

An Exegesis of Ecclesiastes 7 1-18

1 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. 2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. 5 It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. 6 Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. 7 Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. 8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. 9 Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. 10 Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions. 11 Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. 12 Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor. 13 Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? 14 When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future. 15 In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. 16 Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise-- why destroy yourself? 17 Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool-- why die before your time? 18 It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes]. {[18] Or will follow them both}

I. Introduction

A. Attracted to passage

The initial sentence of this passage "a good name is better than fine perfume" reminded this writer of the type of Christian catch phrase that could be found on a placard in a Christian bookstore. Possibly prefacing an encouraging definition of your name, such as, "Chris: follower of Christ." This bit of Christian kitsch, however, is quickly countered by a sobering phrase, "and the day of death better than the day of birth." This serves to grab the reader and arouse much interest in this passage.

"With his sure touch the author brings in a stimulating change of style and approach. Instead of reflecting and arguing, he will bombard us with proverbs, with their strong impact and varied angles of attack" (Kidner, 64).

Qohelet's dramatic shift in literary form to these twelve verses of proverbs that observe a "better than" pattern (Longman, 179) beginning in 7:1 establish the upper boundary of this text.

The lower boundary for this section has been widely disputed and many current scholars tend to view verse 14 as a concluding verse (Longman, 179). This writer, however, believes that the conclusion found in v.14 does not offer an adequate summary of the lessons provided through the proverbs of verses 1-12. While verse 14 does highlight a crucial element of the proverb's teaching (God's position above it all), the full application of these proverbs to the daily life of mankind cannot be found here. The proverbs likewise offer an incomplete direction within themselves as they only provide a "better than" choice for living. To conclude this teaching with the punctuation of God presiding over a "meaningless" and possibly a lukewarm existence (verse 13-14) provides little in the way of meaningful direction to the reader. The fire plate of verse 18's directive to "aim in-between" summarizes the lesson being described through these proverbs and supplies a full disclosure to the reader of not simply God's perspective on the issue of how mankind lives, but also the direction that one should take given the circumstances of this life.

B. Placement of passage

An additional purpose in selecting this passage for study is its placement within the book. Noticeably the "in the middle" message seems to coincide with the passage's place in the text. The premise for this section is established in the rhetorical question in 6:12, "who knows what is good for people during the few days of their meaningless life?" (Longman, 179). There also can be found references both to the first chapter (7:13;1:15) referencing what is crooked and the final chapter (7:18;12:13) to fearing God.

There are, in fact, scholars who view this passage as containing the central theme and message of Ecclesiastes as a whole. The contents of chapter seven then serve as a "key"

that unlocks its full meaning (Reitman, 297). This writer will not presume to interpret the full message of Ecclesiastes here; rather the full impact and message of this passage will be studied in some detail. The importance of this segment of Ecclesiastes was a determining factor in the selection of this passage for study. The placement and utilization of opening and concluding themes made this study quite enjoyable.

II. Literary Context

A. Catalog of Literary Devices

<i>Verse Location</i>	<i>Biblical Words Comprising Device</i>	<i>Device Name</i>	<i>Significance of Device</i>
7:1	"A good name is better than fine perfume"	Assonance	Poetic way to highlight phrase, catch ear.
7:1	"A good name....Day of death better than day of birth"	Reversal	Reader would expect a good name would bring enjoyment to living life
7:1-10	"Better than"	Repetition	Encourages reader to see the importance of this concept
7:4	"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of the fool is in the house of pleasure"	Antithetical Parallel	Contrast between the wise and foolish displayed
7:6	" Like the crackling of thorns"	Simile	Comparing crackling to laughter
7:6	"crackling of thorns"..."laughter of fools"	Synonymous Parallelism	Nuisance noise that produces no real result
7:7	"Extortion turns a wise man into a fool and a bribe corrupts the heart"	Synonymous parallelism	Second statement expands initial statement
7:8	"end of matter better"..."patience bt	Synonymous	Second

	pride"	Parallelism	statement expands initial statements meaning.
7:9	"into the lap of fools"	Personification	Illustrates "anger" as sitting with or residing with the fool.
7:9	"Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of the fools."	Synthetic Parallelism	Extends concept of being provoked to a persons reputation.
7:10	"Why were the old days better than these?"	Rhetorical question	To display the importance of focusing on today.
7:11	"wisdom is like an inheritance"	Simile	Compares thoughts of the wise to finances of inheritance.
7:12	"wisdom is a shelter", "as money is a shelter"	Metaphor	Not an actual building but compared to the benefits of one.
7:14	"when times are good, be happy; but when times are bad consider"	Antithetical Parallelism	Contrasting ways to deal with differing events highlighted.
7:15	"righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness"	Irony	Following verses 16 and 17 show this as a rebuke for the over righteous and over wicked.
7:16-17	"Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise-- why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool-- why die before your time?"	Hyperbole	Extreme terms are being used to draw a contrast between righteous and wicked activity and their serious consequences.

7:15-18	"In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise-- why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool-- why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.	Merisma	Refers to all of mankind, every person is included in this charge.
7:18	"It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes."	Summation	Concludes a series of statements that build and are connected by the term "all".
7:1-7:18	"Birth"..."death" "avoid all extremes"	Closure	Concept of two distant poles evident. Similar concept draws reader to conclusion in v18.

B. Logical Outline

Summary Outline	Logical Outline	Explanatory Comments
What is Better...	Living in the Middle	
I. Things that are "Better than" (1-10)	I. There is a better way to live. (1-10)	For those living foolishly.
A. "A good name" bt "Fine perfume" (1a)	A. Build a good reputation and, (1a)	You may want to consider the value of your life.
B. "day of death" bt "day of birth" (1b)	B. live your life well to its end.(1b)	This is a tough endeavor, but is worthwhile.
C. "house of mourning" bt "house of feasting" (v2a)	C. Take life seriously because, (v2a)	Do your best each day,
1. "death" our destiny	1. we all die,	Be aware of life's limits
2. "take this to heart" (v2b)	2. if you understand this (v2b)	
D. "Sorrow" bt "laughter" (v3a)	D. you know the serious nature of life and (v3a)	Reach out to others don't just laugh at/with them!
1. "sad [angry] face"..."good for heart" (v3b)	1. and you reflect this by (v3b)	
2. "wise in house of mourning"..."fool in house of pleasure"(v4)	2. being in the proper places.(v4)	Do not get caught up with the wrong crowd and be led astray...
E. "wise man's rebuke" bt "false praise" (v5)	E. You also receive correction and (v5)	Seek the correction that real growth requires.
1. "laughter of fools"... "meaningless"(v6)	1. resist meaningless praise that (v6)	There is always room for growth!
2. "extortion...corrupts heart" (v7)	2. could lead you to corruption. (v7)	There is also always the threat of being derailed.
F. "end of matter" bt "beginning" (8a)	F. Your eye is on the goal and you (8a)	Work now with the future in mind.
G. "patience" bt "pride" (8b)	G. are patient, (8b)	Patience in life means realizing where you are now.
1. "don't be quickly provoked" (9a)	1. not an angry person who is (9a)	Stop trying to gain control of your life.
2. "anger resides in lap of fools" (9b)	2. known for having a temper or (9b)	Pride can make you want to take control by using anger, don't do this.
3. "don't say old days are better"... "this is unwise" (10)	3. one who dwells on the past. (10)	Don't try to be what you were, be who you are where you are.
II. Wisdom {of what is better} is like. (11-12)	II. Now that you are living better, (11-12)	Do you understand these lessons?

A. "an inheritance" (11)	A. you have received an inheritance and (11)	These lessons are a gift from an older more experienced traveler.
B. "a shelter" (12a)	B. protected your life, (12a)	They have value for your life.
C. "money" (12b)	C. its like money in the bank! (12b)	They cannot be taken from you like an inheritance of wealth.
III. When wisdom is applied. {to what is better} (12b-15)	III. This is what your inheritance provides. (12b-15)	These lessons can do some things but have limits.
A. It can... (12b-13a)	A. You can... (12b-13a)	
1. "preserve(s) life" (12b)	1. extend your life and (12b)	They can add years to your life.
2. "consider(s) what God has done (13a)	2. know that God is at work.. (13a)	They can assist you in contemplating God's ways.
B. It cannot..."straighten what He has made crooked" (13b)	B. You won't be doing things your way, because (13b)	These lessons can help you learn to trust God.
C. It can...(14a)	C. You will,(14a)	
1. "see good times and be happy"...(14a)	1.be happy in the good times and (14a)	They will help you to find joy in the good times.
2. "when times are bad consider God" (14a)	2. be patient in the bad times, (14a)	They will help you to weather storms.
3. know "God has made one as well as the other" (14b)	3. knowing God is still in charge. (14b)	Because God is our refuge –always-
D. Cannot...(14b-15)	D. You can't, (14b-15)	
1. "discover anything about his future" (14b)	1. control the future or (14b)	You cannot control the future.
2. explain the inequities of life (15)	2. make life fair. (15)	You cannot make life fair.
IV. What to do {with what is better}(16-18)	IV. Now that you know... (16-18)	Put these lessons into practice.
A. "do not be over righteous" or "over wise" (16a)	A. don't rely on religion or become too prideful about how you live and (16a)	Don't expect these lessons to make you superhuman, you are still just a person!
B. "do not be over wicked" or a "fool" (17a)	B. don't go back to the foolish ways you used to live because (17a)	Don't give up and go back to how you lived before you received these lessons.
C. These lead to "death" (16b and 17b).	C. these are both Inadequate. (16b and 17b).	These lessons will not lead you to life!

D. "grasp one" and "do not let go of the other" (18a)	D. Remember these two directions as you continue to, (18a)	You will never be without some foolishness, and you will never be totally wise.
E. "fear God" and "avoid extremes" (18b)	E. love God and live in the middle. (18b)	As you continue to wrestle between foolishness and wisdom do not turn away from God for either extreme, cling to Him as the highest priority!

III. Historical features.

The four historical features that will be highlighted here are items that have remained parts of human culture and experience, although their use, venue, tools and influence have changed in ways that may dull the impact and understanding of the message that the writer intended the original reader to perceive. Through a brief historical description of each, the message of this passage begins to unfurl before us and the context to its original audience is drawn into sharper focus.

Verse 1 says, "A good name is better than fine perfume." The Hebrew term for oil is actually used here. Since oil for anointing was one of the luxuries offered at banquets (Fox, 251), this usage would have evoked thoughts of merrymaking and the "house of feasting" as mentioned in verse 2. This oil provided a glistening sheen to the faces of party goers as well as an elegant fragrance to the body and the room (Walton, 573). This symbol of joy and prosperity combined with the importance of name or reputation increase the impact of the second half of this verse where they are compared to the importance of life and death.

Verse 2 states, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting." The absence of funeral homes and disco's should be highlighted to the modern reader. These types of activities therefore took place within the family homes of the

people of this time. It is also important to note that the Hebrew term for house (בַּיִת) can be used to represent a household or family unit (Selman, 488). With this understanding, "house" of mourning or feasting would include the persons, slaves and property of those who are mourning or feasting. Either event would include the entire family and all possessions of those involved at a more complete level than we would experience in our current culture.

Verse 6 states, "Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools." So then, what are the crackling of thorns? As means of cooking have changed through time, the thin wood of thorn bushes no longer hiss and crack as they catch fire quickly and appear to burn rapidly (Walton, 573). Unlike modern appliances, fires took time to reach a proper heat for cooking and although the thorns seem to burn in a way that suggests a meal is soon to follow; they are consumed prior to offering any real usable heat. To one who is hungry, for the pot to be heated, the crackling leads only to disappointment. Today we might refer to this as a noisy red burner that can't seem to heat water!

Verse 12 says, "Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter." In this verse, wisdom is referred to as a shelter. Death due to exposure may not be something that current American culture is familiar with, those in desert climates would well understand the need for shelter, not merely for comfort, but rather survival (Walvoord, 993). The term used for shelter here would have literally meant shade or protection that preserves the life of its possessor. This would have stressed the importance of being wise in the way that you live your life to its original reader as it clearly suggests that a person who avoids a foolish lifestyle will find protection from death.

IV. Theological Context

A. What this passage teaches concerning God and Man.

Crenshaw states,

“The family was the most important institution in ancient Israel. Here values were acquired and character lovingly shaped. Respect for parents, obedience of their every command, and caring for them in old age functioned as cement to hold a complex society together” (Crenshaw, 13).

By viewing this passage from this vantage point, the intent of the original writer becomes a striking portrait of God and man as family. Qohelet painted here utilizing proverbs which demonstrate that he was fully aware of the conventional wisdom of his day (Crenshaw, 129). He also intended to challenge this wisdom through using a “better than” scheme to display for his reader a differing conclusion. What we see are the compulsions of man to migrate fully in a distinct direction.

“With insight the sages remind us that human beings are oriented toward order and live in such a way to seek its maintenance” (Plank, 324).

The order of your birth may be what some hold onto to give you control over life (verse 1). This however does not guarantee that foolish actions such as following foolish advice (verse 5), extortion (verse 7) and anger (verse 9) can remove you from reaping the rewards of a solid birthright. Once stripped, there can be no living in the past as remembering your birthright does you no further good (verse 10).

So then mankind decides to pursue the wisdom to live correctly, thus holding firmly to what is “better.” “Wisdom is like an inheritance” (verse 11), and it can save your reputation and preserve your birthright (verse 12). Now mankind follows wisdom, the extreme that leads us to be disciplined and oppose the fool; who dances and laughs and all is as it should be?

No, Qohelet continues counseling his reader to “Consider what God has done” (verse 13a). This presents a question to the “better” wise person; is there someone even “better” than me? Is there a “better” one, with “better” wisdom? Verse 13b states, “Who can straighten what God has made crooked?” Suddenly our wisdom cannot explain why there are both “good” and “bad” days even for the wise. But we are instructed to “remember that God oversees both” (verse 14a) and further told that we cannot discover (or control) anything regarding our future (verse 14b). Finally, our wisdom seems inept to explain the fact that we do not see justice as prevailing (verse 15).

Mankind now is encouraged not to be too righteous or wise (verse 16), or to be too wicked or foolish (verse 17). The reasoning here is simple, because the theology shared here displays man as either reaching for one or the other as security. Moving in the middle, between these two extremes allows us the opportunity to “fear God” (verse 18). Certainly we should not worship religion nor should we reach merely for the carnal pleasures of this world. However, that is our bent; we are a people of extremes reaching this way and that for security and protection instead of looking to our Father.

God, as seen in this passage, has been written of as a distant and detached creator. However, the term “loving parent” could also be inferred. Specifically recalling the symbolism of a good name in verse one as being born into His family, or to be one of His people. The house of mourning could be seen to symbolize the sadness over the loss of relationship due to the fall of man and the worship of wisdom; the lack of our dependence on God, even the acknowledgement of anger could have been used to display for us the forgiving nature of our God when we come before Him humbly. God certainly wants us

to love Him; not wisdom or folly. This writer sees God in this passage as a loving parent watching over His children and teaching them how to live through His example.

B. Original Application

The many familial aspects of this passage must have stood out to the original audience. From a “Birth” (verse 1) to houses of feasting and mourning (verse 4) and even the family suppertime (verse 6) or perhaps the father at work (verse 7), the awesome importance of living wisely was a certainty taught in Jewish households. While people from other lands acted foolishly, God’s people were bound to the law. They were the people of promise and they were the “house of Israel.” Pride may have caused them to migrate to the “better” and wise ways of the proverbs, however the encouragements to flee foolishness were meant for them as well.

The encouragement to stand strong among God’s people can be found in verse 2 and the original audience should have recognized that they had a limited time to follow God. They should have been preparing for the conclusion of their time here, especially in the significant light of the Jewish birthright. Thus the original reader was being taught to view their accomplishments appropriately in the light of God’s eternal wisdom (verse 13). This should have motivated early readers to seek joy in the daily tasks of life that had already been brought to mind by the preceding proverbs (verse 14).

Finally, honoring God was the key cornerstone, the cap to the column, first mentioned in verse 14 as an encouragement for the people not to blame God for the bad days of life. Qohelet reminded them in verse 18 that reliance only on wisdom (the law) cannot be sufficient to sustain His people either. Therefore, what could be relied on if neither foolishness nor wisdom could bear the load? Only in trusting God, not in a

removed or detached way, but in a way that says, there is more to life than simply wisdom. There has got to be more to life than simply this life.

C. Modern Application

Modern life in America has changed in many ways regarding the connectivity of families and the association one has with his/her station at birth. There are, however, ways in which mankind does not change and that is seen clearly in a culture that spends lavishly on recreation and pleasure items, while attendance at family funerals is sometimes seen as an optional event.

There are those few dedicated believers who are known to lead long sour lives attending Church regularly and frowning on the joys of playing the lottery, drinking much alcohol and enjoying life's seemingly endless partying. These are the wise that tend to acknowledge and look down on the immature ways of the foolish youth who squander years seeking carnal pleasures. "They will learn in time," they tell themselves.

Thankfully this is not the message that the modern reader should hear from this passage! Here there is a message for those who seek to delight in life through taking on few responsibilities and living an undisciplined existence. Soren Kierkegaard interprets Ecclesiastes 7:2 this way,

"Yes it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, for there one can learn, that after a hundred years all is forgotten. Yes to be sure, long ago the feast and the gallant brothers were forgotten, but truly the eternal is not forgotten, not after a thousand years"
(Kierkegaard, 121).

The concerns of this world are apparent as we heat our pots and conduct our lives today.

Is the wise lifestyle of the church an escape from this empty existence?

Again this text says NO! There is the ability for Christians to become so spiritual that they are stiff, unapproachable and lifeless. They can become boring and dissatisfied with life just as easily as the fool. Dallas Willard writes in his book "The Spirit of the Disciplines" of a minister who wanted just for a while to forget all about God and play golf. Dr. Willard points out that

“this side too is holy in God’s sight and was given to humankind to make and keep him whole, lest he lose his balance while walking on the tightrope of the divine-human life” (Willard, 81).

This is the exclamation from Ecclesiastes 7:16 “spirituality” wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of misery and disappointment for the wise.

Therefore, we are encouraged in our modern world in the same way the original audience was. Find joy in the small pleasures of life; honor God on the good and bad days and know that there is more to life than what we see. This helps us to find balance between the wisdom and foolishness of our lives as we are compelled to truly seek God and not other extremes to fill our lives with meaning.

V. Conclusion

I work in a gym and constantly see the extremes of this passage. The young man who drags himself in to work out after a night of drinking and carousing; he wants to look good for his next trip to the bar. I have also met the pastor who brings spiritual books with him to the gym, lest one should think that his workout would distract him from the duties of the church. Most importantly, however, I have personally been on the extreme sides of this tug of war between the secular and spiritual and I am not very good at either. The empty nature of carnal pleasure and the frigid temperatures of spiritual knowledge can be painful and without personal connection. Putting the spiritual books away to

really talk to someone and connect to them has its place as well as bringing the presence of my God with me as I laugh and enjoy a birthday party for a friend. These are the types of connections that I personally desire, real touch points for growth together with others and God. Matthew 19-21 says,

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Attending a funeral brings me to an awareness of others feelings in a deeper way than going to a party can and putting away what I think about God brings me closer to Him than simply loving my knowledge of Him. This is what this passage shares with me personally. It says forget what people do and forget who you think God is. Just love them; in the good days -- share your joy, and in the bad days -- share your grief, these relationships are not built of foolishness or wisdom, but of people; people that will not last in moments that are fleeting. What I find most intriguing as a Christian is the surprise of others at the gym when I do not offer religious platitudes regarding their bad days, but simply grieve with them and let them know that God is sad when we are sad. I am very content learning to live “in between.”

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