

Eccl. 7:1-14, Things to Value

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A. Summary

In answer to the challenge, "Who can tell man what is good" (6:12a), Qohelet here does! Of the 52 occurrences of "good" or "better" in Eccl., 14 (1/3) are in this chapter! v.14 similarly corresponds to the second half of 6:12.

Ironically, the "good" that Qohelet singles out is sorrow! It has much to teach us about life and God's ways with us. Note how incongruent this all is with a Santa Claus god (but entirely consistent with a holy and loving God, whose law requires sorrow to result from sin, and whose love turns that sorrow into a means of blessing).

We can discern a simple ABBA chiasm here. The outer members (1-6,13-14) tell *why* to bear sorrow, from two perspectives, while the center members (7-10,11-12) tell *how*, first negatively, then positively.

B. 7:1-6, Why bear sorrow? (Human perspective)

These six verses list benefits of sorrow and mourning. Two main benefits: the intrinsic value of death as life's graduation; and the lessons others can learn at such a time.

1. v.1, It is at death rather than birth that one can finally assess a man's reputation. Before then, he either has not yet acquired it, or can still lose it through sin. The verse brings out the point by juxtaposing a terse, perhaps well-known proverb (*tob shem mishemen tob*) with another comparison that we are to understand follows the same pattern, not only in degree of betterness, but in kind.

2. vv.2-6, the lessons we learn.

Structure: ABab, where

a) Aa refer to "the house of X": the environment.

b) Bb refer to sorrow and laughter: our response.

c) ab, but not AB, refer to the wise and the fool.

Thus the basic argument is that we should both choose our environment and gauge our response keeping in view the value of sorrow, and we may be judged as wise or foolish depending on this decision.

a) The environment, 2, 4.

Mourning (more than festivities, &IMXA) stimulates men to think about the deep issues of life, because death is universal, and forces us to contemplate our end.

Application: do we spend our time in parties ("house of the drinking feast") or in activities that lead us to contemplate the meaning of life? In watching TV, or in watching and praying?

- b) The response, 3, 5-6
It is sorrow, not laughter, that accomplishes moral improvement. Even in salvation, we enter by way of repentance (2 Cor. 7:10).

v.3 "in the sadness of the face the heart is glad." The thought is close to that of Philippians, where Paul, from the squalor of a Roman prison, exults in God's joy. Godly sorrow, the repentance that results from contemplating the end of all men in the house of mourning, brings more joy than the laughter of the drunken party.

- c) Because of the benefit of sorrow over pleasure, one who always flees to pleasure is a fool, and one who contemplates sorrow is wise.

- 1) v.4, "heart ... in the house ...": That is where they desire to be, where they are comfortable and at home.
- 2) That is: those who try to hide from the fall in superficial jesting are fools. Their laughter is compared with the quick blaze of dry thorns, giving no lasting heat and doing no useful work. Only those who face up to what life is really like can realize true joy.

C. 7:7-10, How Not to Bear Sorrow

Here he illustrates faulty responses to sorrow and grief.

1. v.7a, Oppressing those under us (passing sorrow's buck down the line). Recall that this verb describes taking advantage of a superior position for the sake of gain. It may relieve our immediate needs, but it drives those whom we oppress mad with frustration and bitterness.
2. v.7b, Bribing those over us (to avoid the trouble they would otherwise give us). This likewise secures the comfort of the agent at the expense of the patient, whose heart is corrupted by the reception of the bribe.
3. v.8, Proud impatience
 - a) "The end of a thing" is its outcome, that which it produces. Cf. James 1:2-4; 1 Cor. 10:13 "outcome".
 - b) The "patient in spirit" waits for this outcome and profits from it.
 - c) He is contrasted with the "proud in spirit." Impatience is a species of pride! We insist on being in control, and do not wait for God to work out his way with us.
4. v.9, Abiding Anger
"Anger" here is the same word as "sorrow" in v.3. How can that be good there but bad here? Observe carefully: this

verse talks about entering that state quickly and leaving it slowly. It is not the fact of anger that is wrong, but being quick to lose our temper and slow to regain it, cf. Eph. 4:26.

5. v.10, Living in the past
We are not to retreat into a smug self-righteous recollection of what life used to be like.

D. 7:11-12, How to Bear Sorrow: Wisdom

This was at least implicit in 7-10, in the references to the wise and the fool.

1. 7:11 compares wisdom with an alternative, money: Translate, "Wisdom [is] {as} good {as} an inheritance: {indeed it is better for} them that see the sun."
2. 7:12, the reason:
 - a) Both offer protection (defensive) from the sorrows of life. "Defense," literally "in the shadow of." One can be in the shadow of money, or in the shadow of wisdom, and either one can shield us from the problems of daily life.
 - b) Only wisdom actually gives life (offensive). It goes beyond shielding us, and actually raises us to a higher plane.

E. 7:13-14, Why bear sorrow? (Divine Perspective)

Because God sends it, to keep our eyes on him. The two verses present parallel ideas. The first deals only with evil; the second broadens out to include good as well. Together, they form an argument like Job 2:10. We are happy enough to take good when God sends it, though we are sinners and don't deserve it. Should we complain when God sees fit to send us sorrow?

1. 7:13
 - a) What God does: makes things crooked.
 - b) What we should do: consider this.
 - c) What we cannot do: reverse what he has done.
2. 7:14
 - a) What God does: creates both sorrow and joy.
 - b) What we should do: respond appropriately to both (rejoice in good; consider in evil).
 - c) Thus the third should be the expansion of "can't reverse what he has done."
 - 1) K&D: that man should be able to experience everything in this life, and thus be completely prepared for the life to come. But the text only says what he shall NOT find, not what he has found.
 - 2) Perhaps "after him" refers to God. Cf. 1 Sam. 29:3, "not find anything in s.o." means not to find fault in them. God has created both joy and sorrow so that we, surveying the

world after he has been over it, can find no fault with him.
NB: Either pure joy or pure sorrow would be faulty, for one would contradict his holiness, the other his love.

F. Conclusion

1. Why bear sorrow?
 - a) It is life's graduation.
 - b) It improves our moral character.
 - c) It comes from the hand of God.

2. How bear sorrow?
 - a) Not by abusing our position, or with pride, anger, or living in the past.
 - b) But by wisdom, practical application of the fear of the Lord.