

Ecclesiastes 7: 2-4; “Sorrow is better than Laughter”, A Bible Study
prepared by Pastor Paul Rendall for the evening of
September 29th, 2010, and delivered to those
gathered at the Rendall home for prayer.

Solomon, in this book, refers to himself as “the Preacher”. In Chapter 1, verse 12, he says, “I the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.” “And I set my heart to seek and to search out wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven...” He was a preacher because in writing this book, he was one who has set forth the truth which he, himself, had discovered by investigation and his experience in living his life. Life, he is saying, is a series of discoveries which come to us from the hand of God in relation to what we attempt to do and to discover ourselves. God’s will and His ways are not at all obvious to us as we go about to live our life. We are not always able to understand His providence. But God does give wisdom to those who seek for it even if it is hard to see and hard to find. God’s wisdom and His ways in relation to our experience of life are not always easy to understand. Solomon knew this, and so he wrote this book from the standpoint of experiencing life from his own observations as a Preacher-King so that He might help us to understand life better. He brings God into his writing of this book only at critical points so that we might understand that the things which He reveals to any man about himself, and his life, are all in His sovereign control. You and I will probably never have all the opportunities and means that Solomon had to investigate the meaning of life and how we should live it, but it will not matter if we learn from him. God reveals himself through His Word the Bible. And this unusual book is part of that Bible. What you should know is that He does reveal Himself to us through the experience of those who wrote the books of the Bible. Their experiences of life and their observations written down for us are an infallible guide which will lead us to heaven and a truly satisfying life if we pay attention to them. God can also use the experience of wise people around us who have read the Bible and have verified the truth of it in their experience, to help you on in your journey through life. The testimony of true believers in God to the truth of the Word in their life is to be received if it leads to the kind of wisdom that God commends in it. Not all the 66 books of the Bible were written in the same way. But that is what makes this book of Ecclesiastes so important and valuable. In Solomon we find a man who had the time and the means to investigate everything by which he could truly satisfy himself in this life “under the sun”. And yet, after making the attempt, he gives us His conclusion. It is all vanity apart from the wisdom which only God can give us.

We saw in our last study that a good name is better than precious ointment. Here today we will find that sorrow is better than laughter. So we see; that in the investigation of the truth about how this life is to be lived; that Solomon found that

there were some things which were better than others for all men to pursue and to spend time experiencing. There are some experiences which are better for you to pursue than others. For in pursuing the thing that is better, it will lead you to discover God's wisdom in relation to them, if you will receive the truth which you will learn by that experience which is related to that which is truly good and lasting. So this evening we want to look at wisdom's better way. Wisdom; that is God's wisdom, will teach us first of all, that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. Then secondly we want to look at the truth that our heart is made better by a sad countenance.

1st of all – God's wisdom will teach us that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. (Verses 1b – 2)

“The day of death is better than the day of one's birth,” it says in verse 1b. We saw in our last study that the day of death can never be in any sense better than the day of one's birth if a person is stepping into Hades when they die, and then eventually is cast into the lake of fire forever at the time of the last judgment. Therefore the person who “has a good name” here is not merely a moral person who is considered by other people to have a good name; but they must be a person who has also tried to do what is good in God's sight. A good name comes from doing good in the sight of God, and then God establishing that person's good name in the sight of men. That person may not have all the knowledge and experience of life to be called the wisest of men in the sight of God, but they are trying to live according to what they do know. They are not simply trying to be wise in their own eyes, but they are striving to know God and what is good in the sight of God and good men. They have thought about how they should live their life in relation to their death. They came to right conclusions to become wise before they came to the house of death. And that is why they can be confident that the day of their death will be better than the day of their birth. They have thought about their life and they have mourned. Turn with me to Matthew Chapter 5 and verse 4. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” This flies right in the face of what many unbelieving people think. They would rather never mourn. They would rather never be present at a funeral where people are mourning the loss of their loved one. They do not like the implications of death; a subject which they do not understand. They do not like to think about the idea of a future judgment when they die. They would rather “celebrate” the life of that person and feast with others and forget all about meeting their Maker. But the person who would find the true meaning of life must come to terms with death. Death is the “end of all men; and the living will take it to heart,” it says here in verse 2.

Turn with me to Daniel Chapter 5 and you will see an example of man who liked to be in the house of feasting. Verse 1 says, “Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.” “While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in

Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.” “Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.” “They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.” “In the same hour the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the kings’ palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.” “Then the king’s countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.” “The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers.” “The king spoke saying to the wise men of Babylon, ‘Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.’”

Let me say, at this point, I think that Belshazzar would now have given anything that he could have, to have been in the house of mourning before this, because he now was greatly afraid of the loss of his kingdom and his life, even though the words had not been translated yet. He thought that he was secure in his house of pleasure, but He had forgotten God. This whole incident is a picture of what great fears will come to those persons who went to the house of feasting in their lifetime and saw no reason to mourn as they thought about their life, and their accountability to God. Belshazzar did not realize what life was about, nor did he believe in the God who had made him for his own good pleasure; not his own. Look over at verse 18. Daniel has been brought in. Belshazzar did not know who Daniel was, even though he was very high up in his kingdom. Belshazzar was too busy living the life of pleasure to be thinking about the administration of his kingdom. Listen to what Daniel says. “O king, the most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor.” “And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him.” “Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down.” “But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him.” “Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys.” “They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.” “But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this.” (He did not go in to the house of mourning) “And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven.” “They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them.” “And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or

hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.” The day of Belshazzar’s death was that very night. The hand wrote on the wall told him of his doom. “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin (Plural of Peres).” It meant as it says in verse 26 – “God has numbered your kingdom and finished it.” Tekel – You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; and Peres: Your kingdom has been divide and given to the Medes and Persians.” Verse 30 says, “On that very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.” He did not take to heart what had happened to his grandfather Nebuchanezzar. He did not go to the house of mourning.

What then does it mean to go to the house of mourning? It means to come to mourn over what our own sin has done to dishonor God, and to mourn over what our sin does to hurt ourselves and other people. It is to mourn over the lost opportunities to do good and to glorify God, because we have lived for ourselves and not improved our time and opportunities to serve God. But thank God, while there is life, there is the possiblitiy of change. The Apostle Paul shows us something in relation to this if you will turn over with me to 2 Corinthians 7: 5. He says, “For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side.” “Outside were conflicts, inside were fears.” “Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more.” “For even if I made you sorry (or sorrowful) with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it.” “For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry (or sorrowful), though only for awhile.” “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance.” “For you were made sorry in a a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing.” “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” In other words they came to the house of mourning, and in that house, they found repentance. It is indeed better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting, for in it they found the grace to repent and to find real and lasting happiness in doing God's will. In this particular case it involved the church’s seeing that they had sinned in tolerating the sinful behavior of one of their members. It involved their excommunicating the offender. But it also involved their welcoming him back in to the church now that he had repented of his sins. They could now extend true comfort to him and bring him back into fellowship with themselves. They took Paul’s admonition to heart. And we should as well. To learn to mourn so that we come to repentance over any known sin is better than feasting and tolerating sin. The former leads to eternal life. The latter leads to eternal death. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

2ndly - We want to look at the truth that our heart is made better by a sad countenance. (Verse 3)

“Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better.” “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools in the house of mirth.” A part of repentance is sorrow over sin. That sorrow brings a healing to the heart. Repentance is a grace by which the heart is made better. In repentance there is turning from sin, and a turning to God. In repentance the heart enters the house of mourning and does not laugh any longer at sin. But the other part of repentance is “the apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.” This mercy brings healing to the sin-sick heart. The repenting man can say with the Psalmist David in Psalm 30, verse 11, “You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothes me with gladness.” The unrepentant man laughs to forget the consequences of his sin and the judgment that is coming. Proverbs Chapter 14, verse 13 says this: “Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief.” But the Christian is one who prays that in entering the house of mourning, that his sorrow will be turned to the joy of being restored to the favor of God.

We will close with James Chapter 4. These verses show us the benefit of being in the house of mourning. It will deliver us from the sinful mindset of worldliness and God will lift us up, restoring our fellowship with Him. Verse 4 – Adulterers and adulteresses!” “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’ “But He gives more (or a greater) grace.” “Therefore He says, ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ “Therefore submit to God.” “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” “Lament and mourn and weep!” “Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.” “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” James is speaking to worldly Christians when he says all these things. Ask yourself – Am I a worldly Christian? If I am, then I need to go to the house of mourning. I do not need more feasting. I do not need more joking and laughter. I need mourning and weeping and confessing my sins. I need to resist the devil so that he will flee from me. I need to draw near to God so that He would draw near to me. I need to humble myself in His sight so that He would raise me up. Let us cleanse our hands and purify our hearts if we are double-minded; thinking that we can have the world and Jesus too. Let us consider that we are soon to be leaving this world and meeting the One “by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Let us boast in His cross and His resurrection life, by which He is leading us on to glory. Let us not be afraid to enter the house of mourning. It will lead to everlasting joy.

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