

“Why Funerals Are Better Than Birthday Parties” // Ecclesiastes 7:1–29 // *Ecclesiastes* (Life Without God) # 5¹

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OK, if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, open them to the book of Ecclesiastes, and let’s stand for the reading of God’s Word.

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.

¹ Sources consulted: Bobby Jamieson, *Everything Is Never Enough: Ecclesiastes' Surprising Path to Resilient Happiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2025); David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Carson Cobb, sermon on Ecclesiastes 7:1–29; David Jeremiah, “[When Bad is Better](#)”, Undated sermon, from BibleStrong.org; Ben Stuart, “[Facing a Frustrating World](#)”, November 25, 2025, Passion City Church D.C.; Tim Keller, “[Problem of Ethics: How Do We Know Right from Wrong?](#)”, June 28, 1992, Redeemer Presbyterian. And others as noted throughout.

so ... 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.

PJD: *This is the Word of God for the people of God.*

Congregation: *Thanks be to God.*

Let me start our reflection on this chapter with a quick quiz. And please answer honestly; don't try to overspiritualize or outthink this:

How many of you ...

- ... like to laugh more than you like to cry? (Raise your hands)
- ... prefer weddings to funerals?
- ... would rather celebrate your birthday than your death day? (In other words, if you somehow knew the date you were going to die, would you throw a party every year on that day instead of on your birthday?)
- How many of you ... would rather be complimented than corrected?
- ... love finding a good shortcut? (I mean, give me a life hack or a more efficient way of doing something.)
- ... sometimes find yourself yearning for a past season you think of as "the good ol' days"? Be honest.

Well, bad news/good news. Bad news: We all unanimously flunked Solomon's test. Good news: Solomon knew we would, which is why he wrote Ecclesiastes 7.

When I first read Ecclesiastes 7, it felt like a random assortment of thoughts, like Solomon had emptied his desk drawer of miscellaneous proverbs. One verse is about funerals, another about criticism, another about anger, another about nostalgia. But Solomon is actually making one sustained argument in this chapter—he's giving us a comprehensive, deeply counterintuitive vision of life. It's basically a backwards view of life, where we learn to see that the hard things, the difficult things, actually teach us the very best things.

First, let's get our minds around Solomon's vision (that's vv. 1–6), then we'll look at the ways we try to resist it.

Vs 1: "The day of death is better than the day of birth." Again, if you had some way of knowing what day in the year you were going to die, would you throw a party on that date to celebrate it? That would be a weird party to go to, right? I mean, would you bring gifts? And yet, Solomon says celebrating your death is better than celebrating your birth.

Vs 2: "It is better (By the way, the word "**better**" is going to be used 11 times in this chapter. It is better ...) to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting..." The house of mourning would be anywhere you weep—the funeral home, the hospital bedside, the bankruptcy

court—why are those places better than parties and all-you-can-eat buffets? “...for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” Sadness and tragedy have a way of waking us up to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of life.

By the way, I would remind you that Solomon was not a morose, melancholic man who always lived under a dark cloud—no, no less than 8x in this book, he **commands** us to enjoy life to the full. He’s simply saying it’s good to go through seasons of mourning because those seasons have a way of waking you up to the fragility of life.

Blaise Pascal once compared life to a grand ballroom where everyone is dressed in their finest clothes. The music is playing. People are laughing, eating, dancing, and talking. Then, suddenly, the doors burst open, a terrifying monster walks in, grabs one of the guests, and drags him away. All the music stops; everyone is stunned. Terrified. But after a few minutes, the orchestra starts playing again, and before long everyone is dancing again, as if nothing happened. And then it happens again. And again. And eventually, it becomes clear that the monster is gonna come back for every person in the ballroom. And yet, every time it happens, after sitting for a few stunned seconds, everybody goes back to dancing. Pascal said that’s how most of us live: We spend our whole lives distracting ourselves from the one certainty we all share. A funeral, or a moment of tragedy, briefly interrupts the music; it forces us to remember what we’ve spent years trying to forget: *“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 wise will lay it to heart.”*

Vs 4 “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Fools hate funerals because they are total buzzkills. They’re like, “Get me out of here.” Fools prefer the delusion that life lasts forever and everything ends happily ever after. So give me the all-you-can-eat buffet, the feel-good music, and the Disney movie.

In the same way, vs 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.” Thorns, in those days, were what they used for kindling. We use newspapers, dry leaves, maybe a copy of one of my books that we’ve given you for free here at Summit. Kindling flares up quickly and makes a lot of noise, but then it’s gone. Solomon says this is what people who build their lives around having a good time are like—bright. Noisy. Gone.

It’s interesting: **The first straight-up lie that Satan ever told humanity was “You will not surely die.”** You see, God had told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that if they ate the forbidden fruit, they would surely die, but then Satan came along and said, “Nahhh ... you won’t die.” Before he lied to them about the fruit, he lied to them about death. He tried to delude them—to make them forget—how short and fragile life could be. **I’d say that’s still where he starts today.** To every teenager, college student, and young adult, he says, “Oh, death? Don’t worry about that. That’s so far off you don’t even need to think about it yet!”

Solomon says that remembering the certainty and relative proximity of our death is where wisdom starts. Moses said the same thing: **Psalm 90:12**, a verse that if you’re a teenager or college student, you should have memorized: *“Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to learn wisdom!”*

It is only by thinking about the fragility and brevity of our lives that we learn to live wisely, and it's places of sadness, or bereavement, or weakness, that teach us that. Eleven times in this chapter he says it's better for us to encounter mourning, sadness, or failure than it is to live a life of parties and good times under the illusion that life lasts forever. Places of sadness and failure and death remind us that life is hevel (and remember that "hevel" is a word that means vapor, like a cloud—something that looks good but is actually substanceless).

So let's ask: ***What specifically can we learn from funerals, hospital beds, and bankruptcy courts?***

1. Your life is shorter than you think

For those of you who are near my age, one of the most depressing things is to see pictures of all these stars you admired as a teenager side by side with what they look like now, and to realize that most of those people have spent tens of thousands of dollars to try and make it look like they're not aging! But those people who once seemed forever young are now in their 60s and 70s. There was a movie that came out in 1980 called **Fame!** (anybody remember it?) and the tagline from the movie—or, at least, the main line from the theme song (anyone remember it?) was, "FAME! I'm gonna live forever." Hollywood remade the movie in 2009, and it cast a whole new group of younger, prettier actors. In fact, the lead actress, who sang the theme song, died in 2022. Anybody even remember her name? Irene Cara. Every generation thinks it's the one that will stay young, feeling 22, remembered forever, until the next generation arrives and takes center stage.

The "house of mourning," the funeral home, reminds us that our turn on the stage is brief.

Recognizing this was a big part of how God brought me back to faith as a teenager. I had a friend from grade school who got killed in a tragic car wreck. We'd been best friends up through middle school—he was so funny and smart and popular ... but he didn't know Jesus at all. And I never told him about Jesus. And then we went to different high schools, and he got killed in this wreck, and I stood by his casket—it was closed because the wreck had been so bad—and I thought, "Nothing he and I bonded over really matters anymore. All that matters is whether he was ready to meet God." And I didn't know whether he was or not.

Your life is shorter than you think, and ...

2, Your future is less certain than you think

Many years ago, when I'd just begun here as pastor, I talked with a professional athlete who had just signed a multimillion-dollar contract but then got into an accident doing something stupid that voided his entire contract. He came to visit our church and asked to meet with me and told me, through tears, "I can't believe I threw away my entire career for a few seconds of stupid fun." And we talked together for a long time, and eventually I told him, "Hey man, all due respect, but what if God was doing something even bigger in your life—something so important through this that you might actually one day look back on it and see it as good?" He said, "What do you mean? How could that be?" I said, "Well, you said 'I can't believe I threw away my whole career for a few seconds of stupid fun.' But what if the bigger tragedy was you were about to throw away your whole eternity for a few seconds of stupid fame?" You see, it was clear that his athletic career had become his idol. And I told him like I often tell you:

Sometimes God has to put us flat on our back so you'll finally be looking the right direction! I had the privilege that afternoon of praying with that athlete as he gave his life to Jesus.

It's the house of mourning, not the house of mirth, that teaches you the unpredictability and uncontrollability of life.

3. What matters most is different than what you think

David Brooks said he noticed where he lives in the Upper East Side of Manhattan how hard everyone worked to build their résumés. But then he noticed, he said, that whenever he went to a funeral in Manhattan, nobody ever talked about the person's résumé. No one stood up and said, "Man, that guy had an incredible LinkedIn profile." or, "Wow, she closed a lot of deals." "He got a corner office." No, they talked about whether you loved your family. Whether you were generous. Whether you made others feel seen and valued. Brooks says we spend our lives building résumé virtues, but funerals remind us that what really matters are eulogy virtues.

That's the kind of wisdom Solomon says we can only learn in the house of mourning.

Joni Eareckson Tada was a beautiful teenage girl with her whole life ahead of her who broke her neck in a diving accident and became a quadriplegic. Through that suffering she came to know Jesus more deeply than she ever imagined, and God has given her one of the most fruitful, enriching ministries of the last sixty years. She's now 76 years old, still a quadriplegic, and she says, "While I would never wish quadriplegia on anyone, I do wish everyone could know Christ the way I've come to know him through it."

That's the paradox of Ecclesiastes 7. ***The suffering itself isn't the gift. The God you meet in the suffering is.***

And she's not the only one who discovered this. There is a great cloud of witnesses throughout Christian history who all say the same thing. Samuel Rutherford, an old Puritan, put it this way: **"When I am in the cellar of affliction, I look for the Lord's choicest wines."**

Or, the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon: **"I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages."**

None of these people loved suffering; they loved the Savior they found in suffering. And the place they learned to love him was in funeral parlors, hospital beds, and bankruptcy courts.

That's the counterintuitive vision, and the rest of chapter 7 is Solomon asking, "If this vision is true, why do we spend our lives running from it?"

And his answer is fascinating. Humans, he explains, have this insane practice of inventing ways to PRETEND we're still in control—ways we close our eyes to the monster of death and the fragility of life.

In the rest of this chapter, Solomon presents four alternatives to submitting to the wisdom of pain and death—all four are built on the illusion that we can control life.

Four Ways We Resist Wisdom by Pretending Control²

1. Money (v 7)

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

Solomon warns us that money corrupts even the wisest people. Let me say this clearly: Money is the most powerfully corrupting element on earth, and if you have access to money and don't know that, you are a fool.

- Jesus said money was the one thing that you couldn't love it and God. Jesus never said anything that dramatic about sex or wine or even people's praise, but he said, "You cannot love God and money."
- The Apostle Paul says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil—and that's because in a modern market society, money is power. Money promises control. With money you can basically go where you want and do what you want, and you think if you have enough money, enough leverage, you can basically insulate yourself from tragedy.³

But then you sit in a divorce court and learn that all your money can't keep your family together ... or make your kids talk to you ... or reverse the Parkinson's diagnosis, or keep a loved one alive.

Or, you go to a funeral and realize that when you die, none of that wealth is going to go with you.

I learned this as a kid through playing my favorite board game with my mom: MONOPOLY. My whole goal in that game was getting Boardwalk and Park Place and Pacific and Pennsylvania Avenue. I'd try to get that whole side of the board, because then I got to watch everybody wince when they rounded the corner to pass through my streak of doom, where I'd loaded up every property with houses and hotels. And I remember one time doing this and my mom smiling with approval, telling me I was getting the point of the game. And then, after I'd taken all her money and trounced her, she taught me the biggest lesson of all. She took all that money and all those hotels I'd compiled and scooped them back into the Monopoly box and said, "Son, you won. But now it all goes back in the box. Go clean your room."

It all goes back in the box! You're going to line your coffin with it. You're going to leave it all behind and you're not going to take any of it with you into eternity.

2. Anger (vv 9, 13)

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

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

² In coming up with this list, I'm following the lead of David Gibson.

³ Insight from Jamieson.

We get angry because the universe refuses to cooperate with our plans. And the more we **expect** to be able to control the world, the more we resent the uncontrollable. My friend Bobby Jamieson says: **"Our anger is proportional to our illusion of control."**

Think about the place you're angry right now—chances are it involves somebody or something not doing what you want them to do, frustrating your plans for what you wanted life to be like.

- You expected your spouse to become this person you want or need—and they haven't become that, and so now you're angry.
- You thought your children would turn out a certain way, and you're angry because they haven't. In some ways, and you wouldn't say this out loud, but you feel like they've let you down—they haven't fulfilled the future you planned for yourself.
- You thought your career would have advanced further by now, so you're angry at the boss or the company or the system or even yourself.
- You always thought your body would be healthier and it's not, and you're angry.

Truth is, if you peeled back the layers, you would a lot of times see that you're not just angry at a person, you're angry at God because he didn't cosign the story you had written for yourself. Notice what all those examples have in common: In each case, life refused to follow the script you had written. **Write this down: Anger is (often) the emotion of frustrated sovereignty.**

Hear me: I'm not saying all anger is sinful. God gets angry. Jesus got angry. Sometimes anger is the right response to evil. But Ecclesiastes exposes a different kind of anger—anger that comes when life doesn't deliver something it never promised in the first place.

Anger is the emotion of frustrated sovereignty. That's why Solomon says, "Consider the work of God: Who can make straight what he has made crooked?" There are things in your life that you may not be able to straighten because God, in his wisdom, has chosen not to straighten them yet. And you're going to have to decide if you're OK with God being God, or you're only OK if you are God.

Wisdom begins when you stop demanding that reality conform to your plans and begin trusting that God is writing a better and wiser story than you ever could.

3. Nostalgia (v 10)

Solomon says, vs 10, **"Don't say, 'Why were the former days better than these?'"** Why? Because nostalgia lies. Nostalgia always edits out the pain and leaves only the beauty. Through nostalgia, we convince ourselves that if we could just go back—back to that neighborhood, that church, that decade, that relationship, those college years—we'd finally be happy. But here's the thing: First, you can't go back. That was just a moment in time. Second, and even more importantly, even if you could go back, what you'd see is that during that time period, you weren't that happy. And here's how I know that: During that time period, you were dreaming of some other time.

One of my favorite 80s songs illustrates this, “The Summer of ‘69” by Bryan Adams. In that song Bryan Adams looks back on that summer as a teenager when he “got his first real six-string, bought it at the five and dime, played it till his fingers bled, it was the summer of ‘69,” and then in the chorus, he croons, “*If I had the choice, Yeah, I’d always wanna be there ...*” Why? Because “*those were the best days of my life.*”

Catchy, right? Nostalgic. But have you ever thought about the lyrics? During that glorious summer he’s singing about—the summer of ‘69—he tells us in the song that he was dreaming about becoming a professional musician. In other words: **He’s nostalgic to go back to a season during which he was longing for the season he’s in now!** I want to go back to 1969, where I was dreaming about becoming the person I am today, only to get here to find out I was dreaming about the person I was then. That’s the trick nostalgia plays on us. We think happiness was back there somewhere, but back there we were convinced happiness was somewhere else.

That’s the trick nostalgia plays, and—really important—in his book *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis explains why this happens. We all have moments in life, he says, when beauty awakens an ache we can’t explain and that nothing in the world seems to satisfy. And we think, he says, that we’re longing for a place to go back to or for people we’ve known—but Lewis says those experiences were only signposts. They point us forward, not backward; they point to heaven, not a time on earth under the sun. **Here’s his statement; we’ll look at it more next week:**

“The (things) in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of the tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”⁴

Nostalgia becomes foolish when we expect the past to give us what only eternity fulfills.

And now, the trickiest one of all ...

4. Self-righteousness (vv 15–16)

[15] “In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” And then Solomon says these really confusing words, vs 16: **‘Do not be overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?’** Wait ... what? Since when does the Bible warn us against too much righteousness and too much wisdom?

Remember, throughout Ecclesiastes Solomon is exposing the false assumptions we make about life under the sun, and here, he’s exposing one of religion’s biggest lies, which is: If you live a certain way, God is obligated to make your life easy.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 29–31.

“But I’ve lived long enough to know that’s not true,” Solomon says. “I’ve watched righteous people die young and wicked people live long, prosperous lives. I’ve watched people who worked hard and tithed and saved get wiped out in bad business deals gone wrong, when it wasn’t even their fault; meanwhile, I’ve seen people who manipulated and cheated retire with gobs and gobs of money. I’ve watched parents who did everything right—taught their kids the Bible, lived consistently and generously in front of them—have those same kids wander from the faith, or even turn on their parents; while at the same time, seen parents who basically ignored their kids and their kids turned out amazing. And all I could say was, “WTH: What the hevel?”

You religious people: If you think you’ve cracked the code—that through righteous living you can control the future, it’s not going to work.

You see, religious people often think, “If I obey enough, then God has to give me the life I want.” But that’s not faith, y’all; that’s bargaining. Our righteous living is simply a contract in which we expect God to give us what we want, but it’s actually not “righteousness” at all. It’s *self-righteousness*—and self-righteousness is simply another attempt to control God, which you can’t do.

So, there you go: four ways we try to resist the wisdom of the funeral home, hospital bed, and bankruptcy court: We do that through money, anger, nostalgia, and self-righteousness—all four ways we attempt to control the uncontrollable. **And Solomon says that if you’re a wise person, you’ll give up on all that.**

Because then, when you ... **Stop trying to “gain” life and start receiving it as a gift.**

The running theme through the book of Ecclesiastes is that there is no way to **GAIN** life under the sun. Remember, “gain” means to attempt to hold onto it; to make it permanent; to have it fulfill your deepest longings. Attempts to control are just another way to try to “gain” life.

But when you try to control the uncontrollable, it’s going to leave you disappointed and bitter. And the harder you work to control it, the more bitter you’ll be when life proves uncontrollable, which it always will.

So, stop trying to **gain life**, he says; stop trying to control the uncontrollable, because when you do, you **can start to receive life as a gift.**

Your life can be happy, enjoyable—but not when you are trying to gain permanence or satisfaction through it; you can enjoy it only when **receiving it as a gift**; that is, when you enjoy the blessings of each day as God gives them—fleeting gifts; temporary gifts, this side of eternity—but gifts you can enjoy to the fullest.

And that brings me to the other great theme of Ecclesiastes: **Make the most of your mist.**

If everything “under the sun” really is fleeting and fragile, then only two things in the world right now truly last forever: the Word of God and the souls of people—and if that’s true, we should leverage our mist of a life which we can’t hold onto anyway into that.

I've told you that Christians with a bucket list overlook the fact that in eternity—in life above the sun—we will experience every joy we had under the sun, only without the curse of futility.

*And **the reason for that is that God himself entered into our hevel and took upon himself its curse.** You see, God did not originally create a world of hevel. We are under the curse of hevel because we sinned. But because God so loved the world, he sent Jesus, his only Son, into our hevel to absorb its curse into himself. And he says that if we receive him as our Savior, he will forgive us of our sin and promise to take us with him into eternity, where we will experience in his presence the fullness of joy and at his right hand pleasures forevermore.*

And if that's true, I don't need to have a bucket list here, or at least one I take that seriously. I don't need to try to cram everything into these seventy or eighty years—because *this* isn't my only life. I don't YOLO (only live once), I YALF (actually live forever)! So, it's OK if I don't hike every mountain, eat at every restaurant, own every watch, drive every car ... It's OK, because whatever I miss here, I'll receive there a thousandfold.

And YET, there is ONE THING I cannot do up there that I can only do here, one thing eternity will not give me another chance to do, and that is **bring someone here to Jesus NOW**. This—these fleeting 70 or 80 years—this is the only chance we've got to bring people to Jesus all over the world.

Which is why some of you should consider uprooting your mist of a life to join one of our church planting teams. I know it's radical, but life is short and eternity is forever. Leverage your mist for the permanence of eternity. Others of you should leverage your resources so that others can go. Some of you should step forward to help care for, and support, and pray for these teams—which is what Live Sent is all about. Whatever you do, don't waste your mist collecting things that will only disappear or chasing experiences you can really better enjoy in eternity. **Make the most of your mist:** Give it to bringing the Word of God to people who will live forever.

Hear me: One day, somebody else will live in your house. Somebody else will drive your truck. Somebody else will wear your watch, have your job, and blow through whatever money you left behind. The only question is: ***What will still be echoing in eternity because you were here?***

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MIST.

Let's pray. What do you need to do? 1. Blank check. 2. For some of you, the first step is just to come to Live Sent night!