

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Thoughtful Choices

A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1-4)

While we are studying the section of Ecclesiastes that presents Solomon's thoughts in brief proverb-like sayings, we should look for thematic continuity just as we've seen in the other sections of the book. Admittedly, in this section continuity at times is challenging, but finding it will uncover gems of wisdom to our minds.

In the verses for this week's study the challenge is obvious. How can we find continuity in one verse between a good reputation and celebration of one's death?

Our pleasure-seeking human nature shirks at the mention or presence of death, and sometimes, though we want to have a good reputation, we are reluctant to invest the necessary effort to earn it legitimately. D. A. Carson interprets the first verse in this chapter as forming a contrasting statement, "As—so also."

"As inner character is more crucial than outer fragrance, so the lessons derived from a funeral are more instructive than the lessons of a birthday party. The funeral may bring us to think about life but the party probably will not. In this sense sorrow *is good for the heart* (3), *i.e.* enables our innermost thoughts to make true evaluations."¹

Given the choice of attending a funeral or a wedding, which would you choose? If we answer honestly, most of us would far prefer

¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed., Ec 7:1 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

the wedding. A spiritually-oriented wedding will stimulate godly and reflective meditation, but many weddings are more fluff and flutter, pomp and circumstance, than spiritual events. A funeral will evoke sobering thoughts in us to contemplate life's serious issues, and even our own death.

Tom Constable corroborates Carson's reflective thoughts, but with a slightly different emphasis.

"It is better to end life with a good reputation than to begin it auspiciously but then ruin it through folly. This emphasis on the importance of living wisely continues through the rest of the book (cf. 2:26; 11:9; 12:14). The mother rubbed the "good ointment" on her baby and supposedly got it off to a good start in life by doing so.

"7:2-4 The point of these verses is that it is wise to bear the brevity of life in mind as one lives. The "heart," mentioned in all three verses, is where we make moral decisions (cf. Prov. 4:23). Thoughtful rather than thoughtless living is wise (cf. Ps. 90:12). Sobriety contrasts with self-indulgence."²

Constable implies that the "good name" in the passage refers to the reputation that a person builds through a lifetime, how he/she is remembered after death.

Typically in Bible times medicine was infused into various oils and ointments, so Solomon's first analogy seems to refer to the

²Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Ec 7:1-2 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

greater value of a good reputation at one's death, if we accept Constable's assessment, compared with a "good dose of medicine."

After attending a wedding ceremony and the following celebration, what life-changing reflections do you discover in your meditations? None? Now ask yourself the same question regarding a funeral. Solomon takes us face to face with a reality that we each experience, even if we dislike its implications. The greatest and most valuable lessons in life are not learned at parties and celebrations. Rather they are learned in the crucible of difficulties such as the death of a loved one or a life-threatening illness. A Masters Degree in Wisdom is not earned in the School of Joviality.

Our American culture increasingly demands the hedonistic entertainment of the party in almost every arena of life. "It is all about me" could be written over the life cycle of many Americans, in fact, over the life cycle of many professing Christians. We are inclined to evaluate experiences and approve them based on how much pleasure they give us, not on how much they put a hand on each cheek and force us to look reality and death directly in the eyes. A favorite response of Christians to the Sunday morning sermon is "I enjoyed it." While one's "enjoyment" of the Sunday sermon is not equivalent to one's enjoyment of the Saturday night party, the pleasure sensation appears in the term.

American Christians en masse typically refuse to consider the fundamental teachings of Scripture that require the gospel to rebuke, reprove, and exhort. Preach a sermon that requires them to face their personal sins, and you can expect them to get mad and point fingers at all those other folks who are "to blame" for their sins. As I read through the New Testament, I realize that God holds each of us accountable for our sins. He heard the first "blame-game" excuse for personal sin in Genesis 3, and He's been hearing them ever since, so they do not impress Him.

I've faced some of my greatest discouragements in pastoral care as I've tried to rebuild broken relationships that could have easily been strengthened—or never broken in the first place—by a faithful application of the often cited, but seldom practiced, process of Matthew 18 in which people with differences honestly work face

to face and as privately as possible to resolve their problems. On more occasions than I care to recall, even as I reminded a person of his/her obligations under Matthew 18, the person immediately responded with tale-bearing, accusing, and blame-casting toward the other person rather than agreeing to follow our Lord's simple, straight-forward instructions. These folks are quite willing to talk to the whole world about the person with whom they disagree, but they refuse to do what Jesus taught in this lesson. Young Christians often wear a small piece of jewelry with the initials "WWJD," engraved on it. "What Would Jesus Do?" If someone offended Jesus, what would He do, blame and accuse that person to all others who would hear, or quietly go to that person and sincerely, graciously, and honestly talk with him/her in a noble effort to resolve the problem?

We never learn this godly discipline at the "House of the Party." It only comes home in the house of mourning and affliction. We struggle with Solomon's lesson here because we have allowed ourselves to become conditioned with the pleasure sensation, even in our profession of faith.

Constable refers us to Psalm 90:12 in his thoughts, "*So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.*" "Teach us to number our days," to think about life in terms of the ultimate reality; it will not last for ever. Someday it will come to an end. I believe Moses, the stated author of Psalm 90, intends for us to reflect on the brevity of life so that we live every day as if it would be our last.

I have known a number of people who lived most of their lives with a lot of vinegar in their personalities and conduct. Some of them merely add more vinegar as they grow older, becoming increasingly bitter at life and at the people they've known. However, an impressive number of people seem to take this verse to heart. As they grow older, they become more winsome and mellow. Forgiveness becomes more important than keeping score of the wrongs that other folks committed against them. Making peace becomes more important than declaring war. Don't you see the point? These folks are learning the lessons that the day of death teaches. That is the point of Solomon's lesson in these verses. May we learn it well.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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