

What is the good life?

It’s a question that many have asked.

How do you find the “good life”?

How do you know how to live?

In our text tonight, the Preacher describes his quest –
and the narrator concludes that there is a fundamental flaw in the Preacher’s quest.

In verse 27, the narrator intrudes himself into the text for the only time the body of Ecclesiastes.
Verse 27 is the one place where the narrator’s voice returns.

We saw in chapter 3, that the Preacher spoke of “a time for every matter under heaven” –
and in that chapter, the Preacher included theological reflections –
not just his own observations.

But then the Preacher returned to his observations of life “under the sun.”
The Preacher has been trying to figure out what is the *good life* under the sun.
But he is attempting to understand this through his own experience.
And chapter 7 brings this quest to something of an end.
Chapter 8 will begin a new section –
but the quest for wisdom – and knowing “the good” –
wraps up here in chapter 7.

The word “good” (tob) is used 51 times in Ecclesiastes.
13 times in chapter 7

At the end of chapter 6, the Preacher asked,
“who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life,
which he passes like a shadow?
For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” (6:12)

In one sense, those questions concluded the examination of “goods” –
as the Preacher told us that we should just shut up and enjoy life –
because if you receive the power to *enjoy* the good things of life,
that is a gift from God!

But in another sense, these questions set up the poem of chapter 7, verses 13-14.

1. What Is Good? What Is Better? (v1-13)

A good name is better than precious ointment,

I should point out that the word translated “precious”
is simply the word “good.”

The ESV is right to translate it ‘precious’ –
because the Hebrew word “tob” has a wider range of meaning
than the English word “good.”
But it is *good* for you to know that the Preacher is using a wordplay here.

I think that we all intuitively understand that ‘a good name is better than good ointment.’
Good ointment is expensive –
it is one of the things that appears on lists of wealthy kings (2 Kgs 20:13).
But better than good ointment – better than expensive things –
is a good name – a good reputation.

At least, that’s what we’re told.
But the second half of verse 1 complicates this:

and the day of death than the day of birth.

What’s the point of a good name when you are dead?
Indeed, if we had stopped after chapter 6, we might have thought that
“shut up and enjoy life” was all that the Preacher had to say –
but then he says something strange like verses 2-4:

² *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.*

³ *Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.*

⁴ *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.*

Some people try to harmonize the two parts of Ecclesiastes
by saying that when the Preacher talks about ‘enjoying life’
he means “in the fear of God” –
but when he says that sorrow is better than laughter,
the laughter refers to the revelry of the ungodly.

Let’s not be so quick to make everything easy.
Plainly, the Preacher is *not* trying to make it easy for you!
He wants you to think!

Proverbs 14:13 says, “Even in laughter the heart suffers, and the end of joy is grief.”
Think of Robin Williams.
Behind every comedian is a deep suffering – a profound darkness –
and *every* joy ends in grief –
because no matter how much you may enjoy life,
eventually you die!

The Preacher, in verse 3, suggests that the opposite is true as well:
“by sadness of face the heart is made glad.”

Yes, by all means, enjoy life!
But do not look for joy in the house of the comedian.
Look for joy in the house of mourning.

Children, have you ever been to a funeral?
A funeral is not a happy time.
But the modern funeral is nothing like what happened in the old days.
Nowadays, the funeral home takes care of the body.
The family just shows up for the funeral.

In the old days it was the family’s job to prepare the body –
though back then, they rarely said, “the body” –
they said “grandma” or “mom.”

When my mother died, I took my children to the hospital where she was.
We identified her as Lorna Loram, we wept, and then we let the funeral home do the rest.

I think that there is something profoundly wrong with a society that wants to avoid death.
It would have been very difficult – very painful – to prepare my mother for burial
(not least because I have no idea how to do that!) –
but until the last few decades,
it was something that every generation knew how to do,
because they watched their parents do it.

The “house of mourning” is not just a place where people weep.
It is also a place where the body of the deceased is prepared for burial.

Why do I linger on this point?
Because of something that the author of Ecclesiastes never expected.
In Mark’s gospel we hear of the woman who came to Jesus,
while he sat at table – at a dinner with Simon the leper –
and anointed his head with costly nard –
and when the disciples scolded her,
Jesus replied, “Leave her alone...She has done a beautiful thing to me...
She has done what she could;
she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.
And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world,
what she has done will be told in memory of her.” (Mk 14:3-9)

In Jesus, these verses all come together.

The house of feasting is transformed into the house of mourning.
And truly, “by sadness of face the heart is made glad.”

There is no way to joy – except by way of the cross.

You cannot find a moralistic way to harmonize
“seize the day!” (*carpe diem* – to quote Robin Williams in “Dead Poets Society”)
and “everyone dies”!
“Life under the sun” has no answer for the juxtaposition of joy and death.

But as we go through this poem,
remember the cross – because only the cross of Christ brings harmony out of this discord.

Verses 5-6 make sense to us:

⁵ *It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools.*

⁶ *For as the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fools;
this also is vanity.^[a]*

I used to say that no one likes to be rebuked.
But that just showed how much I liked the song of fools!

I’ve reached a point a life where I *enjoy* a good rebuke.
When I’ve been on the wrong track,
I rejoice that someone actually loves me enough to tell me!

But the problem is that even the wise are not incorruptible:

⁷ *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.*

Okay, you *need* to understand verse 7.
We’re not just talking about ‘bribery’ and ‘official corruption.’
That happens often enough.
We’re talking about how oppression drives the wise into madness.
How often have you faced a situation
where the people whom you love and respect are divided?
Good and wise and faithful people – whom you would trust with your life –
are diametrically opposed to each other –
and are doing everything in their power to destroy each other!
That’s the sort of situation that the Preacher describes.
Oppression refers to the use of power to extort or squash those who lack power.
Christians are not immune to this.
There are times when the wise are under the influence of power and money –

so what does that do to verse 5?

“Better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise”
But what if the wise have been corrupted?

And so the Preacher observes:

⁸ *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning,
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.*

⁹ *Be not quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger lodges in the heart^[b] of fools.*

I should point out that the word translated “sorrow” in v3 is the word translated “anger” in v9.
In verse 3, we were told that “sorrow is better than laughter” –
now we hear that “anger lodges in the heart of fools.”
But it’s exactly the same word!!

Perhaps we should translate it “vexation” –
a word that captures all the uses here:

So verse 3, “Vexation is better than laughter” –
and verse 9, “be not quick in your spirit to become vexed,
for vexation lodges in the heart of fools”!

The ESV is trying to resolve a contradiction that the Preacher *wants you* to wrestle with!
Vexation is better than laughter,
but vexation lodges in the heart of fools.
Yes, you can see how both statements are true –
vexation is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad –
there is no way to joy except the way of the cross;
but vexation *lodges* in the heart of fools –
if you dwell on your anger – if anger makes its home in your heart –
then you are a fool!

The question of verse 10 is one that you often hear:

¹⁰ *Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?”
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*

People often think back to the “good ol’ days” –
and they wonder how we have fallen into such dark days as these?
Many of the historical books of the OT explain why ‘the former days’ were better.
So the Preacher is not condemning every form of this question.

The preacher is condemning *nostalgia*.

Memory is good.
Nostalgia is a sin.

Christopher Lasch said it well:

“We need to distinguish between nostalgia and the reassuring memory of happy times, which serves to link the present to the past and to provide a sense of continuity. The emotional appeal of happy memories does not depend on disparagement of the present, the hallmark of the nostalgic attitude. Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable. Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging. Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. Memory too may idealize the past, but not in order to condemn the present. It draws hope and comfort from the past in order to enrich the present and to face what comes with good cheer.”
Christopher Lasch “The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics,” Norton (1991).

Have you ever noticed that some people’s stories of the past delight you, while other people’s stories of the past frustrate you?

I find that the difference is often located in the distinction between memory and nostalgia. If someone is extolling the past in order to condemn the present, that is just nostalgia – and it does *not* proceed from wisdom! But extolling the past in order to draw strength from the memory of God’s mighty deeds! *That is wisdom!*

And wisdom is good (verses 11-12)

¹¹ *Wisdom is good with an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.*

¹² *For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.*

In the book of Proverbs, these sorts of verses are celebrated.

In Ecclesiastes, you read this and you wonder –

“But we’re all going to die, right? Isn’t this also just vanity?”

That is why verse 13 concludes the poem:

¹³ *Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked?*

As Psalm 90 says, “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Wisdom is not just knowing how to manipulate the world to get what we want.

Wisdom is contemplating the work of God.

“Who can make straight what he has made crooked?”
You know what I’m talking about.
You see – everyday – something that is crooked –
something that is broken –
and you cannot imagine how this situation could ever be made right!
It’s just too much.

Have you ever thought this?
I know that God can work miracles, but I’m not sure even God could change this?
It is in just such a dark mood that the Preacher reflects on his vain life in verses 14-22.

2. This or That? – Why Does It Matter? (v14-22)

¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

Verse 14 opens “in a good day be joyful, and in an evil day consider” –
again using the word “tob” (but the translation ‘prosperity’ is appropriate).

But the point of the Preacher is that God has made both the good day and the evil day.
All things come from his hand.

If everything comes from God, then why does it matter whether I am wise or a fool?

This is the central question of verses 14-18:

¹⁵ In my vain^[c] life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. ¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

What does he mean?

“Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.”

“Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.”

When he says “it is good that you should take hold of *this*,
and from *that* withhold not your hand –
it is clear that he is referring back
to being neither overly righteous nor overly wicked.

The Preacher is saying that *sometimes* you need to be righteous –
and *sometimes* you need to be wicked!

In Hebrew, this actually makes sense from a godly perspective.
In English, it doesn’t!

In Hebrew, the word translated “wicked” can be used (like the English ‘wicked’) to mean someone who is morally depraved.

But in Hebrew, it can also mean simply someone who is *judged guilty* of a crime (regardless of their actual guilt).

“Righteous” has the same sort of range –
it can either mean someone who is morally right,
or it can refer to someone who is *judged* right.

So the Preacher is simply saying that he has seen an innocent man
who perished in spite of his innocence.
And a guilty man who prolonged his life despite his guilt.

So be not “overly innocent” – in other words,
just because you are in the right does not mean that you should press your case!
You may be right, but if you’re going to lose, *just being right* is not enough.
“Why should you destroy yourself?”
You have all been in situations where you know that if you continue to push the matter
you are going to lose!

Likewise, “be not overly wicked” is not an encouragement to *do bad things* –
but an exhortation to stand your ground when you are able,
in order to *avoid* being condemned.
“Why should you die before your time?”

Even Jesus – the man who never sinned – was not “overly righteous”!
He did not insist on his own innocence.
He was *in the right* – but he did not make a fuss about it.
And so therefore Jesus took his place among the wicked –
not because he was morally guilty,
but because he was *judged guilty* –
first by Pilate, but then by God.

And so Jesus became “overly wicked” – condemned in our place –
and so he died before his time.

But the cross is not the end of the story!
Jesus became “overly wicked”
(condemned as guilty – even though he was morally innocent!)
but that was not the *final* judgment.
There was a “deeper magic” to use C. S. Lewis’s phrase –
a deeper wisdom (to use the language of Ecclesiastes).

Through his taking to himself *our wickedness* – our guilt –
he demonstrated a righteousness that was beyond all others.

Think of how verses 19-21 reflect on this:

v19

¹⁹ *Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.*

This should remind us of Lady Wisdom from Proverbs 1-9 –
this is a superhuman wisdom – a wisdom that comes from God alone.

v20

²⁰ *Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*

There are lots of people in the Bible who are called “righteous” –
because they make it a habit to do what is right –
they are just persons who are innocent in their conduct and behavior.
But the Preacher makes the same point that Paul will make in the NT,
“for *all have sinned.*”
No one can say “I have *never sinned.*”

This is what sets Jesus apart.

As long as there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins,
then the wisdom of Ecclesiastes remains.
Life under the sun is vain and futile.
The cycle of death continues forever!

And we cannot claim to be an exception (verses 21-22):

²¹ *Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.*

²² *Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.*

Have you ever wished that you could know what other people *really* think of you?
So many books and movies have explored this theme –
and most of them concur with the Preacher!
Think of all the times that you have said something hurtful about someone else.
Now, just imagine that the other person happened to be in the next room, listening!

That’s a good practice to implement!
When I’m about to speak critically of someone else,
I try to imagine – not that they are in the same room
(that’s a different dynamic),
but that they are in the *next room*, overhearing the conversation.

3. Seeking Wisdom or Seeking Many Schemes? The Central Point of the Book (v23-29)

In verse 27, the narrator’s voice returns for the first time since chapter 1.

It will not return again until the end of chapter 12.

But here in verse 27, those little words, “says the Preacher,”
remind us that the Preacher is not actually the one talking!
The narrator is recounting the words of the Preacher.

The “I” of Ecclesiastes is not the voice of the *author*,
but the voice of the *Preacher*, whom the *author* is using to speak to *us*.

In verse 23 the Preacher tells us,
²³ *All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me.* ²⁴ *That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?*

In order to test “all this” by wisdom – one first needs wisdom!
But where do you find wisdom?
Wisdom is “far from me.”
How can I find it?
Job 28 is, in many ways, the heart of the book of Job,
because Job 28 tells you where to find wisdom!
Likewise, Proverbs 1-9 is where a father tells his son where to find wisdom!

The Preacher tried to find wisdom:

²⁵ *I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.*

The theme of verses 25-29 is *seeking*.
“I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek...”
what does he seek?
“wisdom – and the scheme of things (the “way things are reckoned”) –
and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness”

Our junior high boys have been going through Proverbs 1-9.
They will recognize verse 26.
The Preacher is not talking about “women in general” – or even “loose women” generally

Who is he talking about?

²⁶ *And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.*

The Preacher is talking about Folly.
Dame Folly – in all her manifestations.
He’s not “blaming women in general” for a man’s lusts.
He’s saying that there is *a woman* (indeed, “the woman”)
whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters.

If you please God, you will escape her.

I'm a little flummoxed by the translation here.
It says, very simply,
 "the good before God will escape her."
It says nothing about "pleasing God" –
 it says that the one who is good before the face of God will escape her.

This is the last usage of the word "good" in our chapter.
The only way to escape her is to be good before the face of God.

If you are a sinner, you will be taken by her –
 and woe to you if you are taken by her!

(Why is it that Calamity is always portrayed as a woman?!)

And so it is precisely here, in v27, that the narrator inserts himself (for just this once)
into the text –
 calling your attention to this point:

*²⁷ Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the
scheme of things—²⁸ which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.*

I'm seeking – I'm searching – I want to understand the scheme of things –
 I want to understand how things are reckoned – how they are arranged.
But there is one thing I cannot find!

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

I can find a man – one among a thousand –
 but I can't find a woman.
See, some would say, he's a misogynist!
He just hates women!

So say those who do not understand his quest –
 those who *themselves* have not found the woman whom he seeks!

Anyone familiar with the wisdom tradition of Israel –
 (and all of the Preacher's hearers would have been steeped in Proverbs 1-9)
 would know what woman he wishes to find!

I want to find Wisdom!
 I can find an Adam (a man).
 But I cannot find Lady Wisdom!

I can find an Adam – but man without Lady Wisdom keeps ending up with Abel.
 (Remember, the word *hebel* – vanity, throughout Ecclesiastes –
 is the name of Adam and Eve's second son, Abel).

And to show you that he is doing this on purpose,
in verse 29, he makes a clear reference to how God created man in the beginning:

²⁹ *See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*

The Preacher has been making various observations
(think back to all his comments about what he has “seen under the sun”).

Now he asks us to see something.

God made “the Adam” upright – straight – morally good.
But ever since the Adam,
we have sought out many schemes.

Indeed, the Preacher is part of the problem!
He is trying to figure out “the scheme of things” –
like the rest of mankind.

You see, the Preacher’s problem is that he has been searching for wisdom “under the sun.”
Searching for wisdom “by wisdom” is a circular path that ends in death!
If your quest for understanding the “scheme of things”
relies wholly on what you can observe “under the sun” –
then you will not find wisdom.

God made man straight – but man has made himself crooked!
And since we look at the world through crooked eyes,
we no longer see the “straight” for what it is!

The Preacher’s quest to understand the “good life” by his own wisdom
will result, inevitably, in failure, folly, and death.

Craig Bartholomew says it well:

“chap. 7 is important in exposing the end of an autonomous approach to the meaning of life –
such an approach confronts us with the enigma of life
but offers us no way out of this impasse.
It brings us into contact with the brokenness of life (vv. 13 and 29)
but cannot move us beyond that hopeless point.
Verse 29 intensifies the problem of v. 13,
for it is not only the world that is broken but humans too,
so that neutral detached observation – the essence of autonomy –
is simply not possible.” (p274)

The *beginning* of the solution, however, is found in verse 29:
“God made man upright.”

God.

The solution is God.

Only if *God* speaks – if God acts – if God *does something* –
will man find what is good.

As long as the Preacher engages in an autonomous quest for wisdom –
an self-governed quest for the good life –
he will only find Folly.

If you want to find Wisdom – if you want to find the Good – the Straight –
then you must look to Jesus, the author and finisher of faith.

Because in Jesus, the Straight has entered our crooked world.
In Jesus, the Straight was judged and condemned as crooked.
But in Jesus, the Straight has triumphed over the crooked –
so that we who have sought out many schemes
might be made straight through his grace.