

The Lessons of Death

This last week, we saw the death of a celebrity – Michael Jackson, one who was worshipped, vilified, studied and gawked at for the world's amusement. After living a tortured life, insulated by his money, and able to pursue any foolish dead-end he wanted to, his twisted and clearly painful life ended at the young age of 51.

Another actress of the same era as Jackson, Farah Fawcett also died this week. Death has a way of coming in waves, doesn't it? And what is to be our response to death? What should we do about the truths that death teaches us? That's what Solomon is going to deal with in the Ecclesiastes passages we'll be studying.

Up till now, Solomon has been giving us his guide to what life is about in a fairly straightforward way. He has been arguing a case – asking questions, providing answers, drawing conclusions and giving us the solutions. He has been goading us with the painful thoughts of life without God, and he has then provided us with the tent-pegs of divine truth, which give us stability and purpose in life. He hasn't hidden the conclusion from us. He has been making it clear throughout: Life finds its fulfilment in a reconciled and fervent relationship with God. All other things fail to satisfy in the end, and God has set it up that by themselves, they frustrate, and even torture us. It is when we submit to Him, repent and return to Him, and are reconciled to Him through His Son, that all the gifts of life find their place. In other words, Solomon has been saying, fear God. Fear God – live in a reverent and fervent relationship with God. That's what makes life work.

By the end of chapter 6, he has demolished the false gods of human wisdom, pleasure-seeking, wealth-seeking, power-seeking, false worship. He has goaded us with the emptiness of life lived only under the sun with truths like injustice, oppression, a lack of control, a lack of comprehension, a lack of satisfaction, and ultimately the inevitability of death. If you don't believe him by chapter 6, there is nothing much more he can say. He has made a very strong case that life is all about fearing God. He ends the chapter by asking, who can

For the rest of the book, Solomon is going to change his approach. He is now going to tell you what that looks like. He is going to change the fitting on his hosepipe from direct jet, to scatter spray. From chapters 7 through to 12, he is going to scatter applications of what it looks like to live life in the fear of the Lord in a sin-cursed world. He is going to give us proverbs: truths about life and how to live it.

At the close of chapter 6, he asks these questions:

Ecclesiastes 6:11-12 *Since there are many things that increase vanity, How is man the better? ¹² For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?*

Now, he is going to answer those questions. He will show what is better. He will show what is good for man, by revealing God's wisdom,

In fact, do you remember what Solomon said about the wisdom of proverbs? He said, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). In other words, if you have believed Solomon, and felt the goads, and they have pushed you to seek God as your ultimate and deepest satisfaction, then you are fearing God. And if you are fearing God, then the wisdom of chapters 7 through 12 is going to result.

Proverbs are not like the continuous thoughts we find in Paul's writings, or even the prose of earlier in the book. Paul tends to throw in a hook, and line by line, he reels it in till we come to the conclusion. That's not how wisdom proverbs are. Wisdom proverbs are more like rock-hunting. We

are looking for a particular kind of rock, so we ignore the others while searching for that rock. So when dealing with one particular topic, we pass over the others till we come to another nugget of truth dealing with that particular topic.

As we begin these chapters, we're going to find that Solomon is going to deal with more or less seven major facts of life lived in a sinful world. We're going to see:

- 1)The lessons of death
- 2)The need for wisdom
- 3)The fact of oppression and injustice
- 4)The pain of adultery
- 5)The relationship with authorities
- 6)The response to God's authority
- 7)The fact of youth and old age

As we look at each topic, we're going to be jumping back and forth through these chapters. We'll end up covering all the verses, but just not in sequence. You might tick them off as we go through them, or mark them according to the topic they are dealing with.

The first big fact of life that Solomon deals with is the fact that life ends. Solomon wants us to know the wise and God-fearing way of thinking about death. And we could hardly be in a better place than after a week like the one we've just lived through to think about death. . We're going to see three effects that the fact of death can have on the living. We'll see that death gives perspective. We'll see that death brings pain. Finally we'll see death provokes pleasure in God.

The first is this

I. Death Gives Perspective

Ecclesiastes 7:1-4 A good name is better than precious ointment, And the day of death than the day of one's birth; 2 Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart. 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, For by a sad countenance the heart is made better. 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

This is a striking paragraph. Solomon says the day of death is better than the day of birth, How is that possible? Who thinks of obituaries as better announcements than birth announcements?

Verse 2 goes further – it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Better a funeral than a feast. Better a place of tears, than a place of laughter, verse 3 tells us. Solomon says (verse 4) that wise people place their hearts, that is their minds, in the funeral parlour, while fools set their minds on the entertainment venue. He says that by sadness, the heart is made better.

Why? Why is the day of death, the house of mourning and sorrow better than the day of birth, the house of feasting, the house of pleasure and laughter?

Solomon gives us the reason in verse 2: *For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart*

That is the end of all men, and the living will be reminded of it. At the funeral, the place of mourning, of tears, of sorrow, the living are reminded: their turn is coming. They too will one day be the one mourned over. On that day, all their activities, plans, desires goals are cut off.

That gives a person perspective. It pops the fantasy bubble and forces us to think about our lives: their shortness, their purpose, and what happens afterwards.

See, laughter doesn't do that for you. People having fun, people feasting and joking and being merry are not reflecting on their purpose in life. They are not thinking about the truth that they might soon step into eternity. Now that doesn't mean that laughter and feasting and mirth are wrong. They have their place. The point is: which is ultimately more beneficial for a person: the fun of a party, or the

reflection of a funeral. Hands down, the funeral. That place of sorrow sobers us all up.

Death has a way of crashing every party. In comes death, tumbling into our lives, just when we were getting into a rhythm of pretending things are pretty good down here. Once again death comes crashing in, turning over the tables, unplugging the stereo system and breaking up the party. And at every funeral, man must again face the reality – life is not a party. It is not about just having a good time, because death could cut me off any day.

Back in the 30s and 40s, it became a cliché to have the television or radio announcer say, “We interrupt this broadcast to bring an important message”. And certain news of the progress of the war or a national disaster would be announced in the middle of the radio or TV series. The fantasy world would be broken, and reality would tear in. Something similar happened to most TV stations around the world on September 11. Whatever fun thing it was that people were watching, the terrifying events broke in and spoilt the fantasy. Death is like that. It breaks the fantasy and brings in reality in a big way. To live life in the fear of God is to allow the reality of death to not be too far from your consciousness.

James 4:14 *whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.*

Life from God's perspective is to realise like Moses said, “**Psalm 90:5-6** *You carry them away like a flood; They are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up: ⁶ In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers.*”

Louis XV, King of France, foolishly ordained and ordered that death was never to be spoken of in his presence. Nothing that could in any way remind him of death was to be mentioned or displayed, and he sought to avoid every place and sign and monument which in any way suggested death. Carlyle said of him: “It is the resource of the ostrich, who, when hunted, sticks his foolish head in the ground and would fain forget that his foolish body is not unseen too.”

Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979

Have you ever stopped to think about your funeral? Instead of laughing at the idea, or making some dismissive comment like, “Just put me in a box and don't make a fuss”, have you ever asked what it is you want to be said of you on that day? What it is you want your life to be remembered for? And above all, where will you, that is, your soul be, when all those people are mourning you?

If death makes you face the hardest questions, then it is actually a better medicine than all the laughter in the world. The deep internal questions are always more important than the superficial external ones. That's why he says in verse 1, a good name – that is, the internal character is better than precious ointment – the outward perfume.

But once we start really looking at death, it leads us to a second realisation

II. Death is Painful

Ecclesiastes 9:1-9 *For I considered all this in my heart, so that I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them. ² All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; To the good, the clean, and the unclean; To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; He who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Also their love, their hatred, and their*

envy have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share In anything done under the sun.

A person who fears the Lord will not only gain perspective from looking at death, but that perspective will reveal this truth: death is painful. Death is painful for two reasons: it is universal, and it is unilateral.

a) Death is Universal

Solomon says, this event of death comes to righteous and wicked, clean and unclean, diligent worshipper or stubborn rebel. This same event of death happens to all. No matter how wise or godly you have been, death still catches you in the end. That's a painful reality. The best people- the people you wish could stay around forever – pass on just like the wicked.

V3- Man is full of evil, he does evil and then he dies.

Alexander the Great, we are told, being upon his deathbed, commanded that, when he was carried forth to the grave, his hands should not be wrapped, as was usual, in the grave cloths, but should be left outside the bier, so that all men might see them, and might see that they were empty; that there was nothing in them. He was born to one empire, and the conqueror of another; the possessor while he lived, of two worlds, of the East, and of the West, and of the treasures of both, yet now when he was dead could retain not even the smallest portion of these treasures. The poorest beggar and he were at length upon equal terms.

Haven't you ever stood at a graveside or thought about someone who has died, and said the words, "Why him? Why her?" "It should have been someone else?" If so, then you are feeling the pain of death. It is universal and it does not discriminate.

b) Death is Ultimate

He goes on to show that death ends it all. It doesn't spare you at all. It is unilateral in its action. Then in verses 4 to 6, he seems to say some things which look as if he doesn't believe in an afterlife. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Rather a mangy scavenger skulking around the alleys than the king of beasts lying dead in a field. The living know they will die, but the dead know nothing and have no reward, and their activities are over, they will no longer share in life, and they will soon be forgotten.

Now Solomon is not saying anything about life after death. He is simply reporting the reality that when death comes, life's opportunities are over. There are no more words to be said, no more meals to be had, no more experiences. Life's opportunities are given to the living now. Life's reward, its privileges, its various offerings are given only once – in the one life you have. Once it is past, it is past. You cannot get them back, replay it, or start over. Death is painful.

Now I believe in the resurrection. I believe God will grant believers new bodies to enjoy forever on a new earth. But even that glorious hope does not take away the force of this point – death cuts off our opportunity to keep sharing in life and participating and influencing and experiencing. When someone dies, it is so absolute a loss.

Visitors may see in the study at Abbotsford the last words written by Sir Walter Scott in his journal: "Tomorrow we shall ..." The entry was never finished. Franz Schubert left his great "Unfinished Symphony," and Charles Dickens laid down his pen in the midst of writing a novel, and students have wondered ever since how the work would have ended.

The thought of not being able to finish, not being able to do what we wanted to do, to go where we wanted to go, to see the results of our work – that hurts. It's painful.

So, look at what has happened. The believer living in the fear of God does not avoid thinking about death. Death gives perspective. What perspective does it give? It is a painful perspective. Death is

universal, and death is unilateral. It is coming for me, and it will completely end all my endeavours in this world.

That leads the believer to a third reaction. You can see that reaction in vv7 to 10.

Go, eat your bread with joy, And drink your wine with a merry heart; For God has already accepted your works. Let your garments always be white, And let your head lack no oil. Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.

What is Solomon saying?

Well, the subject of *what* he is saying is fairly clear. He is saying we should live life with contentment, celebration and diligence. Eating and drinking, wearing white garments – especially in the heat of the Middle East, putting oil on the skin in that dry climate, living joyfully with your spouse, this is a life of joy! This is a life of gladness and celebration. Likewise verse 10 tells us to live life enthusiastically – repeating the truth about the grave holding no more opportunities. Live life joyfully and diligently.

What he is saying is fairly clear. The real question is *why* we should live like this in response to death. Why does this life of celebration and enthusiasm follow on from the perspective and the pain of death? Is he saying, “Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die?” Is he saying, “You only go around once, so get all the good times you can get while you can” Is this a call to death-defying hedonism? No, the very opposite actually.

I think we can find the answer in Philippians 1:

Philippians 1:20-21 *according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

Paul says that this is how he experiences life and death. All of Paul's existence is to magnify Christ. He wants to use up every opportunity to know Christ and to make Him known. So while he lives, His life is about Jesus Christ. Everything is of Him, through Him, to Him.

While he lives, his motto is 'That I may know Him'. But what about death? If He is living for Christ, surely death puts an end to that? No! For the believer, death is exactly what makes faith sight. It is what brings future promises into present experience. At death, you lose absolutely everything, including your own life – which is painful. But for a believer, you gain Jesus Christ Himself.

Do you know what that belief sets you free to do? It sets you free to hold life loosely enough to enjoy it to the full!

My life is not my own. My life is about knowing and showing Jesus Christ. But the only thing better than knowing and showing Jesus Christ now, would be to be in His presence through death. Therefore, I do not covet my own life. I do not hoard my own life. I do not try to save it. I love life, but I love Christ more.

The unhappiest people in the world, are those that see the spectre of death approaching, and frantically try to get as much out as possible, because death has no promises, only pain. But life seldom goes according to plan, and the years tick by, and death looms closer. And it stings.

Luke 9:24 *For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.*

These verses in Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 describe believers who have given up their lives to God. They

have found God's acceptance of them. That's why Solomon says, God has already accepted your works. Justification. And therefore, they are no longer trying to fight for their own lives. If life comes, then let us magnify – maximise the glory of Jesus Christ in every moment. And if death comes, so be it, that we may be with Christ which is far better.

Sometimes, we Christians are so bad at simply enjoying God's gifts! How we tie ourselves in knots! We are like people scared of our shadow – every time joy arrives, we get guilty about it! How many times have I heard the charge that Christians seem miserable! What a travesty! Christians, of all people, should be experts in joy! We have been reconciled to our Creator, the sum of all beauty, the centre of all excellence. We have truth – we understand reality and need not bump into it. We have promises from our God for every imaginable state of life! We have unbreakable promises about our life after death, and about our eternal state!

It can only be when we take our eyes off the surpassing beauty of Jesus Christ and begin to magnify our problems and our performance, our duties and our problems, that joy evaporates, and we resemble the unbeliever plodding through this world. It is when we have taken to trying to love our own lives more than the glory of Jesus Christ that the pains seem to set in again. That's when death gives only pain.

The believer can look at death and be reminded, life is short. The believer can feel the pain of seeing people taken from this life - believer and unbeliever. We can feel something of the sadness that we will not be able to keep doing what we are doing forever. But, if we are in Christ, we have a radically new view of life and death. We live to know and show that Jesus Christ is more excellent than life itself, so much so, that death is a form of gain to us. The result of seeing death that way is that we view life differently. We are not afraid of it. We are not trying to conserve it, and nurse it and shelter it. We celebrate God's gifts. We live for our Saviour and out of the fullness of joy in Him; we celebrate and enthusiastically live our lives.

Do you have a view of Jesus Christ that is so compelling that you can hold everything in life loosely? Have you found Him so excellent, that the thought of losing it all in that cold grip of death no longer frightens you, but actually holds out a promise – more of Christ? I ask you, is Christ your magnificent obsession? Is Christ your breathlessly delightful pursuit?

This is the life that we can live, when we are no longer pursuing the good life, but Christ Himself.