

<b>Book:</b>	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
<b>Series:</b>	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
<b>Lesson 10:</b>	<i>Wisdom for Living</i>
<b>Text:</b>	<i>Ecclesiastes 7:1-14</i>
<b>Date:</b>	<i>Sunday, March 24, 2013</i>

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<b>Next Lesson:</b>	<i>Ecclesiastes 7:15-29</i>

*Colonial Hills  
Baptist Church*

**Key**



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



**TEACHING TIP**

Initially we said that last week’s lesson would span two weeks, but in order to finish this study by summer, we need to push forward. Therefore, the final 3 points of last week’s 7-point outline will be completed, published, and available for your classes in the upcoming weeks.

Throughout this lesson, most of the discussion has been reserved for the application at the end of each point. To enjoy some interaction throughout each point, however, feel free to ask questions of each explanation section, rather than merely reading the paragraphs.

**INTRODUCTION**

A quick reading of today’s passage reveals an emphasis on wisdom vs. foolishness and on seriousness vs. triviality. To bridge the contexts and consider the contemporary significance of this passage, consider the following quotation from one commentator:

*We live in an escapist culture. The materialist mansion that we as modern people have constructed for ourselves has become for many an unbearably oppressive prison whose spiritual emptiness is all too apparent. The sensible course of action is to visit the archives, find the building plans, and begin a discussion of what has gone wrong. This would be to admit, however, that a mistake has been made, and there is widespread unwillingness to consider that option—not least because, even in our heartfelt misery, we still rather like our living quarters and do not want to move out.*

*The alternative choice is escapism, that is, the modern attempt to have our materialist cake and to eat it, but to drown its taste with strong wine. We embrace modern reality to the extent that it is convenient for us to do so for the purposes of income and security, but we make it palatable by fleeing from it as soon as we are able and entering the world of fantasy, where the mind need no longer be engaged and the senses and the appetites can take over.*

*The object is to shut out the pain of the everyday world. Movies and TV soaps achieve this for some; parties and “raves” for others. Drugs can be combined with almost any such activity to increase one’s personal distance from what is ordinary and mundane. This is homo sapiens in party mode, who borrows his or her motto for partying, perversely, from Qohelet (albeit it in corrupt form): “Let us eat, drink, and be merry” (cf. Luke 12:19)....*

*[This] escapism often has religious overtones...It is “spiritual cleansing” from modern culture that is sought—a way out from under the crushing weight of a world that defines our humanness in terms of our economic usefulness and productivity, constricts our imagination and creativity, and can tell us nothing about what it all means. The answer lies, it is thought (whether consciously or not), in using modern technology itself to liberate us from the everyday society that oppresses us. We feel better about it all once we have spent an evening watching our favorite TV shows or have danced the night away while drugged with Ecstasy or alcohol to heighten the experience, that is, once we have entered a “sacred” space away from the normal secular and enslaving space we regularly occupy.<sup>1</sup>*

Against the foolish and trivial—yes, fundamentally deceived—escapism of our society, Solomon returns to the topic of wisdom in the second half of his book. He suggests that life is solved, not by escaping from it, but by embracing it; not by indulging fantasy,

but by accepting reality. In a word, what makes life “better” (8x in vv. 1-14) is “wisdom” (11x in chapter 7).

Wisdom basically means “skill” (cf. Exodus 35:33) and when used to refer to life speaks of “skillful living” or “applied knowledge.” It is attaining understanding (i.e., truth or reality) and then successfully applying it to life in decisions, actions, pursuits, etc. Escapism, then, is doubly flawed, for it both increases the noise in order to keep the silence from forcing our minds to think, and it militates against allowing a moment of somber reflection to alter our course.

Solomon has already exhausted the path of escapism (chapters 1-6; e.g., “mirth” in 7:4 was pursued in 2:1, 2, 10), and although it was wise and well travelled (Matthew 7:13-14), it led to emptiness and eventual destruction. Thus, he is qualified, even as he does here, to stand at the gate of that pathway and cry, “Danger!” With one hand beckoning us to halt, his other hand points in the direction of wisdom, for despite its limitations (1:12-18; 2:14b-17), it is God’s gracious gift of a “better” way (2:12-14a). Yes, **we must not escape from life, but embrace it with God-given, God-oriented wisdom.**

Such wisdom helps us worship “skillfully” or successfully (i.e., reverently, which is acceptable to God), even as we saw in 5:1-7. But that wisdom is meant to direct all of our life, as well. Thus, Solomon suggests it to us here as a part of the solution to the problems of life. Specifically, he is going to describe wisdom in five ways.

## WISDOM IS BEING SERIOUS ABOUT LIFE (vv. 1-4).

*A good name [or reputation] is better  
than precious ointment [or perfume],  
and the day of death [is better] 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 [or take it to] 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.*

For Solomon, one of the greatest of life's problems is death (2:14-17; 3:19; 6:6). Wisdom understands this difficulty, but also knows how to handle it.

### 1. **Wisdom accepts the reality of death.**

**Illustration:** "The late Dr. Ernest Becker wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*: '...the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man' (Free Press, 1975, p. ix)."<sup>2</sup>

While that may be the normal response, the wise person will accept that death is indeed his destiny. He won't fight it, flee from it, fear it, or be frustrated with it. Instead, everything that is associated with death—legacies after one's death (v. 1), the moment of one's death (v. 1), the funeral after one's death (v. 2), the all-inclusive inescapability of death (v. 2), and the sorrow and soberness of death (vv. 3-4)—takes on a fresh and even appreciated reality. When stacked up against the joyful birth of life (v. 1), prosperity in life (i.e., "precious ointment"—v. 1), and enjoyment in life ("feasting"—v. 2;

"laughter"—v. 3; "mirth"—v. 4), wisdom considers death to be "better" still.

That comparison/contrast (crystalized in verse 1) can be interpreted in one of two ways: (1) happy times teach us less than hard times which can bring about moral improvements; or (2) it is better to end one's life with a good reputation than to merely start life favorably.<sup>3</sup> Common to both interpretations is the understanding that death, unlike anything else about life, gives to man a healthy responsibility (which is why it is "better").

### 2. **Wisdom accepts the responsibility of death.**

The reality of death introduces to us a three-fold responsibility, which wisdom readily accepts.

#### a. **Wisdom ponders a sober reflection.**

First, death provides us with the responsibility to soberly reflect (i.e., "take it to heart," v. 2; "sadness of the countenance," v. 3), and such reflection usually adjusts both our perspective and pursuits. It reorients us to what really is important in life, which is why this conversation alone will cause a busy, unconcerned, secular college student to thoughtfully pause and question himself/herself. A brush with death has more than once redirected the self-centered and career-driven father or mother and reoriented him/her towards faith and family. The inescapable reality of death—reminded to us in the car crash, the jarring phone call, the hospital room, the obituary page, the mortuary, the cemetery, etc.—causes us to slow down and reflect along these lines: "Since life is short and death is coming, is what I'm focused on and pursuing really worth living for?" Such sober reflection is a beneficial responsibility of death.

**b. Wisdom pursues a good reputation.**

Second, death provides us with the responsibility to cultivate a good reputation and noteworthy legacy. Having soberly reflected on death, the wise individual now seeks a “good reputation” rather than extravagant possessions (i.e., “precious perfume”) or entertaining recreation (i.e., “feasting,” “laughter,” “mirth”). While Solomon has already shown the place of those things (e.g., “eat, drink, and enjoy the good of your labor, for it’s a gift from God”), he now suggests something “better.” While death will consume our possessions and terminate our enjoyments, it will also solidify our legacy. Wisdom understands this and responsibly begins to develop a good name that will meet with the approval of the sovereign God (3:10-15).

**c. Wisdom plans an appropriate preparation.**

According to the New Testament, death is the “end of all men” only from a physical perspective. While Solomon will merely suggest the existence of life beyond death (12:7), the New Testament clarifies what comes after. Scripture records, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27), and it asks the question, “Are you ready to die and face that judgment?” (Hebrews 2:2-4).

Death and its accompanying judgment has more than once stirred a person to consider the eternal security of his soul. In the New Testament, we learn that death is solved by eternal life, which has always been the promised answer (Titus 1:2; cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11). However, while death is universally experienced, eternal life is only universally offered; not everyone will enjoy it, but only those who have turned in repentant faith to the “Captain of their Salvation,” Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:10). The writer of Hebrews stated that “by the grace of God,” Jesus did “taste

death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9). His experience of death provided tremendous hope for all those who wisely respond to the problem of death (Hebrews 2:14-15):


*Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same, that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*


The fear of and bondage to death have been broken by Jesus for all those who believe in Him. The wise individual accepts the reality of death and responsibly prepares for death by turning in repentant faith to the “Captain of their Salvation” (Hebrews 2:10). Thereafter, they can wisely live and boldly approach death, knowing that it is merely the doorway to eternal life.


One commentator beautifully summarizes this point:


*The work that death and its friend illness must do in our lives is to break in on us and confront us with this important reality, namely, that we are mortal beings who only live for a short time, whereas God is God. Death is an evangelist. It helps us to see that there is a great gulf fixed between Creator and creature and places us in a position therefore truly to worship and to repent of our sins. In God’s grace death and illness offer us the gift of knowing the preciousness of mortal life, which must soon pass away, and therefore of knowing the importance of not wasting time. In God’s grace death and illness also offer us the beginnings of wisdom and insight about how to live life well during our time here, for death, if looked courageously in the eye, allows the embrace of wisdom and thus of life, even in the midst of death. Death allows the embrace of serious living before God, which has at its heart “the fear of the Lord.”*

*True, death is our great enemy (1 Cor. 15:26); yet paradoxically in God's grace, it becomes our friend, because it convinces us to die to self and abdicate the throne of our lives to God, who is the sovereign King. It is, in the end, only this dying to self that removes death's sting; for there is then nothing left, in the end, to lose (15:55–56). Death is not to be escaped—and indeed, will not be escaped. It is best met face to face on the road and studied.*<sup>4</sup>

 **Application:** How has the reality of death been driven home to you? *open discussion*

 What healthy reflections and reorientations has death provoked from you? *open discussion*

 From what we've learned from Solomon so far in this book, what do you think he has in mind when he mentions a "good reputation" (2:13-14a, 24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 4:6, 9-12; 5:1-7, 12, 18-20)? *open discussion*

 If you were to die today, what would your legacy be? *open discussion*

**Transition:** A wise individual will be marked by a seriousness about life (and death). Secondly, a wise individual will reveal a selectivity about his/her companions.

#### **WISDOM IS BEING SELECTIVE ABOUT COMPANIONS (vv. 5-6).**

*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise,  
than for a man to hear the song of fools.  
For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,  
so is the laughter of the fool; this also is vanity.*

In verses 5-6, Solomon briskly contrasts two very different kinds of companions or counselors, which presents the man or woman of wisdom with a decision. And, although his comments are brief, Solomon doesn't sugarcoat or color his depiction; rather, he


poignantly reveals the difference so that the wise and foolish choice will be readily discerned.


#### **1. Wisdom chooses the caring correction of wisdom.**


Solomon doesn't at all talk about enjoyable benefits of wise friendships—he doesn't talk about the fun times they bring, the encouraging conversations they provoke, the thrilling opportunities they offer, or the meaningful memories they produce. Instead, he highlights one certain aspect of these relationships—confrontation. Wise companions will rebuke their erring friends. The word rebuke means "to speak words that show what another has done wrong, and [what] other actions may follow to show the disapproval."<sup>5</sup> Notice the seriousness and commitment of this term, but also the concern underlying it (cf. Galatians 6:1; Colossians 1:28-29)! Such rebuke certainly stings, but in the context of wisdom, it is also successful—"Rebuke is more effective for a wise man than a hundred blows on a fool" (Proverbs 17:10; cf. 13:1). Wise individuals see the value (i.e., "better") of such correction and thus chose wise and challenging companions over the fleeting frivolity of foolish friends.


#### **2. Wisdom refuses the fleeting frivolity of foolishness.**


Foolish friends certainly know how to enjoy a good time (i.e., "song," "laughter"), but their end is swift, like kindling burning at the start of a fire (cf. Psalm 58:9; 118:12). So, Solomon calls these friends useless (i.e., "vanity"). The wise person will see what is the future of such friendship and will refuse companionship with these fools, for he recognizes that whatever is sacrificed in turning away from these individuals will pale in comparison to what would be lost if their friendship was enjoyed (Proverbs 13:20).

 **Application:** Consider the story of “friendship” in 2 Samuel 13. In what way did Amnon manifest some level of wisdom before he sinned (v. 2)? *He considered immorality “out of the question” (NET).*

 In what way did Tamar suggest wisdom to Amnon (v. 13)? *She recommended that he simply ask king David for her hand in marriage.*

 In what ways did the foolish companionship of Jonadab adversely affect Amnon? *open discussion*

 This foolish companionship affected others, too—who did it affect and in what ways? *open discussion*

 What consequences did the foolish friend Jonadab reap? *none*

**Transition:** A third characteristic of wisdom is being steadfast against obstacles.

### WISDOM IS BEING STEADFAST AGAINST OBSTACLES (vv. 7-10).

*Surely oppression [or extortion] maketh a wise man mad,  
and a gift [or bribe] destroyeth the heart.*

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

*Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry,  
for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.*

*Say not thou, “What is the cause that [or why were]  
the former days were better than these?”*

*for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.*

It’s been noted that the test of a man’s character is what it takes to stop him. Everyone faces obstacles, but the wise man of character will not be easily hindered or sidetracked. Instead, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” This wise individual doesn’t just say he’s wise; he demonstrates it crucible of daily living (cf. James 3:13-18). Throughout each day, at least

four possible obstacles will confront him, all of which the man of wisdom rejects.

#### 1. **Wisdom rejects corruption (v. 7).**

We saw the word “oppression” in a previous lesson and considered that it is used throughout the Old Testament both generally (i.e., “oppression”) and specifically (i.e., “extortion”). Within this book, both uses have been discovered (4:1—“oppression”; 5:8—“extortion”), but the current context parallels this term with “bribe” and thus suggests “extortion.” Indeed, there is “nothing new under the sun,” and in a culture that has deified the dollar, financial dishonesty is rampant and alluring.

This kind of ethical corruption “makes a wise man mad” and “destroys his heart.” The word “make mad” literally means to “turn into a fool” (Job 12:17; Isaiah 44:25), and “destroy” speaks of “corruption” (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:18; Jeremiah 23:1). When seemingly wise people buy into financial impropriety, their understanding heart is corrupted, their wisdom becomes its opposite, and their character is susceptible to many other forms of depravity.

#### 2. **Wisdom rejects impatience (v. 8).**


Wisdom sees a matter through to the end, for its firm conviction is that the “end of a thing is better than the beginning thereof.” Much enthusiasm and energy accompanies the launch of something, but the excitement soon fades, even as does the freshness and novelty of it. At that point, many proud or “high-spirited” (lit. cf. Isaiah 5:15) people turn back, for their self-infatuation demands instant gratification. But not so the man of wisdom. Instead, he remains resolute and sticks to it, and his patience and perseverance is rewarded by a fruitful result (“better...end”).


### 3. *Wisdom rejects bitterness (v. 9).*


We already saw the phrase “be hasty” in 5:1, where we were warned against approaching God rashly and thoughtlessly. Now, in life as in worship, we are counseled against “hastiness” in our spirit. Many things in life provoke and stir us, but the man of wisdom maintains his composure and avoids the temptation to “fly off the handle.” His counterpart, however, is quick-tempered and thereby betrays his true foolish character. One version translates verse 9 this way: “Control your temper, for anger labels you a fool” (NLT).

### 4. *Wisdom rejects wistfulness (v. 10).*

Verse 10 warns us against living anywhere but in the present. In short, wise people don’t long for the “good old days,”<sup>6</sup> in part because they never existed. Every age has had its share of prosperity and adversity, and while the past cannot be changed, the present can be chosen. So, “Carpe diem!” wrote the Roman poet Horace—“Seize the day!”<sup>7</sup> The wise man certainly learns from the past, but he lives in the present. Victorian essayist Hilaire Belloc wrote, “While you are dreaming of the future or regretting the past, the present, which is all you have, slips from you and is gone.”<sup>8</sup>

 **Application:** In what ways have you seen seemingly wise men/women ruined by these obstacles? *open discussion*

 Which of the above obstacles do you struggle with? *open discussion*

 What steps will you take to steadfastly practice wisdom in rejecting these obstacles? *open discussion*


**Transition:** Wisdom is being serious about live, being selective about companions, being steadfast against obstacles, and fourthly being safeguarded against harm.


## WISDOM IS BEING SAFEGUARDED AGAINST HARM (vv. 11-12).

*Wisdom is good with [or like] an inheritance,  
and by it there is profit [or advantage] to them that see the sun.  
For wisdom is a defense, and money is a defense;  
but the excellency [or advantage] of knowledge is  
that wisdom giveth [or preserves the] life to them that have it.*

Verses 11-12 teach what Solomon already stated in 2:13-14—“Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walketh in darkness.” Solomon has inquired about what brings an advantage in life (2:15; 6:8, 11), and here he partially answers that. Whatever its limitations, common sense and wisdom benefit one’s life, just like money or an inheritance does.

In verse 12, Solomon is a bit more specific about the particular “advantage” he has in mind. He says that wisdom is a “defense” and “gives life.” “Defense” refers literally to a shade or shadow (Psalm 17:8; 91:1; Jonah 4:5) and metaphorically to the protection offered by such a shade (Numbers 14:9). “To give life” is better rendered “to preserve life” (Genesis 12:12; Exodus 1:17; Numbers 31:15; Deuteronomy 6:24; Joshua 9:15; Isaiah 7:21; Jeremiah 49:11). So, Solomon advocates wisdom as that which both protects and preserves one’s life.

 **Application:** In what ways does practical wisdom (i.e., common sense) protect and preserve one’s life? *open discussion*

 In what ways does biblical wisdom (i.e., obedience to God’s Word) protect and preserve one’s life (cf. Proverbs 3:1-26)? *open discussion [personal illustration of honoring my parents and “it was well with me”]*

**Transition:** The final characteristic of wisdom is being surrendered to God’s sovereignty.

## WISDOM IS BEING SURRENDERED TO GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY (v. 13-14).

*Consider the work of God,  
for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?  
In the day of prosperity be joyful,  
but in the day of adversity consider:  
God also hath set the one over against the other  
[or God has made the one as well as the other],  
to the end that man should find nothing after him.*

This final point is fundamental to all the others. Solomon rehearses a theme he's been consistently preaching—God is sovereign, and we are finite (cf. 3:9-11; 5:2, 4). God has shrouded life in a mystery that only He knows (i.e., He has “made” some things “crooked” that we cannot straighten; He has “made” both the “day of prosperity” and the “day of adversity,” but has not revealed to us when those days or “times” are—1:15; 3:9-11; 6:10-12), and we are wise to surrender to that. Just as we cannot change the past (v. 10), we cannot predict the future (v. 14). Thus, we are compelled to daily trust and joyfully submit to God, and this surrendering to God's sovereignty (i.e., fearing Him) is the “beginning of wisdom” (cf. Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10).



**Application:** In what ways does surrendering to God's sovereignty help us take life seriously? Choose companions wisely? View obstacles steadfastly? Act carefully?  
*open discussion*

## CONCLUSION

The difficulties of life are not solved through escapism, but by embracing all of it as from the hand of a sovereign and good God. With that fundamental framework established, we can allow wisdom from God (cf. James 1:5; 3:13-18) to teach us how to skillfully navigate this “crooked” existence before all things are “straightened” in eternity.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 146-47.

<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 19.

<sup>3</sup> NET Bible note #8 in verse 1.

<sup>4</sup> Provan, 147-48.

<sup>5</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

<sup>6</sup> “Don't long for ‘the good old days.’ This is not wise.” (NLT)

<sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.