

THE VALUE OF DIFFICULT THINGS OVER PLEASANT THINGS

ECCLESIASTES 7:1-14 ADEOYE, EMMANUEL (EVANGELIST)

Ecclesiastes 7:1

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

Qoheleth makes the point that it is better to reflect on sorrow and death than to have a good time. Such reflection makes us wiser people.

The key terms of the section are "good," "house," "death," and "mourning," as well as the themes of "feasting," "laughter," and "pleasure." Qoheleth states that reflecting on death can have a positive effect on our lives.

The first saying, **A good name...**, is almost certainly a quotation from a well-known proverb. See **Prov 22:1**, *"A good name is to be chosen rather than riches."*

Name is better than precious ointment: Hebrew here reads "good oil." The oil may be **ointment**, perfume, or even medicine. "Good oil" does not necessarily mean something of value, but in many cultures in the world, oil has many of the same functions as in biblical times. The deliberate play on words based on the Hebrew terms **shem** "name" and **shemen** "oil" will be difficult to convey in most languages.

The day of death can mean "the day you die," "a time of death." Here **day** indicates the time at which something happens

Better can be rendered as "is of more value" or "is more valuable than." The following are some models for translation:

- A good name is more valuable than good oil.
- Having a good reputation is of more value than good oil.
- A good reputation is better than fragrant oil.
- A good reputation is more fragrant than oil.
- The purpose of this first "better" saying is in the same way that we recognize a good reputation as having great value.

ECCLESIASTES 7:2 *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 men, and the living will lay it to heart.*

It is better to go to the house of mourning: The house of mourning has several possible meanings, but as Qoheleth is addressing the reader, who is still very much alive, then the **house of mourning** refers to the place where mourners have gathered to lament a person's death. **House** can refer to the home itself or the family. This can be expressed as "the home where people are in mourning" "the bereaved family." When Qoheleth speaks about "going" to this home, he means that people should "visit" such a place to pay their respects.

Than to go to the house of feasting describes the opposite scene, a home where there is merriment and celebration; "where there is a party."

Feasting is from the root used to describe drinking parties in *Isa 5:11-12* and (*Job 1:5*). Qoheleth is not opposed to drinking and celebrating. "Better" saying he places more importance on visiting a house where people are mourning than on being where people are celebrating.

End describes a person's ultimate destination, death, and the end of earthly life. Death is waiting for us all." Qoheleth's advice is to visit a family in mourning so as to remind ourselves that we too will eventually die. If we preserve the literal figure of the "house of mourning," we can use a verbal idiom to translate this final phrase: "That is where we will all end up!" Though NIV translates "destiny," the end or conclusion of life seems to be in focus here.

Qoheleth is discussing. He argues that any truly wise person, or the person who would be wise, will naturally think about the issue of death, our common end. The living can be defined as "any living person" because other forms of life are not considered here.

1. **Lay it to heart** is a phrase found often in Qoheleth to describe the process of observation and reflection; 1:13,17,
2. For all people are heading for death; every living person should reflect on that.
3. For every individual will eventually die; this is a fact requiring our deepest reflection.
4. This is because everyone's life ends in death. People should [take the time to] think seriously about this.

ECCLESIASTES 7:3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.

Sorrow is better than laughter: this saying can be given meaning only by keeping in mind the previous verse as its context. The word **ka'as sorrow** also means "vexation" or "trouble". **sorrow** almost certainly refers to mourning the death of a neighbor.

Laughter also takes its meaning from the context, namely, attending a party, The term **laughter** is the one used for empty fun in *Prov 14:13* and should not be confused with Qoheleth's regular term for enjoyment or pleasure.

Again, we might ask, in what way is sorrow **better**? It is better because it has the potential to teach us something about life. **For by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad:** The term **sadness** is not an abstract noun but rather identifies that event or experience which causes the face or **countenance** to appear sad.

Sadness itself cannot possibly make a person glad, though most translations give that as the literal sense of the saying (for example, "*when the face is sad the heart grows wiser*").

The heart is made glad: Qoheleth's thought is that any crisis has the potential to benefit us if we are wise enough to learn from it.

"Though the face is sad, the heart may be glad." Rather, one experience (sadness) leads to a change in an individual's heart (maturing, becoming wise). The complete verse can be rendered:

- Being sad is better than being happy, because a sad experience can teach us something valuable.
- Sorrow is better than laughter, because sadness makes us more mature.

ECCLESIASTES 7:4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

The heart of the wise: **heart** refers to the person's mind or intellectual activity. **The wise**, of course, refers to wise people in general.

The wise person's mind **is in the house of mourning**. "a wise person thinks about..." It is not impossible to maintain the "house of mourning" imagery; for example, "a wise man's thoughts are at home in the house of mourning"

Two possibilities for translation are:

- The wise person considers the significance of mourning [the dead].
- A wise person ponders the meaning of death.

But the heart of fools refers likewise to the mind or thought processes of fools. This second half of the verse provides the contrasting element typical of most proverbs. **Is in the house of mirth** is identical in meaning to the "house of feasting" **house of mirth** is an expression for what happens in a place where people think only of enjoying themselves; it is not simply the place or house itself. It points to a totally careless attitude toward life, the mere seeking of pleasure.

while fools think only about having a good time. But fools would rather join those seeking a good time. For the complete verse a model is:

“Wise people think about the meaning of death, but fools only think about enjoying themselves.”

ECCLESIASTES 7:5 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.

To hear: the Hebrew verb refers to both hearing and responding to what is heard. So "heed" or "accept" will convey its meaning adequately. Constructive criticism from the wise is an element in the meaning of the term **rebuke**.

This is criticism intended to point out a person's weaknesses or shortcomings in the hope that they will change for the better. In ***Prov 13:1*** and ***17:10***, "rebuke" is parallel with "*instruction*." "*Helpful criticism*" or "*sound advice*" are possible terms to use.

Some models for translation:

- You are better off accepting the criticism of a wise person.
- You will be better off accepting the constructive criticism of a sage.
- Heeding the sound advice of a wise person will do you good.

Than to hear the song of fools: again, we have a reversal of what we expect; a song is more pleasant than criticism. Qoheleth suggest that, although the song of fools may be very pleasant to listen to, it is of no educational or other value. Only the wise person's critical remarks have any real value.

"If you listen to a wise man rebuking you, this is better than listening to a fool praising you." We can also express the meaning with two sentences: "*Criticism from a wise person is better than the song fools sing to you. You should pay attention to the wise.*"

For translation the following are possible:

- Heeding the advice of a wise person does better than listening to the songs fool's sing.
- The criticism offered by a wise person will benefit you more than fools' singing.
- Better to be rebuked by a wise person than to be flattered by the songs of fools.

ECCLESIASTES 7:6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.

As noted throughout, the conjunction **For** in Hebrew can indicate an explanation, or mark emphasis, meaning something like "indeed." **As the crackling of thorns under a pot** is literally "like the sound [or, noise] of thorns under the pot. "**Thorns** describes a bush or shrub whose branches have thorns on them.

The term **sirim thorns** introduces us to a Hebrew play on words, as it sounds very much like **kesilim fools**. Again, it is the "s" sounds that are associated with the fool and possibly with the sound of crackling fire.

- **Under a pot:** the **pot** is a cooking pot made of clay.
- **So is the laughter of fools:** When a fool laughs it has no significance, it is of no value. That sound or noise does not have any greater value; it does not accomplish or teach anything."
- **This also is vanity:** what does **this** refer to? **this** refers to Qoheleth's advice that we should accept wise correction rather than flattery from fools.

On the other hand, here it probably refers to the emptiness of the fool's speech.

- Like the sound of twigs burning under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. It makes noise, but it accomplishes nothing.
- Because the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorny twigs burning under a cooking pot. It is empty sound; it means nothing at all.

ECCLESIASTES 7:7 Surely oppression makes the wise man foolish, and a bribe corrupts the mind.

The first question concerns the text itself. **Oppression** is a subject treated earlier in [4:1](#) and [5:8](#); refer to notes **Makes the wise man foolish**. Qoheleth is deeply concerned about the existence of oppression in society.

We have seen his comments in [4:1-3](#), and in 8:10-13 he will discuss the impact that unpunished evil has on the community at large. oppression takes away the value of what the wise says, "oppression makes the sage appear foolish," or "oppression makes foolish the sage's advice." It may be necessary to say who is oppressing who. We will want to be as general as possible, so two possibilities are.

"When people oppress each other, this makes the advice of the wise seem ridiculous" or "In times of oppression, the wise person's advice looks foolish."

ECCLESIASTES 7:8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Better is the end of a thing seeming to suggest that finishing something has more value than beginning it. suggests "anything." The term **end** sometimes suggests a time, "future" or "latter," but here it seems to signal the conclusion of a series of actions.

Then its beginning: It is possible to express the meaning of **better** more clearly in this saying. we could also feel relief if the task had been a difficult one, but the idea of satisfaction is able to include that as well. It is better to finish a task than to begin it.

Completing something is more satisfying than starting it.

The patient in spirit: **patient** the term **spirit** in this setting describes the inner person, our nature or temper. In many cultures "spirit" refers only to that part of a person that leaves the body at death."

This second saying contrasts the patient person with **the proud in spirit**; it considers the proud person to be inferior. This may be rendered as "pride," "a haughty attitude," or "a proud person

"Patience is more a virtue than pride," or "to be patient is a virtue."

Better the end of a matter than its beginning.

Better patience than pride.

ECCLESIASTES 7:9 Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.

Be not quick to anger calls people not to rush into over-reacting to situations where they may have been offended or lost face. It is the same call for calmness found in [5:2](#) ("Do not be rash..."), and it will appear again in [8:3](#).

In each of these verses there is a connection with foolish behavior. The wise person should avoid hasty reactions. "Don't give in to anger" or "Don't get angry lightly."

"Don't lose your temper easily!" convey the notion well. In some languages anger may be expressed in the "spirit," but it can be in other parts of the body, often the heart, the eyes, the nose, the face, or the stomach.

For anger lodges in the bosom of fools: Anger is associated with fools; in fact, says Qoheleth, anger actually lives in or lodges deep inside the fool's body. The bosom is where he locates the deep-seated and passionate feelings. If the fool has anger deep within his being, this suggests that this anger is readily expressed. Qoheleth thus warns his readers not to allow anger to move in and dwell within them, otherwise they will become like the fool.

Qoheleth IS SAYING "

- Don't lose your temper [too quickly], because anger dwells only in a fool's heart.
- Keep your temper under control; only fools harbor grudges.
- ·Be careful not to get angry, for the fool's heart is full of anger.

ECCLESIASTES 7:10 Say not, "why were the former days better than these? "For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

- **Say not** is rendered "Do not ask why the former days were better." This advice is given in the second person.
- **The former days** is from the same root as "beginning" in verse 8.
- **Former days** refers to an indefinite period of time in the past, so we can say "the past" or "the old days." However, what is being compared in this saying is not past and present time. The saying means that the situation or conditions in those days were better than the situation or conditions now.

The former days is from the same root as "beginning" in **Former days** refers to an indefinite period of time in the past,

The saying means by saying "In the old days things were better" or "It was always better in the past."

Better is difficult to define more closely because we cannot determine in what ways the old days may have been better.

Again, the root word "good" ties this passage with all the verses before it.

- ·Don't ask: "Why were things better in the past [than they are now]?"
- ·Don't think that in the old day's things were better [than they are now].
- it was always better in the past than it is now.

The expression **from wisdom** indicates the standpoint from which the question is asked. "From the vantage point of wisdom" is its meaning, where "wisdom" includes the collective experience of the wise men as well as their traditional methods of getting at the truth.

ECCLESIASTES 7:11-12 WISDOM IS GOOD WITH AN INHERITANCE, AN ADVANTAGE TO THOSE WHO SEE THE SUN.

Wisdom is good with an inheritance: this Hebrew clause appears to be a "better" saying, except that "better than

We have already noted that there is a close relationship between verse 11 and verse 12.

In verse 12 wisdom and money are regarded as equally important. Wisdom is also like an inheritance in that it too is passed down from one generation to another.

Inheritance is the noun describing all the material goods that are passed down from one generation to another. expressions such as "the things a father leaves for his children when he dies," or "valuable things passed from one generation to another.

- Wisdom is as good as an inheritance. Wisdom is good; it is like inheriting something.
- Wisdom is good; it is like something precious passed down from our ancestors.

And an advantage to those who see the sun: the initial **and** appears to be a coordinating conjunction, not an adversative one. This second clause links back with **wisdom**, which is the focus of the previous clause. Thus, **wisdom** is an advantage.

- Wisdom is good, like a treasure, passed on from our ancestors. It provides a lasting benefit for all people on this earth.
- It is good to become wise. It is like receiving an inheritance. For every person in this world, becoming wise has lasting value. **Verse 12**

Qoheleth now explains how wisdom is like an inheritance; the explanation relates back to the idea of wisdom's goodness in verse 11.

The protection of wisdom It may also describe something short-lived and passing quickly as in [Ps 109:23](#), but essentially it is the protective sense that seems in focus here. While some versions retain the "shade" image, most abandon it to concentrate on the idea of "protection. **Is like the protection of money** forms the second half of the noun clause balancing the first half.

Money or "silver" can also indicate wealth in general. Wealth protects the person or group that has it. The repetition of the word **protection** indicates that Qoheleth is not comparing wisdom and wealth themselves, but comparing what each offers us. He does not discuss what kind of protection they give or what people need to be protected from

- For wisdom offers the same security that wealth does.
- Wisdom will protect you just as money does.

Preserves the life of him who has it is in Hebrew "Wisdom is a fountain of life to him who has it." The feminine pronoun suffix on the word "master" refers to wisdom as that which is possessed or mastered, that is, "to those who possess [or, are the masters of] wisdom."

- But the lasting advantage of being wise is this: wisdom confers life on the one who possesses it.
- But the lasting benefit of knowing wisdom is that it preserves the life of those who master it.

ECCLESIASTES 7:13 CONSIDER THE WORK OF GOD; WHO CAN MAKE STRAIGHT WHAT HE HAS MADE CROOKED?

Both are calls to the hearer to "see" or "consider" God's role as creator. Verse 13 begins with an imperative followed by a rhetorical question, providing a justification of Qoheleth's advice. It tells us that we cannot change what God decides to do. Verse 14 expands on this, giving two balanced pieces of advice together with a conclusion. The reader is called on to make the best of both good and bad times. We human beings are unable to determine what the future holds.

Consider is an imperative form from the verb "Here he calls the reader to observe closely a particular issue and to think about what it may mean.

The matter Qoheleth wants people to think about is **the work of God**. "What God has done."

Who can make straight what he has made crooked? "Nobody can ever make straight what God has made crooked." This is acceptable because the function of the question is to state a truth in emphatic form rather than ask for information.

Ecclesiastes 7:14

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.

In the day of prosperity: this is a metaphorical use of the term **day**, meaning "occasion" or "time" rather than a twenty-four-hour period,

and is identical to what we have seen in 7:1.

The presence of the keyword "good," "When things are going well for you," providing a clearer contrast with the second half of the verse; but RSV **prosperity** is actually closer to the sense of material goods contained in the original term, such as "good"... "bad," "prosperity"... "adversity," "abundance

BE JOYFUL:

- Be happy when you have the good things of life.
- Enjoy life's good things.
- When you have something good, you should enjoy it.
- When times are good, enjoy yourself!

Day is used in the same sense as in the previous phrase, that is as "moments" or "occasions." **Adversity** is a good, it simply describes the many troubles that strike us

during our life on earth Qoheleth's idea then is "whenever disaster strikes," or "whenever there are problems."

Consider recalls the opening imperative of verse 13. The call is to meditate on the things God does and also on those things that happen to us in a more general sense.), we are told that death, sorrow, and mourning are good for us, since they can teach us wisdom

Qoheleth is not saying that only when we have many goods can we enjoy life, or only when we meet difficulties should we ponder them. we are to enjoy every moment, since they are given to us by God; both life and toil with all its hardships are for us to rejoice in and to ponder.

God has made the one as well as the other: God is truly all-powerful, then one conclusion these writers drew is that God is the origin of everything that happens, regardless of whether we consider it good or evil.

When Qoheleth says that God has **made** all these things, even if we believe that God permits or allows things to happen, rather than that he actively causes them all

CONCLUSION

The time phrase **after him** can refer to:

- events in the future before our death;
- things taking place in the world after we depart it; or
- what happens to us after we die and depart this earth.