LESSON 7

When Bad Is Better

Ecclesiastes 7:1-10

In this lesson we learn some of the paradoxes of walking with God.

OUTLINE

Christians believe things the world finds foolish: Give to receive, die to live, and be humble to be exalted. They seem to be the opposite of the world's way—and they are. Solomon outlines more paradoxes that, while apparently frustrating on the surface, become fruitful in the spirit.

I. **Sorrow Is Better Than Laughter**
   - A. Looking Back Is Better Than Looking Forward
   - B. Learning From Mourning Is Easier Than Learning From Feasting

II. **Rebuke Is Better Than Praise**

III. **The Hard Way Is Better Than the Easy Way**

IV. **Today Is Better Than Yesterday**

OVERVIEW

Consider your answers to the following statements:

I like laughter better than crying.
I like weddings better than funerals.
I like to think of my birthday better than I like to think of my dying day.
I like compliments better than criticisms.
I like the shortcut better than the long way around.
I like the good old days better than the way things are now.

Most people would agree with these declarative statements. If you do, you flunk the test that Solomon suggests in Ecclesiastes 7:1-10! It's not an actual test, of course, but one we might devise, based on the principles Solomon communicates in this section of his book.

Here's the key to what he teaches: The word *better* is found eleven times in Ecclesiastes, chapter 7. He is not teaching about things that are right and wrong in life as much as things that are better than other things—"better" meaning more depth of wisdom. Things that we often consider to be undesirable, Solomon says are often better than the alternative. Difficulties, the hard road, death, mourning—life with these experiences is better than a life without them.

Intrigued? Then study the four categories of better things in Ecclesiastes 7:1-10.

Sorrow Is Better Than Laughter

According to Solomon, sorrow is better than laughter in two ways.

Looking Back Is Better Than Looking Forward

It's hard to imagine at first how the day of one's death could be better than the day of one's birth. Solomon is not a dark, morose figure who looks on the dark side of life. He repeatedly tells us in this book that we are to enjoy life as a gift of God in light of the uncertainty life brings. He also wrote that there is a time to laugh and dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4). And thirty times in Proverbs, Solomon tells us to enjoy life (see 15:13, 15; 17:22).

To celebrate the value of laughter, Turning Point Ministries put together a CD of clips of all the jokes and funny stories I've told or quoted in the pulpit over the years. It's been a popular item, even in hospitals, where one nurse used it to lift the spirits of cancer patients. That ministry tool is right in line with the spirit of Solomon who believed in enjoying life.

So why does he say that the death day is better than the birthday? We have to go back to verse 1: "A good name is better than precious ointment." In the Hebrew language, this statement contains a play on words. The Hebrew word for *name* is *shem,* and Hebrew for *ointment* is *shemen*. So Solomon is saying a good *shem* is better than a precious *shemen*. It's a literary device to catch the attention of the reader.

Here's his point: There are two days in life when a person's name is prominent—birthday and death day. What happens between those two days determines whether your name is a precious *shemen* or a foul stench. If you die with a good name, your name can never be tarnished again. But when you're born, you have an entire life ahead of you in which the possibility exists for tarnishing your name. Looking back on a good name (a good life) is better than looking forward to an unknown name (an unproved life). Therefore, the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. And in that sense, the sorrow of the death day is better than the laughter of the birthday.

Learning From Mourning Is Easier Than Learning From Feasting

Solomon moves now to the heart—what it takes to cause us to learn and become wise. In short, we learn more from adversity than we do from prosperity. Wisdom is forged in the fire of mourning and trouble and difficulty, while fools live in the house of continual mirth.

A person who laughs all the time is denying reality, for life is not a party. There are plenty of times to laugh and rejoice, but there are also many times to mourn and weep. I know the deepest growth in my life occurred during the ten years in which cancer was a part of my vocabulary. I couldn't have learned what God taught me any other way. A. W. Tozer said, "God cannot use a man until He has hurt him deeply." Great men and great women are shaped by pain.

We once had the funeral service in our church for a godly man who had been instrumental in the history of our church and schools.

He had lived a godly life, established a good name, and the funeral was a celebration of his life. That's what Solomon is saying when he says the day of death is better than the day of birth, that mourning teaches us more than mirth. When a baby is born, we pray it will live a good and godly life; but we don't know. There are no guarantees. But when a person reaches the end of life and can look back on goodness and godliness, then that day of mourning is better than the rejoicing at his birthday.

Man's highest purpose is not to be happy but to know God. And we know God the best when we face things we can't do without Him. Our church saw a number of people come to know Christ through the tragedy surrounding the wildfires in our area. Troubles cause all of us to stop the routine and ask more serious questions about life. For that reason, sorrow is better than laughter.

Rebuke Is Better Than Praise

Are you beginning to sense why the answers to Solomon's quiz are the opposite of what we might expect? If so, then you'll not be surprised to learn that rebuke is better than praise.

We normally resist the pain of a rebuke, but Solomon says rebuke from a wise man is far better than the songs of fools. He likens the praise of a fool to the crackling of thorns in a fire. This is an illustration from life in biblical days. When a short burst of heat was needed in a fire, branches from a thorny plant would be thrown on the fire because they flamed up so quickly and intensely. But thorns would never be used for a fire you wanted to last a long time. Likewise, the praise of fools is intense, but temporary; whereas the rebuke of a wise man has long-lasting benefit.

Accepting rebuke is a sign of wisdom which Solomon mentions throughout his writings (Proverbs 10:17; 12:1; 15:5; 17:10; 25:12; 27:5; 29:1). But we would much rather hear the words of a "stroker"—someone who strokes us and makes us feel good about ourselves. But a "stroker" can't be trusted! They usually have ulterior motives for why they're pumping us up—probably to curry our favor down the road. They "stroke" us and then they strike; a friend becomes an enemy.

Solomon says to be more interested in the rebuke of someone who is wise, a person who loves you, than the songs and strokes of a person who is insincere. If you practice this principle for a lifetime, you will reap the permanent benefits of wisdom and avoid the downfalls of flattery.

The Hard Way Is Better Than the Easy Way

I once set out to attend one of our school's away basketball games. I knew how to get to the other school but decided to take a shortcut and got so lost even the navigation computer in my car couldn't figure out where I was. After wandering around aimlessly I ended up back home, never having seen the game. Solomon says the long way is better than the short way.

A bribe is a shortcut—trying to make something happen faster than it otherwise would (verse 7). But why is the end of a thing better than the beginning? Because we ought to be focusing on where we are headed before we begin the journey. What will be the results of my actions, the outcome of my deeds?

Satan always puts his best up front, while God saves His best for last. The immediate and initial impact of alcohol, drugs, or illicit sex may be exciting on the front end, but the backside of those actions is destruction. That's why the end is better than the beginning. A person who ends well did so because he made wise choices on the front end.

I often hear people say that the first days and years of marriage are the best. No they're not! They are the noisiest and most tumultuous by far as two people try to blend their lives together. The best days of a marriage are (or should be) the latter days. Two people spend their adult years together and love each other in spite of everything that comes. The best years of marriage are the latter years. The end of a thing is better than the beginning.

Today Is Better Than Yesterday

Almost everyone longs for "the good old days." But "the good old days" are a myth; they don't exist. Think about it: The days we live in right now will be "the good old days" of the future. Somehow these days will look better thirty years from now.

Solomon says, "Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?'" In truth, he means, they weren't. He warns us not to live our lives in the past. Those days appear good only to those who are trying to avoid living in the present.

All of these paradoxes that Solomon is expressing have been summarized beautifully in a poem called "The Valley of Vision":

> Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
> Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,

Where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
Hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox
That the way down is the way up
That to be low is to be high
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
That to have nothing is to possess all,
That to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
That to give is to receive,
That the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells,
And the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy joy in my sorrow,
Thy grace in my sin,
Thy riches in my poverty
Thy glory in my valley.[1]

The glory of God is found in the valley, not on the mountaintop. When we're in the valley, we are forced to look up and see God "high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1).

If you are not sure how God uses these paradoxical situations, let me remind you of the truth of Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." That's how He does it. He takes things that look like they are the opposite of good and causes them to work together for good and His glory. The world would say that the easy way is better than the hard way; but when God gets through rearranging things for His children, the hard way always turns out to be better.

Life can be confusing at present (Romans 8:22). But in the midst of that confusion, God's Holy Spirit comes to our aid and "helps in our weaknesses" by making intercession for us right in the midst of difficult circumstances (Romans 8:26). God then uses those prayers to cause all things to work together for good.

We've already learned in Ecclesiastes that God's plan is good, His purpose is clear, and His program is mysterious. That's why we don't always know how to pray. That fact doesn't change the goodness or clarity of God's plan or purpose. It does, however,

change the way we pray and depend on the Lord. We have to trust Him for what is mysterious to us but clear to Him. We pray and we groan in our spirit, and the Spirit makes intercession for us according to the mysteries of the will of God. I stop and remember that what I know about God is far more important than what I can't figure out.

This is the Christian life, my friend. We live in the midst of paradoxes which the world finds foolish, but which we find fruitful. As the old gospel song says, "We'll understand it better by and by." Take Solomon's test again, and see if his answers make more sense in light of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3.

Note

1. *The Valley of Vision, A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions,* ed. Arthur Bennett, 1975.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-3.

   a. Based on the lesson, describe why "the day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth." (verse 1)

   b. Explain the quote, "God cannot use a man until He has hurt him deeply."

   c. *Man's highest purpose is not to be happy but to know God.* Interpret the truth in this statement. How can it serve as an encouragement to you or those you know in times of suffering?

2. What other paradoxes does Solomon make in Ecclesiastes 7:5-10?

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   a. Why are Solomon's points the opposite of what we might expect?

   b. Describe each of these points in your own words, and explain why they make sense in the Christian life.

   c. What is an area of your life in which the Bible provided significant correction to your previous behavior?

   d. What benefit can you attach to the correction you received?

   e. Describe a time of affliction you have been through recently and what you learned from it.

   f. Why? When it began, was your first thought "this is a good thing" or "this is a bad thing"?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever struggled with understanding some of Christianity's paradoxes?

   a. Why may they seem strange to some people?

   b. Why do they make sense to us, as Christians?

2. What two ways does Solomon give in the lesson that show that sorrow is better than laughter? Explain each.

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3. Read Ecclesiastes 7:5-6 and discuss the following questions:

   a. Why is rebuke better than praise?

   b. What is accepting rebuke a sign of?

   c. Do we prefer to be rebuked or praised?

   d. Does this mean it's wrong to accept praise? Explain.

   e. What is the difference between a godly rebuke and human criticism? How can we distinguish the two?

f. Why is the hard way better than the easy way?

g. How does this tie into what Solomon said, that "the end of a thing is better than its beginning"?

h. Can you think of examples in your lives where this was proven to be true?

i. Do you often find yourselves longing for "the good old days"? Why or why not?

j. Why is today better than yesterday, even if you may not always feel like it?

k. How can Romans 8:28 serve as an encouragement to us in times of hardship?

DID YOU KNOW?

The *American Heritage Dictionary* says a paradox is "a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true," or "a statement contrary to received opinion." Some of the message of the Bible seems either contradictory or contrary to received opinion. The word comes from Greek *paradoxos*, "conflicting with expectation" (*para*, "beyond," plus *doxa*, "opinion"; beyond, or against, prevailing opinion). Believing that life comes through dying, or that we receive by giving, appears contradictory. But that's because we're used to the world's way of interpreting reality. Exact truth is found in the kingdom of God regardless of how it appears in the world.