

The Better Life

Ecclesiastes 6:10 Whatever has come to be has already been **named**, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. THE CREATOR

¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? TALKING BACK TO GOD AND MORE

¹² For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man **what will be after him** under the sun?

7:1 A good **name is better** than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.

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 mankind, and the living will lay it to **heart**.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the **heart** is made glad.

⁴ The heart of the wise is in **the house of mourning**, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

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

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

⁷ Surely oppression drives the **wise** into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁸ **Better is the end of a thing** than its beginning, and the **patient in spirit** is **better** than the proud in spirit.

⁹ Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for **anger** lodges in the heart of fools.

¹⁰ Say not, "**Why were the former days better** than these?" For it is not from **wisdom** that you ask this.

¹¹ **Wisdom** is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.

¹² For the protection of **wisdom** is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

¹³ Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?

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.

(Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14)

Modern Prometheus

Prometheus is the prequel to the *Alien* franchise, movies that took B-movie horror and made it Feature level quality. The movie's premise is not Christian. It is the *Ancient Aliens* idea that humanity was created by some other created species that does not reside on our planet. It begins with the heroine, a scientist whose most prized possession is her cross-shaped necklace, discovering the oldest rock art in the world in a cave on the Isle of Skye in northern Scotland. It was clearly made by our “creators” (called the Engineers) whom, she interprets, are telling us to go and find them.

We next find ourselves on board the deep space vessel *Prometheus*, named for the Titan who defied the gods (particularly Zeus), and brought fire and civilization to humanity. For his defiance, Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock where every morning an eagle would peck out his liver, only to have it regenerate that night so that the nightmare could be repeated each day for eternity.

The trillionaire who funds the project is a deeply disturbed old and dying man who thinks himself superior to all other humans. He seems to be such a narcissist that he believes that he will single-handedly answer **the greatest question marks surrounding human origins** that have been with us since the beginning. Who are we? Where do we come from? Who made us? What is our purpose? What is our future? Why is there evil? As someone has put it, “**Prometheus is a story about humans going to quite literally meet [and talk to] their maker.**”¹

It turns out that one Engineer is still alive on a harsh and dead planet far from our own. Some, like the heroine, want to ask him these questions to his face. She has **a million words** she would like to tell him. But she soon discovers that this race isn't benevolent, and her questions of curiosity turn into questions of survival. Why are you, our creator, trying to kill us? But our trillionaire is different. He did not travel all this distance and spend all this money to find the Garden of Eden, but to metaphorically steal the fire of Prometheus so that he can gain eternal life for himself.

I rewatched this movie recently and had no thought at all about preaching on it. But I quickly discovered that **our**

¹ **Dom Nero**, “It’s Time to Redeem Prometheus,” *Esquire* (Sept 1, 2021), <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a37377867/prometheus-movie-defense-essay/>.

passage is related to the myth, as numerous people have connected several of the verses in Ecclesiastes 7 to it.² This includes Mary Shelley, whose famous *Frankenstein* was subtitled: *The Modern Prometheus*. At several points, Dr. Frankenstein alludes to **Ecclesiastes 7:2-4** and the house of mourning.

We will see a few more connections as we work our way through the passage, which I'll use to bring home the point I think the Scripture is making. But perhaps the most important are **at the beginning and the end**. To see those, let's look at the structure and context of our passage first.

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14—Structure and Context

Last time, we looked at **Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9**. We saw that **5:18-20** is **the thematic center** of the book, focusing on **joy** (the fourth or middle of seven) in the midst of evil and vanity. This came right after **5:1-7** which forms **the theological center** of the book, as it deals with how we approach our Maker, something I've already alluded to is present in the movie. Our passage now is **6:10-7:14**. **6:10-12** actually forms **a third center**.

² For example, one of Spurgeon's favorite expositors said, "*The poet's fable, that when Prometheus had discovered truth to men, that had long lain hid from them, Jupiter, or the devil, to cross that design, sent Pandora, - that is, pleasure - that should so besot them, as that they should neither mind nor make out after truth and honesty.*" **John Trapp**, *Trapp's Complete Commentary*, Comments on Ecc 7:26. <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/jtc/ecclesiastes-7.html>.

This time it is a *verbal center*, as it comes just about in the physical middle of the book.³ This is marked off by the Rab-
bis in a marginal note in the Masoretic text.⁴

All of these centers form in their own ways *hinges* upon which the book turns. *The way they are arranged*, the center means that as we work our way back out, we start to see things we've seen before. It's like going into a series of rooms with only one entrance in each room. You come to the inner chamber, but then leave the way you came, only rather than looking at the things on your left, you now look at what's on your right. This idea is important to keep in mind as we continue.

6:10-12, as the last of three centers, focuses on *two ques-
tions*: “Who knows what is good for man while he lives the
few days of his vain life?” and “Who can tell man what will
be after him?” (**12**). These questions will drive the rest of the
book. They come immediately after the introduction in **10-
11** which *put us in our place as it regards talking back to our
Maker*. This, then, is a direct connection to the movie.

³ **Ecc 6:9** itself is the last of seven “*this also is vanity and a chasing after wind*” (See **1:14; 2:11, 17, 25; 4:4, 16; 6:9**). “Seven” is the Hebrew number of completeness.³). See **Sidney Greidanus**, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 157.

⁴ **Tremper Longman**, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 176.

We also see that these three verses seem to have **Job in mind**. Importantly, we saw Job alluded to a couple of times in the previous section. “As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand” (5:15) is taken from **Job 1:21**, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return,” the only other place this is found in the Bible. Similarly, 5:17 says, “Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.” This very much reflects **the disasters that God had brought into Job’s life**. Job’s life was made **crooked** by God, and all the man wanted to do was question his Maker and get an answer.

Having Job already in mind, we continue. In a very strange paradox, we find Job early on admitting, “If one wished to *contend* with [God], one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart and mighty in *strength*—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?” (9:4-5). This is very strongly echoed in **Ecc 6:10**, “he is not able to *dispute* with one *stronger* than he.” The paradox is that though Job knows this and said he was minding his own business, his friends very clearly see him as disputing with God anyway! Elihu said, “Who do you *contend* against him, saying,

‘He will answer none of man’s words?’ (33:13). And in fact, God himself said this when he confronted Job. “Shall a fault-finder contend with the Almighty?” (40:2).

God’s next words to Job are, “He who argues with God, let him answer it ... Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me” (Job 40:2, 7). God is about to show Job that all his questioning is but arrogance and vanity. This is echoed in Ecclesiastes 6:11 which says, “The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?” and this is clearly in the context of arguing with God in the previous verse.

The thing is, all these things about Job find parallels in the Prometheus cycle as written by Aeschylus in the fifth century BC (did he know about Job?). Someone writes, “Interesting literary and thematic parallels exist between Job and ... Prometheus ... In *Prometheus Bound*, the protagonist was chained at Mount Caucasus in a situation reminiscent of Job in his distress. Conversations between Prometheus and various visitors centered on the tyranny of Zeus. Prometheus was eventually restored to freedom and favor and (it is thought) the reputation of Zeus was restored as the embodiment of justice.”⁵

⁵ Russell E. Gmirkin, *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible*, Copenhagen International Seminar (New York: Routledge, 2017), 291, n. 134.

Let's move on. If **Ecc 6:10-12** form the third of three centers, **7:1-14** take us back out, revisiting things that we've seen before. In this case, there seems to be an intentional "echo" here with **the great poem on time** in **3:1-8**. "Specific echoes and allusions include references to 'death,' 'birth,' 'mourning,' 'laughter,' 'destroying' (*'ibbēd*), 'good times,' 'bad times,' 'what God has done' (*ma 'asēh 'ēlōhîm*), etc. It seems that in **7:1-14** the author is offering practical advice in response to the poem about time. Yes, there is 'a time to be born and a time to die' (**3:2**); but 'the day of death is better than the day of birth' (**7:1**).... Yes, there is 'a time to weep and a time to 'laugh' (*šḥq*) ... (**3:4**); but 'sorrow is better than laughter (*šḥq*)' (**7:3**)...."⁶

Also interesting is that just like **the earlier poem, 7:1-14** is made up of **fourteen poetic verses** that appear to form **seven smaller units** of two verses apiece.⁷ In fact, just like the previous poem, **the beginning and ending mirror one another**, even as the middle has all of these lines that mirror the middle lines of the earlier poem (as we saw above).⁸

⁶ David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 195. Cited in Greidanus, 159.

⁷ Dorsey, 196, in Greidanus, 159.

⁸ As an **introduction**, **6:10-12 mirrors 3:1**, which is an **introduction**. In the former, **3:1** and **8** were **connected together** literarily through two parallel chiasms. Nothing in the middle was like this. In the latter, we have **thematic connections** tying **6:10-12** together with (it seems to me) **7:13-14**. As we will see, "naming" (**6:10**) reflects directly on creation. Thus, the "mighty" one of the same verse is the God *of creation*. **7:13** talks about "the work of God" while 14 talks about

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8: A Poem about Time

To every *thing*
there is a season,
 and a time
 to every purpose under the heaven:

1 A time to be born , and a time to die;	7 A time to cast away stones , and a time to gather stones together;
2 a time to plant , and a time to pluck up <i>that which is planted</i> ;	8 a time to embrace , and a time to refrain from embracing;
3 A time to kill, and a time to heal ;	9 A time to get , and a time to lose;
4 a time to break down, and a time to build up ;	10 a time to keep , and a time to cast away;
5 A time to weep, and a time to laugh ;	11 A time to rend, and a time to sew ;
6 a time to mourn, and a time to dance ;	12 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak ;
13 A time to love , and a time to hate;	
14 a time of war, and a time of peace .	

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Named, *Stronger (Creator)*, Words
 Who knows what is good for man while he lives his vain life of a shadow?
 Who can tell man **what will be after him** under the sun?

1 A good name is better than precious ointment And the day of death than the day of birth	2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than of feasting For this is the end of all mankind , the living will lay it to heart
3 Sorrow is better than laughter By sadness of face the heart is made glad	4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning The heart of fools is in the house of mirth
5 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than a song of fools 6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is laughter of fools	7 Oppression drives the wise to madness A bribe corrupts the heart
8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit	9 Be not quick in your spirit to become angry Anger lodges in the heart of fools
10 Say not 'Why were the former days better than these?' It is not from wisdom that you ask this	11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance , an advantage to those who see the sun
12 The protection of wisdom is like the protection of money The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves one's life	13 Consider the work of God Who can make straight what he has made crooked?
14 In the day of prosperity be joyful 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	

what **"God has made."** Also, **6:12** finishes with **"what will be after him,"** while **7:14** finishes, **"that will be after him."** This ties the end to the beginning.

This in turn is appropriate for the entire context which shifts from the past (**6:10a**) to the present (**6:10b**), to the future (**12**), the day of death and the day of birth (**7:1**), the end of a thing and its beginning (**8**), former days and these days (**10**), and so on. In other words, **both passages deal directly with time.**

Into these, it should also be remembered that the poem of **3:1-8** is tied literarily to the structure of Genesis 1 and creation (see the charts in the sermon on that passage). Thus, it comes as no surprise that the God of creation appears again in **6:10-12** and again at the end in **7:13-14.**

All this means that **the bulk of our passage** (mostly filled with poetic proverbs) is taken up with new reflections on **the appropriate times** for things. For, if the first poem simply states that there is a time for everything, the proverbs before us now **differentiate** between times through specific examples and comparisons of things one of which is “**better**” than the other.

It is the word “**better**” (found, curiously, **seven times** in our text) that gives us **the true point of the passage**. If we are brought before God and want to interrogate him, and if we learn that this is vanity because of our own weakness and lack of knowledge and ability to comprehend who he is and what he does, which is how the passage begins and ends, then **what is wisdom in the face of this?** Wisdom is the opposite of our movie, chasing after the gods in a never-ending quest for answers. Rather, **it looks for the “better” things in life** in the middle not only of being silenced by a Creator you cannot comprehend, but by a Creator who is sovereign over all the things he has created, including the trouble in our lives. We can do this because the real Creator is not just a Brute of Pure-Power and Energy, much less an evil demi-god, but he has made this world good and some good still resides in it. “*Since God has sovereignly set the times, in times of*

adversity people should look for what is relatively good.”⁹ This is what we will spend the rest of our time trying to understand.

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12—Prepare to Meet Your Maker

Let’s look more deeply into the introduction—**6:10-12**. It begins with a reflection on **naming**. “**Whatever has come to be has already been named**” (**6:10a**). The focus is on **the past**—things named long ago. In Scripture, **to name a thing** is to have **power and control** over it. We see this whenever God renames an individual (Abram to Abraham; Jacob to Israel; Cephas to Peter; Saul to Paul). He becomes their God. However, naming a thing also involves **deep wisdom and knowledge** of what a thing’s essence is. This is why names are so important in the Bible. A name tells you what a thing is.

The first naming in the Bible is in Genesis 1, where **God names all of his creations**. God then transfers this power of naming to Adam, giving him the task of naming the animals (**Gen 2:19-20**). As an act of knowing, naming thus tells you that everything that happens today has previously been known, because everything has already been named.

⁹ Greidanus, 167.

That **Genesis 1-2** is in mind here is made clear in the **second half** of the verse. “... and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.” The **time now changes** from past to present. Who knows what man *is*? The one *stronger than he*. He is the one who named things in the past. Almost everyone has seen this as **God**. God is the one who named Adam (**Gen 1:26**). He is the stronger one, the Mighty Creator. The Targum is explicit and brings up Christ (the Memra) as it interprets it for us. “*What was in the world, behold it was already given its name and made known to men from the day Primordial Man (i.e., Adam) existed, and everything is the decree of the Memra’ of the Lord and a man has no power to stand in judgment with the Master of the World who is stronger than he.*”

Notice how **the sovereignty of God** comes directly into view. *Everything* is the decree of the Word of the Lord, and man has no power to stand against his Maker. This in turn tells us what God actually knows about us. That he knows that we are “man” means that he knows **we are finite, weak, and limited in knowledge**. He knows this. He has already taken it into great consideration, for he is Wisdom itself!

Vs. 11 is clearly related to **vs. 10**. “**The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?**” The

immediate context seems to be **talking back to God**. Disputing with the one stronger takes words. The Crash Test Dummies lead singer Brad Roberts sings about his own funeral. At one point he says,

*I can't be sure where I'm headed after death
To heaven, hell, or beyond to that Great Vast
But if I can I would like to meet my Maker
There's one or two things I'd sure like to ask¹⁰*

What kind of questions does he want to ask? How about you?

As **Job** learned, the more words the more vanity, and it is of no advantage. In the movie *Prometheus*, this was truly horrible. When the heroine and villain both begin to question their “creator,” they at first have no idea that he is actually evil and hell-bent on destroying them. Is this what the actual Creator is like?

It is possible to read **vs. 12** in light of this. “**For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?**” If you were a **secular person** or someone **angry at God**, someone who has

¹⁰ **Crash Test Dummies**, “My Funeral,” *The Ghosts the Haunt Me*, BMG/Arista (1991).

not been taught rightly or has never heard of who he really is, you might conclude that the lack of answer means that God has it out for us and that talking too much might get his dander up and who knows what he would do to us? Is this the warning of Ecclesiastes?

No, but we will only better be able to see that as we move on not only in our passage, but in the rest of the book. For these two questions really form the outline of to [read this book](#) as the rest of the sermon.¹¹ But it is, again, just here that we must remember *Christians*, just like the Preacher would have us. For when we know who our real Creator is, then we are not allowed fanciful imaginations of what he must be like. Instead, we learn deep revelation not only that he is just, but that he is *kind*, not only that he is holy, but that he is *loving*. Not only that he is out-there, powerful and sovereign, but that he is *God-With-Us*, Emanuel, the one who came as a man to gives us further revelation than even our Preacher had. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? The focus is [not](#)

¹¹ Greidanus, from Addison Wright, says, “The second half begins with two questions: “Who knows what is good for mortals?” and “Who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?” (6:12). The first question the Teacher will explore in chapters 7:1 to 8:17 in four sections that each conclude with the phrase, “not find out” (7:14, 24, 29; 8:17). The second question is the focus of four sections in chapters 9:1 to 11:6 that each contain the refrain, “do not know” (9:12; 10:15; 11:2, 6).”

going to be here on **the vanity** of our lives, and how some might interpret this as if we are like ethereal shadows with no substance, wraiths and shades just awaiting the underworld. No, the focus will be on “**the good**” which is put in terms of things that are “better.”

Good: A Better Perspective (7:1-4)

7:1 begins **the first of three verses** which are proverbs of comparison. “**A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.**” **Two things are said to be better** than two other things. This is in contrast to the earlier poem where it was simply stated that there is a time for everything, with no judgment on whether that thing was good or bad. I’ll take the second one first because it parallels the first “time” in the earlier poem. “**There is a time to be born and a time to die**” (**3:2**). Now, the Preacher tells you that **it is better to die than to be born!**

This is in line with what he said about being a still-born infant in relation to a man who gets no rest because of his love of money and power (**6:3-5**). But **it still doesn’t sound right**. How can it be better to die than to be born? You have to love Ecclesiastes. He always makes you think. What must

he be thinking? Is he just morbid? Does he have bad theology? Does he have a macabre fixation on death?

Notice that this is juxtaposed with “*a good name is better than precious ointment.*” Perfume to them was the equivalent of jewels in other cultures (so Luther). Does that *one sounds right*? Perhaps *not to Judas*. Remember when Mary took a pound of expensive ointment made of pure nard and anointed Jesus’ feet? The house was filled with the fragrance, but Jesus Iscariot was incensed (pardon the pun). “*Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?*” (*John 12:3-5*). Ah, the hypocrisy of the lover of money, the one who had control of the purse-strings from Jesus’ ministry. *He did not believe* our Preacher *or Proverbs*. *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches*” (*Proverbs 22:1*).¹² Judas sold the Lord over to death for a measly 30 pieces of silver (between \$100-\$500). (He then used that money to buy a field and hang himself, i.e. “*the day of his death.*”)

But *a good name is better*. What does that mean? There is a word play going on here in Hebrew that is captured.¹³ Someone put it into English as, “*Fair fame is better than fine*

¹² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 150.

¹³ It is actually chiasmic: *Tob shem mishemen tob*.

perfume.”¹⁴ The meaning is that one’s reputation, their character, who they are in their essence is much more important than having the best stuff. Isn’t it interesting then that he has just brought up naming in 6:10? *Whatever has come to be has already been named.* We know that the Namer was God. Therefore, to have a name from him is infinitely better. And this is exactly what Paul tells Christians as he puts the two together. “We are the fragrance of Christ” (2Cor 2:15). We bear the name “Christian.” And as Christians, our character matters hugely, for we represent this King.

But this still doesn’t answer how the day of death is better than the day of birth. That doesn’t sound right. I think the good name is the first part of that answer. What is your reputation when you die? But if we keep reading, we find out more. Here is our second “better.” “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 mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (Ecc 7:2).

This verse mirrors vs. 4. “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools in the house of mirth.” This is a passage that no culture in human history has needed

¹⁴ G. C. Martin, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, in *The Century Bible: A Modern Commentary*, 33 vols., ed. Walter F. Adeney (London: Caxton, 1908), 13:253; quoted in Ryken, 150.

to hear more desperately than our own. No other people have done so much to separate themselves physically and emotionally from death than ours. We are **the culture of perpetual youth**. Our athletes are young. Our models are young. Our celebrities are young. Our newscasters are young. Our singers are young and the things they sing about are things that consume children. Our churches are young. Our buildings are young. We have youth retreats and youth groups and youth pastors. None of that is wrong in and of itself. But when that's the idol of the age, it is. We exalt the young while we mock and discard the aged. Everything we do it geared towards not thinking about this question. Most of us have never seen a real dead body, certainly not someone who has died in our very house.

This is the Preacher's point. **We are all going to die**. All but one learned that pretty quickly in *Prometheus*, some at the hand of their supposed maker who murdered them. Even the man who sought to live forever, died. All do. All will.

But Ecclesiastes says that the living **lay this to heart**. In the parallel, *the heart* of the wise is in the house of mourning. So the living are the wise. And this is why the day of death is better than the day of birth, because it causes us to think

about what this must mean for **how we live here and now**. In fact, **vv. 2-4** form a short chiasm with a center:

- A. It is better to go to the house of mourning than go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind
- B. And the living will lay it to heart
- C. Sorrow is better than laughter
- C'. For by sadness of face the heart is made glad
- B'. The heart of the wise
- A'. is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth

This center is our **third “better”** and it reinforces the point as a hinge. Sorrow is better than laughter, *because* (the hinge) by sadness of face the heart is made glad. But just like **vs. 1**, **this seems wrong**. How does a sad face cause the heart to be glad? The answer is profound. By understanding death and facing it head on, it gives you **the power to seize the day and live it to the fullest** extent. This is the practical effect upon your life from this sermon and we are going to see more and more of that as he moves through its second half, including what comes next.

Good: Better Choices (7:5-12)

With three “betters” behind us, we have **four more** in front. These are found in **vv. 5, 8(x2), and 10**. Getting a *better*

perspective of knowing that we will die and confronting it head-on rather than running from it lays the groundwork for several **practical proverbs** that help us here and now.

“**It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools**” (5). **Rebukes** are difficult to hear and that’s precisely why he mentions them. The *better* things are often the things that you do not actually think on the surface are better at all! **Rebuking occurs** when someone thinks that you’ve done something bad, and they want to make sure you know it. **A fool** will rebuke someone over something that should never have been rebuked. He is will often do it in a terrible manner. His goal is to harm not help, to put down not build up. But **a wise** man will rebuke a friend with constructive criticism in a godly manner, because he knows that confronting the error or even sin will make them *better* in the long run, especially if they are headed towards harm in what they are doing.

But what is the song of fools? Rather than “**songs of flattery**” as some translations render it, this most likely refers simply to the songs that are sung in the house of mirth. And **what are those songs?** Songs that **ignore the problem** rather than confront it. They **don’t have to be evil songs**. They simply sing about anything else to keep the mind off what

matters. Of course, those are not always wrong. The point is that the man is in this house because he doesn't want to confront death. He is living life to the fullest, perfectly blissful, and therefore unaware of the rebuke that is needed from what he is doing. It's basically the American condition.

This is paralleled in **vs. 6**, which if I were numbering the verses, would be part of vs. 5. “**For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.**” The focus is not on thorns as evil things in and of themselves, though I think we all hate them. Rather, “**Thorns were rapidly burning, easily extinguishable fuel in the ancient world (Ps 58:9).**”¹⁵ Thus, it **isn't that the fool is necessarily laughing at crude jokes** (though that could certainly be part of it). Rather, the “**fools' laughter is a sudden flame, a fine display of sparks, accompanied by plenty of noise, but soon spent and easily put out.**”¹⁶ His laughter shows him a fool not because he is laughing, but because he is spending his time **living foolishly**, pretending he won't die rather than preparing himself for death, avoiding rebukes rather than embracing them, hanging with fools rather than with the wise. The take-away is that even when there are difficult problems that face us, be

¹⁵ **Michael A. Eaton**, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 110.

¹⁶ **Greidanus**, 173.

they our own stupidity, sin, or impending death, that we are doing things now to help us deal with those. This in turn will make our lives better here and now for we are embracing that which is better.

Vs. 7 tells us, “Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.” His point is that even if someone is wise, he can be tempted with foolish things just like the fool. Solomon surely knew a thing or two about this, for he did his fair share of oppressing others and, most certainly, of taking bribes, especially through marriages. He became mad and only in his last days did he return to his senses.

A fifth and sixth “better” return in **vs. 8**. “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.” You can hear how “time” is a main concern, returning us to the earlier poem. The end of a thing is better in the same way that death, which is our end, is better. But, of course, it can also be better for more obvious reasons. When you complete something, you have satisfaction looking back and the accomplishment, for example. This may be why the second half deals with **patience vs. pride**. Patience sees a thing through to the end. The proud often have no need to even see it begin. The “in

spirit” is very interesting in light of the Beatitudes of Jesus, which I’ll return to at the end.

“Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.” The NT directly quotes this verse. It comes from the great wisdom teacher of the NT’s letters, James. “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). It is extremely practical advice, especially in the church, which is James’ context. There is a time for love and a time for hate, but the anger of hatred is not better for us than love. For when that root lodges in your heart, it becomes a thorn of disaster to you and everyone around you. And it is not easily taken dislodged.

One of my favorite verses in Ecclesiastes is one I need constant reminder of. It has our seventh “better.” “Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this” (Ecc 7:10). Chicago sings about the old days, “Good times I remember ... take me back to the world gone away.”¹⁷ It’s easy to be sentimental about the days gone by, as if they were pristine and perfect. But maybe Macklemore is more on point of what the Preacher is driving at.

¹⁷ Chicago, “Old Days,” *Chicago VIII*, Columbia (1974).

*I wish somebody would have told me babe
Some day, these will be the good old days
All the love you won't forget
And all these reckless nights you won't regret¹⁸*

They seem to be celebrating her recklessness, reminiscing about a past that was actually evil, but that she can't participate in anymore because life has changed.

Either way you take this (as celebrating sin or reminiscing), it seems to be the human condition to forget the bad in the past because the bad of the present seems so palpable and immediate. The Preacher warns against this idolizing of the past to keep you from living life in a better way in the present. In a bizarre way, maybe **Weird Al's** satirical song about the "Good Old Days" where he sings sentimentally about the past where he committed truly terrible acts is a good reminder to listen to the Preacher's advice, because things really weren't "that much simpler then."¹⁹ (Yes, I've been dying to get **Weird Al** in this sermon series!)

By way of a kind of footnote, I think it is worth mentioning that is possible to read vv. 8-10 as a mini-chiasm just like we saw in 2-4. In this case, the end of a thing and its

¹⁸ **Macklemore** (feat. Kesha), "Good Old Days," *Gemini*, Bendo (2017).

¹⁹ "**Weird Al**" Yankovic, "Good Old Days," *Even Worse*, Rock n. Roll Records (1998).

beginning **parallel** the former days and these days. In **the middle** would come **anger**. If this is the case, then the reason some people see the former days as better than these days and have a proud spirit is because **they are angry**. Their anger causes them to sentimentalize the old days, in part, because they weren't themselves as angry then as now. So anger can extend in many ways we do not foresee.

Vv. 11-12 bring up **wisdom**, the wisdom that we need to live life now in a way that is better. “**Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and advantage to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.**” The focus is on **handling money**. If you have an inheritance, the wise person will use it wisely and it will benefit them in this life. Therefore, wisdom is worth protecting even more than money, because it preserves your life.

Consider the Work of God

We might call all of **these proverbs things that focus on our works**, because they deal with how we can be wise as we live our lives before we die. But as the passage began, so also

it ends. Not with us, but with God. Not on our works, but on *his works*. “Consider the work of God...” (13).

What work? He has in mind a true mystery. “Who can make straight what he has made crooked?” This does not refer to *us* making a thing crooked, but to *God* making it that way. God? Makes things crooked? Yes. This refers to **God’s sovereignty**, the same theme we saw in 6:10-12. He is the Maker.

God says to Isaiah, “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things” (Isa 45:7). Paul tells us that God subjected creation to **futility** (Rom 8:18-20). And there are so many passages about this, I could not complete the sermon if I gave them all to you. Unfortunately, many people today do not regard God’s sovereignty over his creation, and **they deny this fundamental truth**. That is to their own harm, for in denying it, they show themselves to be the fool, a fool who denies what God is like. In turn, they end up denying what they are like and this in turn moves them to bring forth a plethora of vain words at the one who alone who names and knows us.

The Preacher’s point here is that **God is sovereign even over evil** (human evil, natural evil, and so on). This evil seems “**crooked**” to us, and in itself it *is* crooked. We

experience many of them throughout our time down here. But as Job learned, they are his work and therefore, “it would be the height of arrogance and foolishness for us to try to change the work of God,”²⁰ or to question him (6:11) about what he is doing. Job only thought God had abandoned him in all the evil that he was bringing upon him. But he didn’t know the truth. And so he brought accusations against his Maker.

Vs. 14 gives us the conclusion to the whole text. “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.” This is the work of God, and we are to consider it (“consider” is in both vs. 13 and 14). In the considering, we are to realize that we can’t know with much understanding what he is doing down here as he rules over his universe.

But *what we can do* is be joyful (the central structural theme of the book), when he brings good into our lives and be contemplative when sorrow and trouble comes. In that sorrow, we remember that we are dust and that we do not know what will be after we are gone. This is thinking rightly about God as we approach him (the central theological

²⁰ Greidanus, 176.

theme of the book). We are not the center of the universe and when we are gone, much more will happen. And who can know it? That's the question that ends in 6:12. "Who can tell man what will be after him?" It is the thought that ends 7:14, "Man many not find out anything that will be after him."

Blessed ... Future

This last thought sounds itself like vanity and quite a sad way to finish a sermon. That's why to conclude, I want to take us to the NT and some of the things that it says regarding these things. First, we've seen how James quotes from Ecclesiastes 7:9. His point about not being angry shows that these observations continue to be relevant today.

But something has changed from the time Solomon wrote his sermon to today. That something is the coming of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus gave a great sermon on the law on top of a mountain. That sermon began with beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3), he began. We saw earlier how it is better to be patient than proud in spirit.

Jesus is affirming that by echoing the truth of Ecclesiastes here.

But as Greidanus explains, [there is more in the Beatitudes than mere verbal parallels](#).

The Old Testament Teacher discerns some relative good in events we usually think of as bad: death, sorrow, the house of mourning, rebuke, the day of adversity. Remarkably, in Jesus' teachings we find a similar emphasis on good aspects of suffering on this earth. In the Beatitudes Jesus called those who suffer "blessed":

Blessed are those who *mourn*, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are those who are *persecuted* for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ([Matt 5:4, 10](#)).

Blessed are you who are *poor*,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are *hungry* now,
for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who *weep* now,
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people *hate* you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven ([Luke 6:20–23](#)).²¹

²¹ [Greidanus](#), 165–166.

But this “reward in heaven” might just be the most important thing for us Christians to think about now. Ecclesiastes is not concerned with heaven; only with us knowing that we are going to die. His emphasis is on having us live our lives in godly, pleasing, “better” ways today in light of it. Essentially, “The Teacher instructs his readers to look for some good in times of adversity in part because they do not know what the future holds. By contrast, Jesus and the New Testament teaches us to look for the good in adversity because of what our future holds: the perfect kingdom of God.”²²

This kingdom of God has come powerfully to this earth through Christ’s coming, death, and resurrection. And it is here now. What does this mean for us as Christians? It means that we can view what Ecclesiastes tells us through fuller lenses and in light of the resurrection we have been given in Christ. William Brown writes, “Qohelet reminds the church that faith in Christ entails facing the fulness of death ... The hope of the resurrection does not rest on the denial of death, but on the full acceptance of death’s all-encompassing scope. As death marks the beginning of wisdom’s

²² Greidanus, 167.

journey for Qohelet, so death in baptism marks the beginning of the journey of faith.”²³

But it isn't just what we've been made that allows us to see things even better than Solomon. It is **where we are going**. When we die, we do not just cease to exist. Therefore, our motive is not just living better lives here and now. Rather, when we die, we go to an eternal reward with God in heaven. This eternal reward is made richer as we bring things with us where moths and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal. To put it another way, **we want to live better lives now because we realize that there is an eternal destiny awaiting us**. But this destiny means nothing positive unless you trust in Christ. To have your faith in him is to be made a new creation where wisdom meets practical living and living for eternity. Your “better life now” means nothing if you are not given new life by Jesus. Therefore, **come to life** and see that death is not the end. **Be among the living** who go to the house of morning. **Contemplate** that your Creator is good and knows what he is doing and don't talk back to him. **Acknowledge** your limitations of knowledge and believe that in Christ God loves you, so that in the middle of the difficulties he brings into your life, you

²³ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*. Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 75.

in fact know what will be after you—eternal joy and happiness with God in heaven. Something he bids you to enjoy even now on earth.

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