

### ***The Good and The Better in Life***

We are going to continue our walk through the book of Ecclesiastes, so let's turn together to Eccles. 6.

There's an old routine called "That's Good, That's Bad" in which what is good and what's bad constantly gets flipped. Here's a portion of how it goes:

*Archie: Hey I guess you heard about my terrible misfortune.*

*Roy: No, what happened?*

*Archie: My great uncle died.*

*Roy: Oh that's bad!*

*Archie: No that's good!*

*Roy: How's come?*

*Archie: Well, when he died, he left me 50,000 dollars*

*Roy: Oh that's good!*

*Archie: No that's bad! When the Internal Revenue got thru with it, all I had left was 25,000 dollars*

*Roy: Oh that's bad*

*Archie: No that's good because I bought me an airplane and learned to fly*

*Roy: Well that's good*

*Archie: No that's bad, while I was flying upside down the other day I fell outta the dern thing*

*Roy: Well that's bad.*

*Archie: No that's good because when I looked down under me and there was a great big ole haystack.*

*Roy: Well that's good*

*Archie: No that's bad, when I got a little closer and I saw a pitchfork aimed right at me*

*Roy: Well that's bad*

*Archie: No that's good because I missed the pitchfork*

*Roy: Well that's good*

*Archie: No that's bad because I missed the haystack too.*

*Roy: Well that's bad*

*Archie: No that's good...*

And on it goes, and I think by now we're beginning to suspect that Archie's interpretation of what's good and what's bad is a little mixed up. If somebody took the time to examine this routine carefully line by line (which you would only do if either you had no life or were thinking about using it in a sermon illustration) – but *if* you took the time to examine it you'd see that what Archie calls bad on one side he turns around and calls good on the other side and vice versa. What's good as an effect then becomes bad as a cause. Buying an airplane is good when it's the *effect* of having \$25,000 left to him by the IRS, but buying an airplane is bad when it's the cause of his falling out of it while flying upside down.

It's a silly routine, but it does point out how in real life, often what seems to be bad ends up leading to good, and what starts out looking so good ends up bad. Urooj Khan won a million dollars in the Chicago scratch off lottery. That's good. No, that's bad, because he was poisoned with cyanide the day after his first check was released. Some family member wanted his money for themselves. It's been four years and no one has been charged with his murder. That's bad.

Johanna Ganthaler and her husband Kurt were supposed to fly home from their vacation in Brazil, but they missed their flight. That's bad. No, that's good, because the flight they were supposed to be on crashed into the ocean killing everyone on board. That's good (that they missed their flight). No, that's bad, because Johanna was killed one week later in a car accident.

Life is full of these "that's good/that's bad" twists. That thing that seemed like such a blessing turns out to be a curse, and that thing that we thought was such a terrible thing turns out to be a blessing in disguise. Solomon sees this and is going to talk about what's bad, what's good and what's better in life all in the framework that we can't really see what the future holds, we aren't really in control of what happens in our lives, and that ultimately God is sovereign over our lives. Let's begin by reading chapter 6:10-12.

*Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known; no one can contend with someone who is stronger. <sup>11</sup> The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?*

*<sup>12</sup> For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? Eccles. 6:10-12*

Solomon alludes to this strong current of events - both good and bad - that carry our lives with them and that we aren't strong enough to overcome. That stronger Someone isn't named here but in chapter 7 Solomon will identify him as God. We can't change the world or this current with a lot of words, in fact, the more words we speak the less meaning they have and that doesn't help anyone.

Verse 12 acknowledges that there is a mystery to what is good for a person in this life. *Who knows what is good for a person in life...* We can be like Roy saying, "that's good." No, that's bad. "That's bad." No, that's good. Who really knows? And the framework - and this is important - is that we don't know what will happen "under the sun" after we're gone. The future is unknown and unseen. We can't completely know what effect our lives and the actions of our lives will have on the future and on future generations.

All this is meant to humble our pride and make us less sure that we've got this whole thing figured out. But Solomon in his wisdom has observed that some things are better than other things and so he lays out seven "better than" proverbs, weighing what in life is good, and what is better. The first one, to be honest, is really surprising and seems like a real downer.

*A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. (7:1)*

Solomon actually quotes one of his own proverbs that says a good name is better than great riches (Prov. 22:1) and tells us that when we're weighing what's good and what's better in life, having a good reputation (and in the Hebrew culture the reputation and the character are inseparably linked) is worth more than having a lot of money or expensive ointments. When people destroy their character to get more money, they're making a bad deal. Money is what you have, character is what you are, and God says, what you are will always be more important than what you have.

But then things take a morbid turn as Solomon says the day the death is better than the day of birth. What? Our dear friends Jeff and Rachel just had a baby boy on Thursday, and that is a day of celebration and rejoicing, not only for Jeff and Rachel, but for all of us who know and love them! Little

Leo has his whole life ahead of him, and they will dream and pray and invest in him so that he knows Jesus and lives a full and rich and productive and happy life. There's so much anticipation and joy on the day of a baby's birth.

What can Solomon mean when he says the day of death is better than the day of birth? He doesn't mean better in the sense of happier, he means better in the sense of more important. While the day of birth is all about anticipation, the day of death is all about what's been accomplished. One day is all about potential, the other day is all about what we did with that potential. One day looks ahead, the other day looks back. Solomon is saying that it's more important that we live life well so when we come to the end of it we can look back with a different kind of joy than a birthday. The satisfaction of doing what God called you to do. The joy of knowing the Lord's used your life to affect other people for good. As Christians, we pray that our lives touch others for Christ and leave a legacy that is a witness for Christ. And that's really good. The other way that it's better for the believer is that it's the day we shed this body and go to be with the Lord. Solomon would not have the revelation about this that we do, but because of the resurrection, death isn't the end of life, for the Christian it's the beginning of new life, resurrection life, eternal life. So when a believer dies, it's a sad day for those left behind, we don't throw a party with balloons like we do for a new born, but on the other side, all of heaven throws a party as a child of God comes home. Live well and trust Christ so that last day is a good day.

<sup>2</sup> *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.* <sup>3</sup> *Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.* <sup>4</sup> *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.*

<sup>5</sup> *It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools.*

<sup>6</sup> *Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.*

This isn't saying that it's bad to laugh or feast or experience pleasure. What it's saying is that laughing and feasting and pleasure aren't the best things for our hearts long term. Sadness is in an odd way better for us than laughter. If our lives are just one long party from birth to death - nothing but good times and rock and roll - we'll end up being really shallow people. Sadness and mourning does a work in our hearts. We think more deeply about life, we examine ourselves more carefully, we reflect on what's really important and what's not when our hearts are raw from sadness.

Have you ever met a really shallow person? I don't mean someone who was really cautious about opening up to people, I'm talking about someone who, if they were a swimming pool, their deep end is only about 8 inches deep. You can't dive into a deep conversation with them without risking breaking your neck, cause there just ain't much deep there. That kind of shallowness isn't good for our hearts. Sadness is like exercise - we don't like it when we're in the middle of it but it's good for our hearts. You go to a party with strobe lights and loud music and giddy laughter and your mind shuts off, you go to a funeral home and your heart begins to grapple with things like, "where's my life headed to? What's really important in life? What things have lasting value in this world?"

This kind of reflection isn't automatic - it's not like sadness and mourning will automatically produce this

in us. Solomon says in verse 2 that we should take this to heart. We should let our hearts ponder this. So there really are two messages for us this morning in these verses.

The first is, don't numb your heart and mind with empty pleasures. Don't try to make light of everything and ignore issues hoping they go away or don't matter. Solomon uses this really interesting metaphor in verse 6: *Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.* Thorns in the ancient world were known as fast-burning, easily extinguishable source of fire. So the crackling sound of thorns burning under a cauldron is like the fool who is always laughing and making light of everything - it's noisy and short lived. There are people whose lives are burning up and they're ignoring it, making jokes when they should be taking it to heart and trying to change things.

When their marriage is struggling, they make jokes about their spouse. Take my wife...please! They get sarcastic and yuck it up with the guys over a beer instead of doing the serious work of reflection: what's going wrong and how am I contributing to it?

When their job is going down the tubes or their kids don't want to be around them, or they have a string of broken relationships in their wake, they try to forget by medicating themselves with good times and parties and TV and alcohol and whatever else. When they're in debt up to their eyeballs, their answer is to go out and spend money. They try to good time their way through life and they spend their life looking for short term fixes, never tackling the real issues or trying to work on them. Their laughter is short lived like the burning of thorns under a pot. It quickly goes out and they're left with the same problem. They spend a lifetime gathering thorns and lighting them on fire - going from one laugh to another. Don't live that way, Solomon warns. It's a dead end street.

The second message is, do take sadness to heart. Allow it to press your heart to God. Reflect deeply and let God use it to soften your heart, to deepen your heart. Sadness and mourning can work to humble our pride. It can replace apathy with compassion. It can change our self-centeredness to empathy for others. And it can motivate us to make changes that are good. Changes that lead to a better life.

Maybe you're in a season of sadness now. There's a burden on your heart, a regret that you can't change, a loss that you feel deeply. Whatever it is, God isn't looking for you to deny the sadness, to just put on a happy face and act like nothing's wrong. He's also not looking for you to drown in self-pity. He wants to meet you in that place and help you. Comfort you. Teach you what's really important in life, and what has lasting value.

We need to skip some verses, but jump down with me to verse 13. Remember, this isn't about one thing being bad and the other good. Most of this is about what's good and what's better. Ultimately we need to acknowledge that God is sovereign over our lives, we aren't. Remember that current that Solomon spoke about at the end of chapter six, that guides our lives in ways that is out of control, and who knows if it's good or bad? He picks that back up, only now he explicitly names God as the sovereign one.

<sup>13</sup> *Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?*

<sup>14</sup> *When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.*

God is sovereign and our lives are in God's hands. What God does we can't undo. *Who can straighten what he (God) has made crooked?* If God wills something to be one way, we can't override His will to make it something else. This isn't encouraging us to live passively, but it does speak to the importance of trust and faith.

*When times are good, be happy!* Nothing wrong with enjoying good times. Nothing wrong with soaking in God's blessings and being overwhelmed with His goodness. You don't need to look for ways to be miserable. Be happy! It's okay to enjoy the good times, to count the blessings, to rejoice in God's kindness. But when times are bad, consider this: God is Lord over one as well as the other. The bad times come from His hand as well, God has made the one as well as the other. Let's close by considering this from two vantage points.

- 1) We don't know what the future holds. *Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? (Chap 6:12) and Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future. (7:14)* We can't see definitively if something is good or something is bad. I've talked to people who had something that seemed terrible enter their lives, only to hear them say they wouldn't have it any other way. God used the bad to bring about great good. If God says the road is going to be crooked and we want it straight, we need to trust Him. We can't see the future, but we can trust the One who can. That's one vantage point.
- 2) But if we climb a little higher up the biblical revelation that God has given us, to a vantage point that Solomon clearly didn't have, we see that we do know what the future holds. God has made us a promise in Rom. 8:28 that says <sup>28</sup>*And we know (we know!) that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

In Christ we know the future. It is good. God's good is better than any good we could ever imagine. And everything God allows into our lives is weaving a beautiful tapestry that will bring us good and bring God glory. God is good at that. The darkest day in history was Good Friday, when evil men crucified the Lord of glory. It was the lowest of the low. But it was also the highest of the high - the brightest day in history as God made a way for sinful man to be restored to Him in loving relationship. Jesus took our punishment so we would never have to. Jesus experienced death so we could experience eternal life. If there had never been a Good Friday, there would never have been a Resurrection Sunday! If Jesus had never been laid in the grave, there would never have been an empty tomb!

We don't know what the future holds, short term, but long term we know that it holds good. God is working all things - all things - for the good of those who love Him. God is working and weaving those things in your life right now that might seem so bad into a tapestry that one day you will see is a beautiful, beautiful thing. The dark threads that God allowed into your life will be a precious part of the whole, and on that day you won't want a single dark thread removed. Until we have that sight, we walk by faith. Trusting our God and Father who loves us more than we can imagine.

If you're going through a hard time and you're having a hard time seeing what good God means to bring from it, we want to pray for you. If there's a need you have, provision, strength, wisdom, or just a fresh sense of trust in God, just slip your hand up and some of the brothers and sisters standing around you will gather around you to pray.