

Ecclesiastes 7 (1-4) – Sorrow is Better than Laughter

Wow! What a title! It seems so counterintuitive; no one thinks this way. And it seems so counterfactual; no one lives like this. I don't think anyone would agree with this! But this is a truth that is taken right from this text.

Now, of course, we must consider the context. The text in vs.3 says this, but what does Solomon *mean* by saying this? That is the question we will answer. And it is vital to know and properly apply to your life. Because when it comes to learning how to develop a godly character and solid reputation, this text teaches you something the world doesn't.

There is a place of learning that teaches you like no other place can. And to be mature, you must take some classes in this school.

Through the first 6 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon gives you many examples of the vanity of this world, especially when you try to live your life without God. And now, in chapter 7, Solomon gives you wisdom on how to counter some of these examples of vain living.

The first part of vs.1 says – *A good name is better than precious ointment*. Some versions say perfume. The point is that a good reputation is of great value. Proverbs 22:1 says a good name is more desirable than great wealth. And the second part of vs.1 continues this thought.

The second part of vs.1 says – *and the day of death than the day of birth*. Solomon says the day of a person's death is better than the day of their birth. This refers to someone who leaves behind the lasting legacy of a good name. But it applies to all people. What kind of reputation will you leave behind?

The day of your birth is a day of celebration. And you continue to celebrate your birthday each year. But the day of your death is more significant. On the day of your birth, people celebrate a new life and its possibilities. But your character is not revealed, and your reputation has not been established.

So, every birth is celebrated on the same basis. But as your life is lived, your character is developed and displayed, and your reputation is established. And on the day of your death, people will celebrate how your life was lived. How will you be remembered? What reputation will you leave behind? This is what people will celebrate at your funeral.

Wisdom knows that a solid reputation takes a long time to build, but just a moment to lose. Trust is earned over time. Spouses trust one another because of years of faithfulness. Parents want to build trustworthy children. And parents need to recognize the importance of their reputations before their children. And maturing people, instead of getting bent out of shape by someone else's words, learn to consider the source of those words.

Vs.2-4 continue with the idea of building character and a solid reputation. And the surprising "school" and "classes" where these are best developed.

Vs.2 says – *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.* The house of mourning refers to a funeral. At a funeral, people consider the life of the deceased, their character and reputation – *and the living will lay it to heart.* Often at funerals you will hear people say, "They are gone, but they will live on in our hearts." And it is true. The wise person considers the results of a life well spent. And the trajectory of their own life.

Vs.3 says – *Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.* Everyone has to deal with sadness. But when you deal with it rightly, by grieving, and lamenting, but learning, it's one of the great teachers in this life. Sorrow is better than laughter because laughter doesn't give long term instruction. It doesn't lead to contemplation. It doesn't lead to conviction. It doesn't lead to course correction.

Everyone likes laughter. And laughter is often good, and it isn't necessarily bad. However, nothing brings out the issues of life like death. Nothing can mold character like suffering and sorrow. It is right to cry, to mourn, and to

grieve the loss. But grieving should also make you consider this life's limitations, and your life's goals. In that sense, grieving can be a great good.

Make sure you understand that Solomon isn't teaching you to throw Bible verses at people in the immediate aftermath of loss. He is talking about learning and building yourself. Comforting others in their pain means having a loving presence and listening ear. It isn't about teaching a lesson in correct theology. It is about letting them grieve. Let people process in their own way. And as you go through life, you make sure that you live the right theology. That is how most people will learn it from you.

Vs.4 says – *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.* What is going to cause you to grow, to turn, to rejoice in the right things? Living to please yourself, or living to please God? To never contemplate the endgame is to seriously miss the mark.

No one likes getting sick, hurt, or old, because it costs you and it limits you. And Solomon is not talking about being in love with your sadness. He is talking about processing things rightly. When all you do is avoid serious things, when they do come, you won't be able to process it in a godly way.

We also need to consider how Solomon is using the word laughter here. The term "laughter" is used in Ecclesiastes 7:3, 7:6, and 10:19 metaphorically of foolish or simply instant gratification. It speaks of a person that focuses on the pleasures of this life and for the moment, without considering the future or building any lasting benefit.

Adversity stimulates an eternal perspective. There is much to be gained by sober reflection on suffering, sorrow, and death. Of course, everyone prefers laughter and pleasure, but there are benefits to sorrow and mourning. It can make you think about life, its meaning, and your priorities. Sorrow and suffering can bring you to God, and they can even give you hope, peace, and strength. Because there is a mellowing and maturing that takes place in affliction and sorrow that cannot be attained any other way.

Solomon is not condemning happiness. He is advocating an appropriate peace and contentment that is not based on temporary circumstances alone.

Everyone has to go through or maybe even live with sorrow. But lots of people experience sorrow and don't get anything out of it. They grieve, and lament, but they don't learn. They don't grow. Little waves don't rock big boats. And what you may think are big waves aren't so big when you know you're in the ARK. The whole world can be drowning, but you'll be safe.

When something bad happens, a child is all reaction without reflection. An adolescent can reflect later but they are still going to react first. An adult can reflect before they react but they often fail to do so. A mature adult has already reflected and so it tempers how they react.

Only the fool avoids the serious subjects of life. Of course, some take this too far; they morbidly focus on sin and death. And Solomon is not telling the believer to morbidly focus on sin and death. He is not telling you never to laugh. Christianity deals with sin and death, but focuses on God's love in Christ and the joy of his forgiveness. But though believers should laugh and enjoy life – your goal must not be to please yourself, but to please God. At the core God's people are serious minded people.

The Bible doesn't say that grief is godlier than happiness. In fact, in the beatitudes, when Jesus mentions "blessed," it means happy. And Christians are commanded to be joyful. And the heart of the wise is broader than emotion. The fool is the one who is looking for constant diversion from having to deal with their own thoughts.

But if you learn how to look at sorrow, and learn how to deal with your own thoughts, then you will be looking at what other people won't look at. And then you will be able to see what other people won't be able to see. The way to develop a deep happiness even as you have to deal with sadness.

Most people can't see it. Can you?

God is happy. And he wants you to be happy. But he wants you to have more than momentary happiness. He wants to strengthen your happiness even when you have sadness. This isn't denying the reality of that sadness. It is learning how to properly deal with and develop from that sadness.

Part of learning how to be happy involves learning from sorrow. Deep happiness doesn't come from learning how to avoid all sorrow. Deep happiness comes from learning how to apply all sorrow. It doesn't mean you ignore the truth of sorrow. It means you are able to embrace sorrow. It's where you truly grieve, lament, and learn. Because grieving makes you consider this life's limitations, and your life's goals. Lament means you tell the truth that you don't like it, but you will trust God in it. And sorrow leads to contemplation, conviction, and course correction.

This is how you will become stronger and better, instead of stubborn and bitter. In other words, happy.

People say, "I can't change how I feel about things." "I can't change how I deal with things." "This is just the way that I am." As if they cannot change. As if God doesn't care if they change. But God is in the change business. You want proof of God in your life? Your faith will soar when God changes you in that one area that you thought would never change. That's a powerful testimony that will inspire and encourage others. And yourself.

You hear people say, "God loves you just the way you are." And he does. But that doesn't say enough. Here is the truth: God loves you *despite* the way you are. And God loves you enough to help you change the way you are. For his glory, and your good. For your happiness.

So, slow down, and meditate on this – *Sorrow is better than laughter*. And start learning to apply that depth of that truth to all of your life. So that you can glorify Jesus Christ with all of your life. And be happy.

Amen.