

Guest Preacher Rev. Donald A. Macdonald

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Preacher: Rev. Donald A. Macdonald

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read, the book of Ecclesiastes in chapter 7. I'm reading again at the beginning of the chapter.

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 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.

The book of Ecclesiastes is as contemporary today as the day it was first written. It's a book about life, the way that life really is.

It wrestles with the monotonousness of work, injustices in this life, the ravages of age, and the inevitability of death.

[1 : 28] It answers many questions, like for example, if we have difficulty understanding why a powerful creator permits evil in the earth.

Or if we struggle with the inconsistencies in life. It is all in this book. A book that is honest about the troubles of life.

Some would contend that the book is about the meaningless of human existence. I don't for a moment believe that to be true.

The book is about the meaningless of life without God. And I think that is a message that requires to be heard more than ever in our day, when there is such lethargic indifference to the message of the gospel.

We are living in a hedonistic world, where self-indulgence is the God who is frequently worshipped. The author of this book looks squarely in the face of life, apart from God.

[2 : 43] And he acknowledges the emptiness of such a life. It is vain. It is futile. It is fleeting.

It is without substance or satisfaction. And having stated that stark reality of what life is like apart from God, he explores in the first several chapters different escape routes that people attempt to provide for themselves, to get away from what they consider as the bleak reality.

Some people take the route of philosophy. Some go to the escape route of pleasure. They attempt to pleasure themselves out of the emptiness and lack of satisfaction that life throws up.

Some go to the escape route of work. They throw themselves into a vocation or some great task in life, and they try and work themselves out of the emptiness, while others seek the way of affluence, and they attempt to tranquilize their empty hearts with wealth and riches.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 6, the preacher summarizes some of the ways that people attempt to fill up the gaping hole that is in their life.

[4 : 18] He speaks of wealth. He speaks of family, a large family. He speaks of long life. He speaks of work, and he speaks about words.

All these ways that people attempt to fill up the void in their life, and all of these things, he says, fail. Now, he doesn't say that just because he's wise. He says this because throughout this book, he acknowledges that he himself has attempted to fill up the void in his own life in these ways, that he has been able to experience these different avenues in a state far beyond that which most people are able to experience.

He has been exceedingly productive, and so the way of work, if it should have worked for anyone to provide satisfaction in life, should have provided it for the preacher.

But it didn't. He has been exceedingly affluent, so if wealth was able to provide satisfaction, it should have provided it for him.

[5 : 42] But it didn't. He has had a large family, and so if a family was going to provide meaning and satisfaction, he surely would have experienced meaning and satisfaction, but it didn't.

He experienced pleasure beyond what others have ever experienced, and so if pleasure was going to provide meaning and satisfaction, fullness, and so on, it should have provided it for him.

But it didn't. All of these have failed. And I suppose, in a sense, what the preacher is saying, why make the mistakes he made if we can learn from him?

And so he addresses the questions that are ever contemporary. What is the meaning of life? Why are people unhappy? Does God really care? Why is there so much suffering and injustice in the world?

Is life really worth living? And you could say, he's not satisfied with easy, glib answers. He's like a probing, inquisitive student who says, every time he gets an answer, yes, but, what about this?

[7 : 06] That's how he operates. Now, you may argue that the preacher in this book is too much of a pessimist in his view of life. In fact, one scholar went so far to describe the author as a bitter skeptic suspended over the abyss of despair.

It's a very graphic description. But I don't accept the description of the author. In my view, he's a realist. He writes of life under the sun, that is, from a human perspective, when we fail to lift our eyes beyond the horizon of our created world without ever lifting our eyes to see the beauty and glory of the great creator God who has spoken it into being.

If we only see the present created order, then life will leave us empty and unhappy. But when our eyes are opened to look to God in reverence and awe, we are able to see the true meaning of life and the beauty of its pleasures and the eternal significance of everything we do, including what we turn, the little things of everyday life.

Only then can we discover that everything matters. Remember how the Apostle Paul writes, He's writing in the letter, second letter to the Corinthians, and he's writing to tell why he doesn't give up. He says, We look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

[8 : 53] He endured because he looked past the transitory moment to the future. Everything we see with our eyes is temporary, but the unseen is eternal.

God in his three persons, his promises yet to be gloriously fulfilled and realized. Paul's hope was set in the future resurrection and future transformation.

That's why he didn't lose heart in a disheartening and discouraging world. And so you find the author of this book writing at the end of the book about the conclusion of the whole matter, And it is this, Fear God and keep his commandments.

For this, he says, is the whole duty of man. Why should that be so? Why does he lay stress on that? For this very reason. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

The need to fear God. The book of Proverbs has a similar emphasis. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge or the beginning of wisdom.

[10 : 10] This book teaches that the fear of the Lord is not just the beginning of wisdom, but also the end. The very goal of our existence. So rather than look upon this book as a pessimistic book, it is a positive, encouraging book pointing us forward to the necessity of grace so that we learn to live for God rather than for ourselves.

And at the beginning of this chapter that we read, we are presented with a series of comparisons. He is teaching how to exercise discernment in choosing the way that we will live.

And I'd like just to raise two points. First, a striking comparison. Secondly, a strange statement.

First, a striking comparison. Look at the first of these. A good name is better than precious ointment. It's very similar to what you find written in the book of Proverbs.

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches. And yet, many people would prefer the latter to the former.

[11 : 32] In this chapter, he is comparing a good reputation to an exotic fragrance. You find a similar thought expressed in the book of the Song of Solomon where there you find your name is oil poured out.

Now, although in the Song of Solomon I believe the reference there is to Christ himself. His fragrance is felt in services where the message of the gospel is proclaimed.

And if you are in Christ, I'm sure you can testify to that. His fragrance is also felt in the fellowship of the Lord's people.

And again, if you are in Christ, you can testify to that. Where you have had fellowship with the Lord's people and where there was a particular fragrance. It reminds me of what I heard my late father say at the time of the quickening.

Quickening in the North Locks congregation way back in the 1930s. And he used to say that the fragrance was like the fragrance of apples when they met in fellowship.

[12:59] And it was a time of sustained blessing in the life of the congregation as he would describe it. Well, in the book of the Song of Solomon the fragrance of the Lord is experienced in services and the fellowship of the Lord's people.

You could say his fragrance. Fragrances are the fruit of the Spirit that he displayed to perfection. The effects of his life.

A perfect righteousness. Remember of his atoning death. The Apostle Paul writes, it is as a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma.

The Lord smelt the fragrance of perfect obedience from the sacrifice of Christ. His possession of the Spirit, his intercession in heaven and his coming again.

Referring to his name, his character, all his perfect attributes, love, holiness, gentleness, and joyfulness. He always lives up to his name so that John Newton could write how sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear.

[14:18] Soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, drives away his fear, makes the wounded spirit whole, calms the trouble best, tis manna to the hungry soul.

and to the weary rest. How many of us this evening can say that the name of Jesus is sweet in our ear?

But I digress. Although I believe that what is applicable to the name of the King in the book of the Song of Solomon gives us a clue to what is implied in our text, a good name is better than precious I meant.

The writer is using a word play in the Hebrew. It's not easy to capture it in the English translation, but if I paraphrase it, it comes close.

Fair fame is better than fine perfume. Now, I'm not sure if that was a popular saying at the time when this book was written.

[15:35] But what the Bible suggests to us is that scented oils and other fragrances were valuable commodities in biblical times. For example, one example that comes to mind, the anointing of Jesus in the house of Simon the leper is one example.

Mark tells us, a woman came having an alabaster flask, a very costly oil of spikenard. She broke the flask and poured it on his head.

It was significant what she did. It didn't unscrew the stopper, but she broke it and poured it. In other words, she wanted it all.

Poured out on the head, of the Saviour. And John tells us the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

And that is how it is frequently when Christ is present. Whether in a home or in the life of a believer or in a church service or wherever, there is a peculiar fragrance that emanates from the presence of Christ.

[16:57] Perhaps the women present here this evening appreciate some of the more expensive perfumes available on the market today. Maybe even some of the men going for aftershave lotions.

I don't know. But at any rate, what the writer says before us is that having a name is like, if I can put it like this, the cologne of good character.

It's much more valuable than any perfume, no matter how expensive it might be. And so, what estates here should lead to a scrutiny of ourselves.

When he is saying a good name, it's better than precious ointment. Then we ought to be asking ourselves and bringing our lives under the scrutiny of the word of God.

What character traits do we display? Are they the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit? Are they the characteristics of a life lived with Christ?

[18:13] So that when you examine your own life, in the light of this pronouncement, it is surely the researching takes you into all the recesses of your life.

And as you reflect on that teaching, remember the primary aim. of a good name. It's not to gain clodids for yourself, although that's what your nature would want, but to glorify the Lord. To glorify the Lord. That's the purpose. To put him first, second, and third, so that you disappear. To be something like John the Baptist. Baptist, do you remember the humility of John the Baptist? And do you remember what he says? The one who has the bride is the bridegroom, the friend of the bridegroom, stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.

[19 : 23] He rejoiced greatly at the voice of the Lord. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete. But you remember what he went on to say? He must increase, but I must decrease.

In other words, I must disappear from the picture, but Christ must be seen. And that is what I think is the essential lesson of this pronouncement.

A good name is better than precious ointment. you know, we have a saying. Somebody's got a good name.

And you mean by that they're good for credit, they're dependable, they're trustworthy. Yes, all of that.

But there's much more than that in the good name that is better than precious ointment. Christ. It's the life of a person that reflects Christ in every step of their life.

[20 : 34] So that God is glorified. And then the second part of the say, and the day of death is better than the day of birth? Because implied in the statement is the word better.

No, it is surely the person in Christ of whom that is spoken. the day of our birth is filled with unknowns.

Will we grow up to become adults? What kind of adults will we become? Where will our journey through life take us?

What kind of providence will be our portion? Will we follow a career and a myriad more of unknowns? And you might say to me, but there are many, many, many unknowns at death as one steps into the eternal realm.

But if you are in Christ, as this surely refers to, it is the best day in the life of every believer because they go to be with Christ.

[21 : 48] That is a certainty. There's no dubiety about that. that is a certainty based upon the infallible word of God. For the apostle Paul, that was the plus of eternity.

You remember how he spoke of life for me to live, he says, is Christ and to die is gain. And then he wrote of his dilemma whether to remain or depart. And you remember his desire?

My desire is to depart and be with Christ. Why? And the answer he gives is to be with Christ, for that is far better. Or as Thomas Buston expressed it, in the day of our birth we were born to die. But for those in Christ in the day of their death, they die to live. They die to live. they enter a better world, with higher perfection, greater purity, deeper rest, better company, better employment than the world they entered into on the day that they were born.

For the believer, death is the gateway to glory where they reach their desired haven. All the storms of life are behind them, as the psalmist expressed the storm has changed into a calm at his command and will, so that the waves which raged before, now quiet are and still.

[23 : 22] Then are they glad because at rest and quiet now they be, and so to the heaven he then brings, which they desire to see. Why is that? Is it not because Christ shed his blood by dying on the cursed crosses the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people, but more he arose again, triumphant over death and the grave.

The tomb was broken from within, death until then had reigned supreme. Remember the question the women asked on the way that early morning on the first day of the week.

So they made their way to the grave of Jesus. Who will roll away the stone? That was the all consuming question. It's the very question I would suggest posed by humanity down through the ages.

The stone represented the ceiling finality of death. No key was available to unlock the power of death, but you see the message of the resurrection morning is that the power of the grave is broken.

As one writer puts it, an unwanted visitor, broke its seal, snapped its feathers, a power stronger than death entered the grave and broke its power.

[24 : 52] Come, said the angels to the perplexed and distraught. Women who came early to the tomb, see the place where the Lord lay.

Yes, it was empty. and strangely not empty because it provided assurance and confirmation that the Lord of life had proved his lordship over death and the grave and left in that empty tomb the pledges of his triumph and his power.

life. And so for those in Christ the day of death is an entering into paradise. They go to be with the Lord. The fact that he has triumphed means that they conquer in him whereas the day of their birth was an entrance into a world full of trial, tribulation and suffering.

So that's my first point, a striking comparison. And then there is this second point, a strange statement. Seems to go against, run counter to the desire of man.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. The writer is stating it is more beneficial for us to be in the house of mourning than to be in the house of feasting.

[26 : 28] And just in case we didn't clock it the first time, he restates it in verse 4. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools in the house of mirth.

Now, our natural inclination is to seek to avoid the gloom associated with mourning. In fact, the prevailing attitude of our culture is to try to deny the reality of our mortality.

We use different metaphors to avoid speaking of actual death. Given the choice, we prefer the house of feasting. And yet, when you reflect on scripture truth, you discover a pattern emerging in the Bible, a pattern that speaks of truly dreadful events taking place in the house of feasting, or the house of mirth, a pattern that sets before our minds the absolute deception of the house of feasting, which promises so much and leaves one strangely empty, or even worse.

Let me quote several examples from the Bible. where was the world when the servant of God, Noah, entered into the ark?

Where was the world when all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and God opened the windows of heaven and sent down heavy, persistent, constant rain for forty days and nights?

[28 : 08] Is it not written, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark?

And you know the story, and you know what happened to those who were parting, and to those who were living every day as if the next day were to be the same and as if they had an inalienable right to every day?

And God cut it short. Where were Job's sons and daughters when the great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house? Fell upon the young people and they were killed.

And the answer to where they were, they were parting. They were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house.

Where was Samson when he lost his strength? He was in the house of sinful pleasure, lying asleep with his head in Delilah's lap. What had Nabal been doing? When his heart died within him and he became as a stone, the Bible states, he had been feasting, he held a feast in his house.

[29 : 15] His heart was merry within him for he was very drunk. Who killed Amnon? Did not Absalom's servants kill him at a feast when his heart was merry with wine? They did so, you remember, on the express instruction of Absalom.

And there is one other example which I cannot omit. I wish to describe it a little more fully than those to which I have briefly alluded. There is recorded in the book of Daniel a feast that in the view of some has never been surpassed.

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drunk wine in front of the thousand. You might call it the party of all parties.

And during the course of the festivities orders were given to bring in the utensils captured from the temple in Jerusalem. These utensils had been consecrated for a sacred use but at that party they were used for secular revelry as events spiraled out of control.

The king and his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine. They worshipped their gods. They praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone.

[30 : 35] And then there is a sudden dramatic change. A change that is brought about by divine intervention in a most peculiar way.

Immediately we read in the book of Daniel the fingers of a human hand appeared. and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace opposite the lamp stand.

And the king saw the hand as it wrote. And the king's color changed. His thoughts alarmed him. His limbs gave way. His knees knocked together.

The king was no longer laughing. The laughter had died on his lips. arms. Nor do those who become seriously ill and are hospitalized.

There's no laughter then. Or those who are caught up in brutal warfare with the constant threat of imminent death. Or even in an airplane in severe turbulence when the aircraft seems totally out of control, screaming and shouting.

[31 : 54] Or when you've had what was supposed to be a routine test and the doctor calls to say there's something sinister. There is no laughter then.

Neither was there laughter at that party after that intervention. And everyone who has read the Bible will remember the solemn words written on the plaster of the wall in the king's palace.

Words that had such a sobering effect on the drunken king. Mene, mene, tekel, you farce, you have been weighed in the balances.

God has numbered your kingdom and finished it. Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Paris, your kingdom has to be divided. given to the Medes and the Persians. And you will remember the outcome for that king. It was to be his last party in the world. Not only that, it led to the downfall of his nation.

[33 : 04] That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. Just a short time before, it had seemed uproariously funny to denigrate the God of Israel by drinking from the temple utensils.

But that party is exposed in the Bible as the ultimate act of folly, feasting on the very brink of the grave, celebrating on the edge of extinction.

And Belshazzar never knew it. And the point is this. What seems so attractive and told such a magnetic appeal to the fallen nature of man, can pose the greatest threat to our remaining in life.

Just as Belshazzar feasted while the armies of his enemies were outside his gates, so too rebellious humanity actively suppresses the truth about God.

And that is done in countless ways. And sadly, our nation today has gone backwards in a whole lot of ways.

[34 : 31] Many are even this night eating and drinking, pursuing an actively sinful lifestyle. all the time, deliberately ignoring God's revelation of himself in the Bible, or in their consciences, or in the world.

Should we be among that number and continue along that path, our fate is as deserved as it is certain. The God's Belshazzar worshipped, where but idols done, totally impotent, to protect him from the opposing forces, that under God brought about his demise.

And so the writer states here, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Despite the lack of attraction that the house of mourning might hold, despite how difficult it might be to go there, why is it better?

Well, for several reasons, but there is this one. The party circuit is but an illusion. It's like a desert mirage. It's not reality.

But in the house of mourning, we are faced with the grim reality of death. In the house of mourning, we are being called to evaluate our lives in the light of eternity.

[36 : 06] Every time we go to the house of mourning, whether we are aware of it or not, there are particular notices being flashed up at us.

And the first of these is this, life is brief. The second is, death is inevitable. in fact, the writer brings that to our attention in these verses, for this is the end of all mankind.

Death is the end of all men. Some might like to think that death is an exit to extinction. It's not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches clearly that death is an entrance to eternity, where we must stand in the presence of our maker and creator.

It is appointed for man to die once. And after that comes judgment. Have we taken to heart the ephemeral nature of life in this world?

[37 : 13] And the third signal is walk wisely. You know, every time we attend a funeral and a coffin is placed before us, the Bible is shouting at us, redeem the time, redeem the time.

The death of our fellow citizens asks questions of me and you. In fact, it forces the most profound and relevant questions.

How are we spending our time here? Are we prepared to meet with God? How will we stand before?

Will it be in the sin-born nakedness of the shame of our sin? Or will we be clothed in the imputed righteousness of Christ?

There are only the two options. There is no third. The house of mourning then is a time for solemn reflection.

[38 : 23] There is of course the danger that we become immune to or divorced from being in the presence of death.

That we treat it as of no relevance to ourselves. But the Bible gives guidance on this matter.

Remember the prayer of Moses as he reflected on the fleeting nature of the mortality of man.

It's a prayer we would do all well to take to heart. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

He is asking God to enable us to reflect wisely on our situation as sinners in the sight of a holy God. Each day is numbered.

Lord. And one of these days will be our last. Let us learn from our attendance in the house of mourning that there is a vital difference between the believer who passes out of life into the eternal dwelling of God's grace and the unbeliever who dies in the guilt of his or her sin to face the dreadful prospect of eternal judgment from a holy, righteous, unjust God.

[39 : 57] If we have prepared for that moment of judgment by trusting in the great sin-bearer Jesus Christ as the one who paid the penalty for sin, we have embraced the very heart of wisdom in the face of life and death.

Let me ask the question, has the house of mourning acted as an evangelist in your experience? Has it led to a seeking after eternal life? Because eternal life is obtained by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you too will be able to rejoice in your Father God as your eternal home.

And when your all too brief life is brought to an end here, you will experience with the psalmist the fulfillment of his longing, plea, satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

[41 : 23] And until then, you will enjoy his divine protection for to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, glory, to the only God our Savior.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and forever. Amen. Well, let us together seek the heart of the wise, reject the heart of the fools. Why? Because the heart of the fool is in the house of mirth. But laughter will not take you to be with Christ.

What does the psalmist say of the fool? He's an atheist. The fool says in his heart there is no God. That doesn't mean that he's not intelligent. He knows there is a God, yet he chooses to believe and act as if there is no God.

That's why he designated a fool. That's why the fool's heart is in the house of mirth. He chooses to act as if there were no God.

[42 : 44] A striking comparison. A good name, better than precious ointment. The day of death, better than the day of one's birth.

How much is that to look forward to? You and I, we don't remember the day of our birth. It was celebrated by others, but not by us, because we don't remember it.

But you know, if you are in Christ, you will remember that day as you pass into his nearer presence and see him as he really is.

A strange statement, better than go to the house of mourning to the house of feasting. Who wants to be in the place of sadness and gloom? But oh, it's profitable and beneficial for us so that we come face to face with the realities, eternal realities.

Think on them, ponder them, so that we look to Christ. Let us pray. Oh, eternal God, help us to take thy word to heart so that none of us be careless or indifferent about the message of thy word and the glory shall be thine.

[44 : 12] In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Let us conclude by singing from Psalm 90, page 120, of the psalm book.

Psalm 90, page 120, Psalm 90 at verse 11. The power of your anger, who can know?

Your wrath's as great as the fear we owe. Teach us to number all our days aright. So will our hearts be filled with wisdom's light.

Return, O Lord, how long will you delay? Have mercy on your servants, Lord, we pray. O satisfy us with your love always, that we may sing, rejoice in all our days.

Place of our affliction make us glad. Give joy for all the years you made us sad. To all your servants may your deeds be shown, and to their children make your glory known.

[45 : 25] Now may the favor of almighty God abide on us. Rich blessings of our Lord. Establish every work our hands have done.

Yes, Lord, for us establish them, each one. Let us sing these verses. The power of your anger, who can know.

The power of your anger, who can know.

Your wrath, as great as is the fear we owe.

He us to number all our mates are high.

[46 : 25] So will our hearts be filled with wisdom on side.

We need to know Lord, how will you delay. How will you delay.

How mercy, all your servants, Lord, we pray. O satisfy us with your love always, ways, that we may sing, rejoice, sing, all other days.

Give place of the ground, which shall make us God.

Give joy joy for all the years you in our son.

[47 : 44] To all your servants may your deeds be shown, and to their children make your glory known.

Now may the favor of almighty God abide on a strength of our Lord.

Abide on a strength of our Lord. blessings of our Lord.

Establish every work our hands have done. Yes, Lord, for us establish them, each one.

Now may the good of our God and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Holy Spirit, rest on and abide with you all, now and forever.

[49 : 11] Amen.