Hebel* closes verse 6, reminding the reader that the previous uses of the word were at the close of the first half of the book (6:9, 11, 12).

Ryken’s exposition of verses 5 and 6 exposes the message of Ecclesiastes with regard to edifying criticism and friendly reproof:

Wise people will say all of the things that Ecclesiastes says. They will tell us that living for pleasure and working for selfish gain are striving after wind. They will tell us that God has a time for everything, including a time to be born and a time to die. They will tell us that two are better than one in facing all of the toils and trials of life. They will tell us that because God is in Heaven and we are on earth, we should be careful what we say. They will tell us that money will never satisfy our souls. In short, they will teach us not to live for today but to live for eternity.¹⁴

We become that to which we listen. The ear can be a Golden Gate for wisdom, knowledge, holiness, righteousness, and grace, or it can become the Dung Gate for foolishness, ignorance, impurity, iniquity, and crudity. Solomon declares that the better path is the former, even if a rebuke appeals less than a song. Instead of drowning out the realities of life and death with music, humor, and feasting, believers would do well to heed a wise counselor who is not reluctant to offer heart-strengthening admonition.

¹³ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 342.

¹⁴ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 156.

In a fallen world, true biblical wisdom attracts persecution. “Surely oppression makes the wise foolish” (v. 7a, NRSV). Life’s complexities involve the deleterious effects of oppression on even the wise person’s stability of mind.¹⁵ Persecution possesses the power to pressure the wise into speaking or acting as fools—in other words, contrary to the faith they espouse. Another interpretation understands the text to speak of corruption’s subversion of wisdom.¹⁶ Fredericks takes the meaning in a third direction, making the wise the oppressor rather than the oppressed: “Even the wise can sin (7:20) and stoop to intimidating another person physically, emotionally, legally or even ecclesiastically.”¹⁷ Of the three approaches to verse 7, the first two appear more solidly based upon the straightforward reading of the text. The second half of the verse continues the effects of corruption in the realm of influence. Bribery can do to the upright heart what oppression can do to the wise of heart. When innocent victims watch the public humiliation of a wise counselor (who is made to look like a fool) and the corruption of previously honest witnesses, they lose heart. Injustice appears to prevail and life becomes even more complicated.

Verse 8 transitions from verses 5–7 to verses 9–12. “Living for the End in the Now”¹⁸ labels 7:8–12 in Brown’s commentary. The contrast of beginning and ending closely parallels the opening of the chapter with the acknowledgement of birth and death. **How can the end of a matter be better than the beginning?** Bartholomew points to verse 5 for one example: “the rebuke of a wise person may be unpleasant, but its end or result may be good.”¹⁹ A handy illustration to demonstrate the point, according to Estes, is a race, since “the only measure that counts is the finish line, and in life it often takes considerable time until the wise course is vindicated.”²⁰ The literal translation of verse 8’s second half reads, “Better is length of spirit than height of spirit.” “Length of spirit” refers to patient endurance—being slow to anger (cp. Prov 14:29; 15:18; 16:32—all three proverbs use “length of anger” to mean “slow to anger”). “Height of spirit” occurs also in Proverb 16:18 with the meaning of “a haughty spirit.” In other words, **patience and humility enable a person to wait for the outcome of a matter and to actually witness the truth that the end is better than the beginning.** Without these two attributes, a person will not discover what time can do to improve a situation.

Anger finds fuel for its fire in impatience and pride. Thus, **verse 9** follows logically. The catchword is “spirit” (twice in v. 8 and once in v. 9—translated sometimes as “heart” in the latter verse) ties the two verses together conceptually. “Fools” comprises another word linking this verse to its preceding context. The heart of a fool seeks pleasure (v. 4), his song lacks wisdom (v. 5), his laughter lasts momentarily (v. 6), and he harbors anger (v. 9). This fool can be described as obstinate, with no patience to seek wisdom, and

¹⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 110–11;

¹⁶ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 343. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 249, writes, “Even the wise person buckles under oppression and is susceptible to a bribe, and bribery and corruption destroy the heart.”

¹⁷ Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 169.

¹⁸ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 76.

¹⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 249.

²⁰ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 343.

possessing no reverence for truth.²¹

The lack of wisdom on the part of fools promotes an unhealthy and irrational nostalgia for the past. The fool wishes for a return to the past where things surely were better than they are in the present (v. 10). In reality, he exercises a selective memory. Dreamers of bygone days reveal their ignorance of history, their false theology regarding the sinfulness of man and fallen condition of the world, their blindness to the opportunities existing in the present, and their impatience regarding the future. In short, this way of thinking “is not from wisdom.”

Verses 10, 11, and 12 all employ the catchword “wisdom.” Solomon picks up his earlier references (vv. 4, 5, 7). The wise person values a funeral above a feast (v. 4) and a rebuke above a song (v. 5), but wisdom has its price (v. 7; cp. 1:18). Life is not only brief; it is filled with trouble (cp. Job 5:7). So, how can someone experience good (Eccl 6:12)? **Individuals who possess wisdom and who also receive an inheritance, do experience good (7:11).** After all, there is an advantage to having an inheritance—an advantage that can be enjoyed only in this life by “those who see the sun.” Seeing the sun implies pleasantness and enjoyment (11:7; 12:1–2) as well as referring to life on earth (Ps 58:8). The vicissitudes of life sometimes bring pain and loss, but sometimes even the loss results in a gain. Inheritances come to someone as the result of the death of someone near and dear (Prov 19:14; cp. Heb 9:16–17). Good and godly people seek to leave an inheritance for their children and grandchildren (Prov 13:22). The fool, like the prodigal son, squanders his or her inheritance (Eccl 2:18–19, 21; cp. Luke 15:12–13). The texts dealing with this issue imply that the wise will not waste an inheritance, but will appreciate it and, if possible, even multiply it for their descendants.

An inheritance with wisdom is good because they both provide protection (v. 12; literally, “because in the shadow of that wisdom is in the shadow of that silver”). A shadow might appear a bit unusual as a figure for protection in this context, since 6:12 utilized the figure to emphasize the brevity of life. However, a shadow also symbolizes protection (as from the heat of the sun; Judg 9:15; Ps 17:8; Isa 4:6). **However, both money and wisdom provide only temporary shelter, when it comes to preserving life.** No matter how much wisdom a person possesses and exercises, she will yet die. No matter how much money a person expends for comfort and medical care, he will eventually die. The fact that neither wisdom nor wealth can prevent death does not make these things worthless, bad, or a disadvantage. Wisdom and money give the wise the means to handle life’s complications well, so that a person might enjoy his or her God-given life for the short time it lasts. This approach to life countermands the axiom “Eat and drink for tomorrow we die,” because it demands biblical wisdom involving *right teaching* (from Scripture) that produces *right thinking*, resulting in *right choices* that make for *right living*.

The Sovereign God Is in Control (vv. 13–14)

Bringing this section (7:1–14) to a close, Solomon calls upon his readers to think about their present conditions in the light of eternity. How does God figure in their

²¹ Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (1964; reprint, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 40.

situation? How do they relate to His will? Literally, the author's imperative is **"See the work of God" (v. 13).**²²

After listing some of the good, beneficial, and advantageous aspects of life (7:1–12), **Solomon turns the reader's attention Godward.** God's work cannot be altered (v. 13; cp. 1:15; 3:14). God has appointed both the good (the straight) and the bad (the bent or crooked) circumstances. This is not mere "fate." God controls all events in our lives and designs them for our good (Rom 8:28). We should accept everything with thanksgiving (1 Thess 5:18), being content in every circumstance (Phil 4:11–12). In fact, both James 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:6 exhort believers to count it a joy to pass through times of trouble. The Spirit of God, Who superintends Solomon as he writes, intends this instruction (Eccl 7:13–14) "to build confidence and define boundaries within which one can act wisely."²³

Verse 14 contains two uses of "good" (literally, "In a good day be in good") in order to encourage readers to take advantage of the enjoyment of the days of good, prosperity, health, and happiness. The English idiom "be in the moment" approximates the meaning Solomon intends. In other words, **do not miss the enjoyment of the good times.** Savor them and treasure them—build memories to sustain hope during the more difficult times of life. Next, Solomon turns to the "day of adversity." For the second time in two verses, he exhorts the reader to "consider" the work of God in bringing about both kinds of days in a person's life. Human beings cannot predict which kind of day tomorrow (or even today) might be. In fact, the fluctuations of life's extremes exhibit no regularity and the changes come with astonishing speed. God's people must learn to trust Him, because He alone knows the purpose of those fluctuations.²⁴ "What appears on the surface as adversity, may in truth be a severe mercy of the sovereign God that leads to a more profound and substantial blessing"²⁵ (read again 2 Kgs 22:18–20 and Isa 57:1–2). Whether these changes are economic (prosperity vs. recession or depression), physical (health and life vs. illness and death, peace vs. war, environmental stability vs. earthquake or flood), or social (support and acceptance vs. rejection and persecution), **we must find our peace and confidence in knowing God is at the helm.**

Questions for study:

- What have I done with my life thus far?
- Am I prepared to leave this life?
- In what ways do people seek to escape life's complications?
- How can we properly enjoy and treasure them?
- What is there about God that causes us to trust Him in life's trials?

²² Other uses of same Hebrew root (translated variously as "see," "observe," "consider," "enjoy," "tell," "look") occur in Eccl 1:8, 10, 14, 16; 2:1, 3, 12–13, 24 (2x); 3:10, 13, 16, 18, 22 (2x); 4:1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 15, 27, 29; 5:7, 12, 17 (2x); 6:1–2, 5, 6; 7:13, 14, 15; 8:9, 10, 16 (2x), 17; 9:9, 11, 13; 10:5–7; 11:4, 7; 12:3.

²³ Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 173.

²⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 113.

²⁵ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 346.