

A Better Way to Live in a Fallen World



Eccl. 6:10–7:29

Bro. Ricky Cunningham

I discovered this week something that I did not know. I learned this from Philip Bracken. Did you know that NASA gave a grant to the University of Wyoming, specifically their English department, to develop a class called Interstellar Message Composition? NASA has been working tirelessly because they have the belief that there is life outside our planet, and for years, they have been working feverishly. We have spent millions and millions of dollars trying to find aliens and we have been really trying to find a way to communicate with them once they are discovered. But NASA suddenly realized that when we make that discovery we have not thought about what going to say, so they have given a grant to an English class to write a message. The professor of that class believes that the first message we send needs to be a simple SOS message, ten words or less. So the prevailing thought of what that message should be from one of those higher-educated English students is going to be this, "We are an adolescent species searching for our identity." That says a lot about higher

education, amen? I know some of you rolled your eyes with the very thought that there is another life form outside the galaxy besides us as humans and to know that we would actually try to communicate with another lifeform. I hope it doesn't surprise you but I, your pastor, believe there is another life form beyond this planet — and He had the desire to communicate with us before we ever thought about communicating with Him. Praise the Lord, He didn't send us a nine-word SOS! He not only sent us His Son but He sent us His Word.

Let's open to the book of Ecclesiastes. I have always heard wise people say the more they study, the less they seem to know. I have really struggled with the book of Ecclesiastes. Kory makes it look so easy but I am struggling. So in full humility, I say this to you — after studying this week, I am at least wise enough to know that I don't know as much as I thought I knew, but I am going to give you my best attempt at interpreting God's Word through the preacher we all believe to be Solomon. For our public reading, we are going to read chapter 6 verse 12, and chapter 7 verse 14.

Scripture

"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?"

"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."

I want to point out something before we begin. The last three verses of chapter 6 in our English Bibles are in what's called straight prose, but when we come to chapter 7 verses 1–13, you are going to see that there's a change in style. That change in style is because there's going to be proverbial sayings in these thirteen verses. There's going to be pithy sayings, so to speak, wise statements; therefore, they are written in most of our English Bibles like they are in Hebrew, which is in the style of poetry. When verse 13 ends, Solomon goes back to straight prose, so we have prose, poetry, prose. Wouldn't you know it? It would fall to me again,

an AM guy, to have to preach on an FM passage...but I am going to try to do it to the best of my ability.

Starting with chapter 6:10, the writer is continuing his thought but he's starting a new thought at the same time, so let's back up in our Bibles and look at verses 10–12 because they are going to form the introduction to our message this morning. Listen what these verses say, "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 more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? 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?" I believe, like many Jewish scholars, that Solomon here is referring back to creation. In creation, God spoke everything out of nothing, and once He spoke things into existence, He named things. When light appeared, God called it day. He created land and called it Earth. He created man and named him. In Jewish thought, if you name something or someone, for that to be proper you must have authority over it, you must be sovereign over it. So Solomon is saying everything that is has already been named by someone who is sovereign over it, and when we think about creation, we know what man is. God named us 'man' because it reveals who we are; we are from dirt, we are just an old clod, so to speak. We are earthy; we are from the dirt, from the earth, from the land. I think Star Trek got it right in many of those episodes; they talk about us as earthlings, and there's something in us we all have in common that differentiates us from that species they were meeting in their imagination. What Solomon is doing is reminding us that we are earthlings who live in a fallen world and there is a being that is stronger than us. There's a being who named us, who is sovereign over us, and He is God. He is stronger than us, so just quit talking about it, quit arguing with Him; you are never going to win. You are going to lose every time you go up against Him because He's heavenly and you are an earthling.

Now, Solomon is going to remind us there's a sovereign over us, but most of us look at life under the sun so he asked this question — who can know what's really good for earthlings who live for such a very short time that

their life is like a shadow that passes? James would agree with Solomon. Our life is like a mist, a vapor, appears for a short time, poof, gone. And who can tell man what's going to come after him? To Solomon, the answer is nobody. He is trying to get us to see how to live life in a fallen world, to where from time to time we are going to disagree with the sovereign who has authority over us because life under the sun isn't going to make sense sometimes. To do this, he launches into poetry, thirteen verses. He is talking about a better way of living in a fallen world and he's going to tell us in his own language there's a "*more good*" way to live than another way. Now for those of us who are from Dexter, he's going to tell us there's a '*gooder*' way to live in a fallen world. And if you are from the other side of the tracks, he's going to tell us there's a '*more gooder*' way to live. He's not really talking about right or wrong, righteousness, and symbols. Yes, he's going to allude to that, but he's going to say that in a fallen world where we can't figure it out, he's examined life to the degree that there are some things that are (our ESV says) better than other things.

What we are going to see in this is a formula where Solomon is comparing things. Now, I am going to divide these thirteen verses into four sections. Look at verses 1–4 with me, "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. 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. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Can we just process this quickly? In a fallen world, it's better to go to a funeral than a birthday party. Does anybody want to argue with God? Solomon believes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a good name is better than having the ability to buy precious oils. Meaning, a good name is better than having a luxurious standard of living. Does everybody agree? Now, to drive the point home so we understand this truth, so we understand how to have a good name and not pursue a luxurious lifestyle, he said it is better to go to funerals than to birthday parties. It is better to go to the house of mourning where you are mourning the death of someone than to go to a house where there's drinking because we are celebrating somebody's life. Why? Because when you go to a birthday

party, you don't learn anything you just celebrate somebody's birth. When you go to a funeral, you learn something — we are all going to die. In that moment of grief that's on our face, outwardly, it starts to change our heart inwardly. If you let me stay until the first Sunday of May, and I hope you do, I will have been your pastor for over forty years. I have done a lot of funerals and I have been to a lot of funerals, but culture is changing in Western Kentucky. When I first started preaching and I did a funeral, the place was full. There was hardly ever a time when the place wasn't full. Now, the norm when I preach a funeral is there's the family and a couple of other people in the crowd. We just don't go to funerals; we send flowers, we send food, we get on the meal train. We try to go through visitation, if not we post, we send a text, we make phone call. We are too busy to go to funeral. The birthday parties? Wow, we don't miss them. So here's what we are losing — we live in a society now that doesn't go to a funeral and have thirty to forty-five minutes to sit and contemplate that one day we are going to be in a casket. While the preacher or somebody in the family is talking about the person who died, we don't think about what's going to be said at our funeral. How am I going to be thought of? What influence do I have? See, Solomon knew it was *'more gooder'* for us to attend funerals. As a matter of fact, if we consider ourselves wise we had rather go to a funeral than a birthday party because it's the fools who go to the birthday parties and it's the wise who go to funerals, because when we wise people go to a funeral we go and learn how to live our life in light of our death. Life is really, really, really short. You just get one opportunity and you don't want to waste it. After the sermon this morning, a church member came up to me and said, "Bro. Ricky, my daughter who is young, has already written out her obituary and she reads it to herself every morning." Some of you say that's morbid — no, that's biblical. She's living in light of her death and it changes the way you live in a fallen world. Some of us would not make the choices we make if we lived in light of our death.

Secondly, listen to verses 5–7, "It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart."

If you are like me, you see those people coming and you want to go somewhere else because you know what they are going to say is going to hurt. It's going to be a critique. It's going to be a rebuke. But when we see that person comes who sings our song, we want to hear our song being sung. Now, this doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to someone wise who praises us, but what he's contrasting there are wise folks who we need to listen to because they have some sincere critique of us that will help us as we live in a fallen world, and then there's some people that are singing our song but they are fools and we need to quit listening to those songs, even though it's all about us. That song we are listening to that's coming from a fool? It is like in those days of people who cooked with the thorn bush, it crackled and it popped, but it was all flame, no heat. Can you imagine getting ready to grill a steak and going out and getting some briars, and putting the briars under your grill? You wouldn't do that. Even though it will crackle, pop, and make a lot of noise, yes the song of the fool maybe making a lot of noise, but it's no value to you. You need to listen to that wise person. It could be your husband, could be your wife, could be your father, could be your mother, could be your pastor, or could be a friend. We need what they say to us as we navigate a fallen world.

Some of you know this, I think, but I don't say this proudly I just say this truthfully. I have improved a little bit in my preaching since I started almost forty-two years ago. One of the main reasons I have improved is because I have a critic, and she's my number one critic. Her name is Celisa. She's wise. She was on the Calloway County speech team just like I was that won state championships, and I prize her critique. Now, we have learned how to do this and to not do this. In the beginning days, I would preach in this little church in downtown Hardin and then we would go to the Country Crossroads for lunch because somebody would slip a twenty-dollar bill in my hand. That would buy the whole family lunch and have money left over for dessert and a tip in that day. We would leave church and when we would cross that little bridge on our way home, she would start critiquing. I couldn't handle it. I would get defensive; I was still on the high! So, we agreed, "Let me glory for four days, and then on Thursday you critique the sermon," and I am better for it. We live in a fallen world. None of us is experts so we need those wise people. So, we not only live in

light of death, we listen to the wise people in our life, even though it may hurt from time to time.

Thirdly, look at verses 8–10, “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools. Say not, “Why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” We have a little saying in America that goes “All's well that ends well.” We can't always tell how things are going from the beginning or in the middle until it actually ends. There have been a lot of times where we thought we were making the right decision doing the right thing and then it was a disaster. Solomon knew the reason that is— it's because we live in a fallen world. So he says it is “*more good*” to be patient in your spirit than to be proud in your spirit. Do you know what's going to happen if you are proud in your spirit? You are going to think you are right and you aren't going to listen to anybody. What you think is going good is not going to end well, and you aren't going to have anybody to blame but yourself because of the pride you have got! How can you tell it's pride? You get angry at others. Why are you angry at others? Because they aren't doing what you want them to do. They have another opinion, they have another thought, and so you are quick to anger. Now, listen. No matter who you are; you may be wise but all of us can still be foolish. Here is what Solomon says, not me — when you lose your temper and you get angry, you are a fool. That is all of us, not the entirety of our life, but in that moment when we let pride take over. So let's be patient, let's be humble, because we live in a fallen world and we are really not going to know some things until it's complete.

And then, Solomon says in verses 11–12, “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.” It's better to have wisdom with your money than money with no wisdom. With money, you can protect your standard of living, but it shouldn't be your standard of living you are worried about. What you should be worried about is your standard of life, and money doesn't preserve a person's standard of life, wisdom does.

Next point. Now, we are going to switch here. There is one more verse of poetry but I am going to put it with a verse of prose so I am going to put verses 13 and 14 together. Verse 13 is poetry but the next sentence is prose. Now, most of the scholars stop this at verse 13 and have verse 14 starting something else. I do not believe that's what Solomon is doing. As Kory talks about there are bursts of light in this book in the midst of this darkness, I think this is a burst of light. So when we are thinking about living in a fallen world and there's a '*more gooder*' way to live, there's a better way to live, here's what he says in verse 13, "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" Even though we are living under the sun, there needs to be times when we stop and recognize we are not in control of the world but God is. Do you know what He's done? He's made some things crooked. Not all things are straight. This isn't attributing evil to God, but it is attributing to God that He has designed the world and He has a purpose for some crooks, some speed bumps, some valleys, some cliffs, and you need to consider that. You need to quit trying to make those things straight, meaning you need to quit trying to make it the way you want it to be and accept the way it is because you are not going to change it.

If I could use a baseball analogy, most of us baseball players are fastball hitters, but we live in a fallen world where we are going to get an occasional curve ball so we have to learn to hit curve balls. I learned this the hard way. I played baseball in Hardin, Kentucky, in downtown Hardin. I was so skilled at being a second baseman that I was voted by the coaches to be the all-star second baseman of the league! They felt so good about our team that they decided to play other teams and other tournaments. We would go to the big city of Murray and the big city of Benton, and we played one as far as way as Calvert City. Now, I want you to know that in our league we learned to be great fastball hitters because we had one of the fastest pitchers in this area. At the first of the season, he would strike most of us out, but by the end of the season, we were hitting his fastballs. His name was Stefan Hutchens. That ball would smack into that mitt, but then we learned to hit his pitches. So when we went to our first tournament and we faced Murray we were not worried, even though they were a big metropolitan city and we were just a small town. There were

only nine playing at a time and I was the lead-off batter. I will never forget that first tournament. I was in the batter's box, and being a right-handed batter, all of a sudden when the pitch started coming to me it was right at my shoulder. You don't want to get hit by a fastball, so I took a step back. When I took a step back and leaned back, the ump called it a strike. How could a ball that was going to hit my shoulder suddenly be called a strike when I had bailed out of the batter's box? Now, I was not an argumentative kid but I knew the ump had messed up. I was puzzled when I looked at the pitcher though. His name was Terry Gibson and he had a smirk on his face. I lined up again and this next pitch came toward me again, so I bailed back again, and it was strike two. For the first time in my life, I had faced a curveball. Needless to say, we didn't do very good in that game against Terry.

Some of you aren't doing very good in life. You are living good but not '*more gooder*' because you refuse to consider the work of God. You refuse to consider that God has ordained some crooks in your life and He's not going to make them straight, and you are not going to make them straight. Here's what you need to realize — verse 14, straight prose, "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." You are going to have a day of prosperity and you are going to have a day of adversity. On your day of prosperity, just rejoice. Amen? Just rejoice. Just enjoy the moment! But get ready. When that day of adversity comes, no, you are not going to rejoice but you are going to consider. You can't change it, you can't make it straight, so quit arguing with the One who has sovereign authority over your life! Here's what Solomon says to us — ultimately, God is not going to let us figure all things out and know all things because if we did we would be Him, and He's not going to share His glory. We are earthlings, so consider that there's a sovereign God in control of your life! You are not going to learn from the times of rejoicing because you are not going to think anything about it; you are going to take them for granted. But how many of you have had a day of adversity that changed your life? You didn't change the day and you didn't change the event, but it changed you.

Next section, verses 15–18, “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. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” Here's what bothers Solomon — in his vain attempt at life and looking at life, he realized there were some righteous people who died in their righteousness; they died really righteous and they died really young. And then, there were some people who were really wicked and they lived in their wickedness to a long life and they prospered. That bothered him. Does it bother any of you? So Solomon says (you are not going to like this but I am going to say it anyway); spiritually, be a moderate. Don't go to that extreme of trying to be super righteous, and what he's talking about is being self-righteous. Some of you are setting yourselves up for failure because you are just like a Pharisee — you are so self-righteous, you so think your way of life is right, and you are setting yourself up for a fall. Then, there are others who have gone to the other extreme. You flirt with sin and you flirt with danger, and you are going to end your life before it's time. Solomon says be moderate. How do you be moderate? You fear God, and God saves you from the extreme of self-righteousness and He saves you from the extreme of flirting with sin. Amen?

Now, next section, verses 19–22, “Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.” We all know this truth, right—there is not a righteous man on the earth who doesn't occasionally sin, so be careful what you hear even righteous people say. Because sometimes they going to be talking about you and it's going to hurt your feelings, and you are not going to believe they think that about you. Have you ever had your spouse tell you something, and then later they say, “No, I didn't mean that!” Oh yes they did or they wouldn't have said it, right? So listen, we live in a world where we have to be careful; even your servant

who knows you may say something about you — but don't live your life based on what other people are saying. Now, this isn't contradicting the wise man who's going to critique you. The bottom line is there is no one here who's never said anything bad about anybody. I have only been to a couple funerals where I heard this statement, "I never heard her say anything bad about anybody." You have heard somebody say something bad about that you reacted to, and you have said that same thing about other people but you don't want them to react what you said! You want other people to tell you what someone said about you, but you don't want them to tell what you said. So let's just confess that in a fallen world there's nobody righteous that never messes up.

Now, that brings us to the conclusion, verses 23–26, "All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her." Solomon says I have been trying to figure out life, I can't figure it out, but here's this one thing I have figured out — stay away from that woman who's a snare and a net. When you go for her and you get her, you are going to get more than you bargained for. She is not who she says she is and presents herself to be. When you get in a relationship with her, you are going to be in fetters; you are going to be chained! And those of you who are sinners, those of you who are selfish, those of you who are about yourself, you are going to fall for that. But those who are seeking God, we are going to have the wisdom to stay away from that kind of lady. Solomon spends three chapters in Proverbs warning us about that kind of lady. Pray you are not married to that kind of lady. I pray that in this fallen world you are wise enough to stay away from that kind of woman.

The last section, verses 27–28, "Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man

among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found." I know that isn't popular today and I know we are on *this* side of the cross — but in that day, Solomon says I found one wise man among a thousand but when it came to ladies, he didn't even find one. Ladies were half the population so what he is emphasizing here was there's just one wise, righteous person among two thousand. The odds are really slim we are going to bump into a righteous, wise person. That's what he's trying to point. He's not saying ladies are bad and men are one in a thousand better than a lady — that's not his point.

Look at this last verse, "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." God made us right to bear His image, but we blew it because we wanted to figure out life on our own. We wanted to be our own god. Now in closing, can I just bring you on this side of the cross? This whole sermon is about a '*more good*' way to live, a better way to live in a fallen world. But on this side of the cross, I can promise you there is a best way to live in a fallen world. See, Solomon did not know that God would send a Man who would be righteous and would never sin. He didn't know we could live in light of His death, not our death. And living in light of His death not our death, we can live wisely in a fallen world because you can trust everything the One, who has lived the life you couldn't live and went to the cross to die the death you should have died, says. You can trust what He says, so quit arguing with Him. Quit doing it your way and let's live the full, true Christian life.