Death, Adversity and Romance
Ecclesiastes 7:1-29

We're looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 7. But before we do, look how chapter 6 ends - with a question: v12: '*For who knows what is good for man* while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?'

And the writer's investigating life 'under the sun' - life in a secular world where God plays no part. And in such a world, that's a nagging question. If there is no God, and therefore no moral absolutes - how can anyone say what's good? How can anyone say, this is how you should live? This is moral and that's immoral.

But of course that doesn't stop people trying. In fact, our modern western secular culture is incredibly moralistic and quick to tell you when what you're doing is *not* good. Even companies have got in on the game. In a recent article in the Times, entitled, 'Corporations have become our moral arbiters - Where once we looked to the church to enrich our souls, we now rely on hypocritical employers', the journalist James Marriott describes how companies have taken on the role of 'moral instructors.' For example, Coca-Cola has declared that it 'stands with those seeking justice and equality' - as if it was a judge of what's morally good, he said, rather than just a seller of fizzy drinks. And through workshops on racism and sexism, they're hoping to 'make us better people'.

But in a world where there is no God and therefore no basis for absolutes, how do you decide which version of good or better you're going to opt for? Coca-Cola's or Pol Pot's? Because what seems self-evident to Coca-Cola didn't to the Khmer Rouge. At his trial for crimes against humanity, Khieu Samphan, one of Khmer Rouge's top leaders, defended himself, saying, "As an intellectual I have never wanted anything other than social justice for my country." A social justice that resulted in the death of one quarter of his country's population. So who's version of social justice, of good, are you to choose?

Well, in chapter 7, the Preacher says that as you assess its take on good, every world view faces three tests: how does it deal with death - and especially your death? How does it deal with adversity? And… how does it handle romantic relationships? And he wants you to ask - which works better in those areas - the idea that there is no God or that there is?

Dealing with Death
Look at v1: 'A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.'

And in the Bible, your name is your reputation. And having a good reputation is way better than having good looks and a great smell thanks to some perfume or aftershave.

But, the Preacher is saying, if a good reputation is better than superficial appearance - well, the day of death is better than the day of birth. But we think, really? I mean, Woody Allen said, 'I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.' And when someone's expecting a baby, their friends throw them a baby shower, don't they, and buy little pink booties, or a blue baby grow. But no one throws a death shower, do they? 'Martin's dying soon, let's have a party!'

Now, don't get the Preacher wrong. The day of birth is special, and it can teach you stuff, and not just that every baby looks like Winston Churchill. Hold a baby and you can marvel at the mystery of life. It's that the day of someone's death can teach you more. Because someone's death makes you

reflect on a life well-lived, or a life wasted, on their investment in others, or lack of it. On what most counts in life. Hold a baby and you'll feel the warmth of love. But sit beside a dying man, or a dead one, and you can't help but reflect on your own life: One day I too will die, so how should I now live?

The American author, Robert Jordan, who himself received a terminal diagnosis, wrote, 'Death comes to us all; we can only choose how to face it when it comes.' And yet, the person with a secular mindset *typically* chooses *not* to do that. They don't like the idea of their own mortality. Talk of death is morbid: 'let's not talk about that.'

But, the Preacher says, v2, '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 couple beside us are Jeremy and Katie - they were like parents to me at university. And Jeremy preached at our wedding, and took Psalm 118 as his text, 'this is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.' But I doubt any of us have ever heard that text at a funeral. And few of us would say, 'I so much prefer funerals to weddings!'

And the person with a secular mindset, who thinks, 'this life is all there is', would far rather go to the house of feasting than face the reality of death, or sit beside a coffin and think seriously about the implications of death. That one day this will be me. So how should I be preparing myself?

Instead we live in denial. We pretend we're going to live forever. But what good is a world-view that doesn't want to face reality? The English novelist, George Eliot, wrote, 'Worldly faces never look so worldly as at a funeral.'

One commentator, David Gibson, talks of the TV series *Fame*. 'Fame: I'm going to live forever.' Except, for version 2 they had to use a whole different set of actors, because, funnily enough, the originals ones weren't so young and attractive any more. They were stiffer, more saggy. They'd aged. It turns out we don't live for ever.

And yet, for a world-view that prides itself on authenticity, the avoidance of the subject of death is ironic, isn't it? Because the authentic you will one day die. And, the Preacher's saying, so don't you think it would be best if you took that to heart and became truly authentic?

And so, v4, '*The heart of the wise* is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.' Now, he's not going back on his word that you should find joy in the small things of life. He's critiquing a superficial, shallow life. The life that tries to drown out the reality of our mortality with entertainment; lining the road to our funerals with one fun party after another so we don't have to think too much about it.

Instead, he says, the heart of the wise 'is in the house of mourning'. And your heart is your emotional, worshipping centre. The centre of your choices. And where you tilt your heart determines what kind of person you become. And he's saying, the house of mourning - taking to heart that you're going to die, is a much better training ground for a life of depth, than a party.

Because, at a party, you're just going to hear, v5, 'the song of fools'. Now, at school, I used to play rugby and we had a whole repertoire of songs that you'd never sing to your mother. But those songs

don't teach you much worth learning, do they? Or think of the song of people praising you, or agreeing with you - it's a great song, it makes you feel good, but, the Preacher says, you'll learn more through 'the rebuke of the wise' (v5), because they'll be telling you, one day you're going to stand before God, so don't waste your life, it's time to get this area of your life sorted.

So if a secular world-view implicitly leaves people having to live in denial, we need something better. A world-view that means we can face death, but face it with hope. And Christ gives you that. Because he too was made subject to death. And of all deaths, his has the most to teach you. Because the cross tells you, you are loved, not abandoned; your life does have a point. You're forgiven, so have nothing to fear at the final judgment.

And his resurrection tells you, death is not the end. As he said to Martha standing at the graveside of her brother, Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." (John 11:25). And that has the power to give you courage to face your own death ahead of time, and take it to heart, and then live - not a superficial life, but one of increasing depth, and joy.

But, if death is one test for an under-the-sun world view, the difficulties life throws at you are another.

Handling Adversity

Verse 15: 'In my vain 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 evil doing.' In other words, bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. But how are you to handle the fact that life doesn't always give you what you think you deserve, or want; that it doesn't work out the way you think it should?

Well, the Preacher's saying that a secular world view doesn't just leave you wanting to escape the reality of your mortality, it also leaves you wanting to escape the reality of your difficulties. And he gives us 4 examples.

Verse 7, 'Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.' When those in positions of authority lack integrity, standing up for what's right can cost you, can't it? So it can be tempting to compromise your own integrity or cut corners ethically. Because why risk your own position for a battle you can never win?

There's a saying: everyone has their price. And the Preacher's saying, yes, but don't be everyone. Have the courage to live a life of virtue. But a secular world-view will struggle to tell you *why* you should do that. Because if this life is all there is, this life is the only one to win in, so the ends justify the means, don't they?

But the second scenario he gives is the fact that hard times just seem to drag on and on: v8, 'Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.' You see, to deal with adversity rightly, the Preacher is saying you need to stay in it for the long haul. You need to be a person of patience, and not like the proud who think, this'll soon be over, I can handle this. But if this life is all there, it's hard to be patient. Because you need a result soon. Time is ticking.

So when things aren't improving any time soon, you can start getting frustrated. Frustrated and angry. Scenario number 3: v9, 'Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.' So one of the problems with an 'under the sun' world view is that you can struggle to accept that this life, or other people, aren't going to give you what you want. But you need them to - because, *this life is all there is*. So anger gets a foothold. But what does anger do? It slowly eats away at you.

But there's a fourth danger when things aren't going the way we want - nostalgia. Verse 10, 'Say not, "Why were the the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.'

Now, maybe you think, hey come on, surely, it's religious people who are always wanting a return to the good old days, not the secular? Well, maybe, but if you have an under-the-sun view of life - no God, nothing beyond death - and life is not giving you what you want, one way you might try and deal with that is by taking an emotional trip back in time. To when you did have that job, or income, or relationship. And you feel robbed of what was.

But what is that? In The Weight of Glory, CS Lewis said that, if you're honest, you know that if you could go back in time, or things could be how they used to be, things would never be as good as you're imagining them to be. And that's because its not the past you're after, but the future. Not for a world that's gone but for one's that's not yet come. The things you're longing for, he said, "are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."

In other words, you're not really after how things were, but how they should be. For a perfect world. For a world made right. You're longing for eternity. But an under-the-sun world view can never give you that.

But Christ can. In Revelation, John heard a voice from the throne of heaven saying of the future, "The dwelling place of God is with man…He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev 21:3-4).

But in v16-17, the Preacher says that rather than trust that God will make all things right, people typically handle adversity, and the fact that bad things happen to good people, in two ways. Firstly, v16, 'Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?'

It's the approach of the religious moralist: bad things are happening so maybe I, or the person they're happening to, haven't been good enough. I need to become *more* moral, *more* righteous, try harder, to make sure God blesses me. I need to buy God off.

But there's a second option. Verse 17, 'Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?'

Because you could see bad things happening to good people - maybe even to yourself - and think, what's the point of being good and moral? It clearly doesn't insulate you from trouble, *and* it might just spoil the fun.

And the Preacher's saying, avoid both those errors - they're a bad way of handling the adversities of life. Because if you take the path of the religious moralist and think God owes you, you're only kidding yourself: v20 - 'surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.' But the path of not caring is also no good, because it just brings death - like emotional pain - into your life ahead of time.

Instead, there's a third way: v18, '*the one who fears God* shall come out from both of them.'

But you need a way of fearing God that doesn't end in the moralism of thinking you have to prove yourself better than others, don't you?

And it's only the gospel that can give you that. Because when you see Jesus - the only truly righteous man - having to die for your sin to save you, it deeply humbles you, and you realise you have *no* claim on God other than him. But when you see him dying and rising for you you also know you are loved and accepted, because of him. And that leaves you wanting to obey him, not from the duty of the moralist, but from delight.

It's why the Preacher says in v14, 'In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other.' Because you'll know that even in adversity God is working all things for your good. That, as Paul says, 'the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom 8:18). That not even adversity 'can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:39).

Okay, but if Christianity gives you a much better way of facing death and adversity than a secular world-view, a secular take on life also falls short in a third area: romantic relationships.

Navigating Relationships

Go back to v1, 'A good name is better than precious ointment.' Now, there are some names you hear, and you have an immediate reaction to them, don't you? Good or bad. Like Donald Trump. Or Margaret Thatcher. Or Nelson Mandela. Because what you're remembering is their character. And the Preacher's saying, while an ointment, a perfume, an aftershave, can fill a room with its smell, so can a person's character. And someone can be externally beautiful, or handsome, but inner character trumps external appearance every time. I mean, the size of a guy's biceps, or a woman's figure, says absolutely nothing - or at least, very little - about whether they'll love and cherish their husband or wife, does it?

Verse 26, 'I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters.' In other words, there's a type of woman who may very well be beautiful, and her hands may be soft and do all the things you want them to do, but she's like a hunter, and you're trapped. Now, remember, the Preacher's probably principally writing to young men. If it was young women, he'd have something to say about the kind of guy who's a hunter too. I mean, when I talk to my girls about relationships, we don't talk about women, we talk about the kind of qualities they want to see in a man. The Preacher's point is, man or woman - look mainly at the outward stuff, and you will probably live to regret it.

But that's a problem for our secular culture isn't it? Because it's highly image conscious, and life is viewed through an Instagram filter, *and* it has no way of judging what good character looks like.

Verse 28, ‘one man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.’ And the Preacher’s not being sexist. He’s not saying, ‘men are so much more upright than women.’ It’s that among 2000 people, men and women, he found just one upright one.

But there’s something else. Because he’s either Solomon, or deliberately putting himself in Solomon’s shoes. And Solomon literally had hundreds of women at his sexual disposal. But given his selection criteria - and how low down the list character would have come - it’s hardly surprising he didn’t find an upright woman among them. He’d spent his life looking for the wrong kind of woman.

But follow a secular, under-the-sun approach to life, and you’re going to be too swayed by the externals, and you’re going to want all your pleasure in this life, because this life is all there is, and you’re going to think external beauty is the way to get it. So you won’t pay enough attention to *inner* beauty, which is the real key to relational happiness, to a good name over precious ointment. And the Preacher is saying, if you want to rightly handle romantic relationships, you need to be wiser than that. Verse 26, ‘He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.’

You see, God is the God who says, ‘The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’ (1 Sam 16:7). And God’s love for you is not like a beauty pageant where you’re chosen or discarded based on your looks. God’s love for you is based on Christ. And as Isaiah said, at the cross, ‘his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance’ (Is 52:14) and ‘he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’ (Is 53:2). Yet he was marred to make us beautiful - beautiful on the inside.

See that, and how you assess others will begin to shift. And, married or single, you’ll be happier - and safer - as a result. Because the gospel gives you a much better basis for navigating relationships, even romantic ones, than a secular world view can ever give you.