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Interlude: More Reflections, Maxims and Home Truths
Ecclesiastes 7: 1-12

Interlude: More reflections, maxims and home truths DIG: How does the Teacher go about searching for answers to his question? "What is good?" Is anything absolutely good, or are there some things only relatively better? In each of the couplets in 7:1-4, which is the better thing and why? What is the reason behind the advice given in verses 5-7?

REFLECT: How sincere is your quest for the "good" things God provides in life? How do you recognize them? When are you confused, how do you decide who to listen to? How do you know when to advise? Rebuke? Praise? As compared to dwelling in the past or longing for the future, how much time do you live in the present? Do you enjoy it?



With a sure touch **Solomon** now brings in a stimulating change of style and approach. Instead of reflecting and arguing, **he** will bombard us with proverbs, with their strong impact and varied angles of attack. The opening ones are strikingly cheerless; the rest (for the most part) are provocatively cool but clever.

You might as well face the facts (7:1-6): A good name is better than perfumed oil, and the day of death better than the day of birth. Better to

go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for all are destined to be mourned; the living should take this to heart. Grief is better than laughter, for sadness can improve a person. The thoughts of the wise are in the house of mourning, but the thoughts of fools are in the house of pleasure. It is better to hear the rebukes of the wise than to listen to the songs of fools. For the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns burning under a pot; this too is pointless.

Nothing in the first half of **verse 1** prepares us for the body-blow of the second half. There is something like it in the previous chapter **(6:1-6)**, but that was speaking of special cases. This saying is so sweeping and so contrary to our normal thinking that we must take a leap into the B'rit Chadashah, where **Paul** proclaims that: **Life is Messiah, and death is gain (Philippians 1:21a).** But **the Solomon** of **Ecclesiastes** has already refused the assumption that there is **life** after **death (3:21).** So, we must read on and hope for a clarification in the verses that follow.

And sure enough we find the answer spelled out most clearly at the end of the next verse, especially in the saying: **the living should take this to heart.** In other words, **the day of** our **death** has more to teach us than **the day of** our **birth. Its** lessons are more factual and ironically, more vital. On the **day of** our **birth** (and to draw on the next couple of verses, on all **festive** occasions) the general mood is excited and friendly. It is no time for dwelling on **life's** shortness or on human limitations: we let our hopes and dreams get in the way. On **the day of** our **death,** on the other hand, the mood is thoughtful and the facts are plain. If we shrug them off, it is our fault. We shall have no **better** opportunity to face them.

The great **psalm** of human mortality puts it with majestic simplicity: **Therefore teach us to count our days, so that we will become wise (Psalm 90:12).** Like **the psalm**, the passage before us has a positive result in view, which is clear from its insistence on the word **better**, and especially from the last part of **Ecclesiastes 7:3** which says: **For sadness can improve a person.** The thought of **sadness** not only being replaced with **laughter** but **itself** preparing us for the truest form of **joy** – unlike the hectic, empty cheerfulness of **fools** – can be most clearly seen in the analogy of **childbirth**, whose **pains** prepare the way for a special **joy**. **When a woman is giving birth, she is in pain . . . but when the baby is born, she forgets the suffering out of joy that a child has come into the world** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Kw – Your Sorrow Will Turn to Joy**).

You might as well be rational (7:7-12): But oppression can make a wise man stupid; also, a bribe can destroy understanding (7:7). The end of something is better than its beginning, so the patient is better than the proud (7:8). Don't be quick to get angry, for only fools nurse anger (7:9). Don't ask why the old days were better than now, because that's a foolish question (7:10). Wisdom is good, along with possessions, an advantage to all who see the sun (7:11). For wisdom is a shelter, and money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom keeps the one who has it alive (7:12).

There are almost as many moods and positions here as there are sayings, but a certain low-key approach to the subject marks most of them. Meeting the man of the world who lives **under the sun,** cutting **God** out of the picture, is not lofty ground. **The Teacher** points out that there are self-evident advantages in trying to make sense of **life**, instead of relapsing into cynicism and despair.

In **verse 7**, we can recognize the essence of a maxim which, in modern times, suggests that all power tends to corrupt. It is interesting that the implied appeal here is for one's self-respect, for no-one willingly makes **a** real **fool** of **himself** – which is what the cruel or corrupt official is doing by definition, since **he** acts without reference to the merits of the case. **His** mind had been tampered with. It is now the tool of greed, not the servant of truth.

Taking **verses 8 and 9** together, we are again shown the purely **foolish** side of attitudes which the believer would condemn on biblical principles, but principles which have little appeal to the worldly man. Whether or not we regard patience as a virtue and being aggressive as a vice, we can at least see the practical good sense of self-control; of following a matter through instead of dropping it at the first affront to our dignity. It is not the only kind of area in which doing the wrong thing can also be described as childish.

Verse 10 is even more crushing. To sigh for "the good old days" is really unrealistic. It is a substitute not only for action but clear thinking. The clear-eyed **Solomon** is the last person to be impressed by this golden haze of the past. **He** has already declared that one age is very much like another. **What has been is what will be . . . and there is nothing new under the sun (1:9).** All this, **he** now implies, is too obvious to be worth arguing. **The Teacher** only needs to ask us to talk more sensibly.

What follows in **verses 11** and **12** is an unusually mundane estimate of **wisdom**. It is clear that **wisdom** is being treated on much the same footing as **money**, for its utility value, as a comparable or added insurance against the risks of **life**. If so, it is hardly a flattering comparison for something whose true worth is incalculable: **For wisdom is better than pearls; nothing you want can compare with her (Proverbs 8:11). Verse 12** may be claiming that **wisdom**, unlike **money**, is **life**-giving, but it would be in keeping with the modest aims of this passage if it had no more than its practical, protective value in mind. The phrase in **7:11b, an advantage to all who see the sun,** may well be a double-edged remark, a reminder that there is a time-limit to the help that even **wisdom**, at this level of general good sense, can offer. It pays no dividends in the grave.[292]

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** have planned a wonderful future for those who **love You**. Living with our eyes on the present, even in the best of times, will never satisfy.*

*As we live praising **You** for all **You** have done for us, only then can we be satisfied with life. Satisfaction is an internal feeling of peace and joy. David found great satisfaction in the midst of a terrible time. He was fleeing and was in the wilderness of Judah, yet he made time to look up to **You**, and see your steadfast l**ove**, for which he rejoiced. **O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding Your power and glory. Because Your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise You . . . My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise You with joyful lips, when I remember You upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for You have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy (Psalm 63:1-3** and **5-7).** Thank **You** that no matter how hard our circumstances, **Your love** is always steadfast! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*