

Ecclesiastes: Searching for the Meaning of Life
#4 “Be Careful What You Wish For” – Eccl. 6-7
Dr. Matthew Cassidy – 6/22/2014

Thank you for coming. I think you are going to be glad you came today because we are looking at a passage in Ecclesiastes, chapters 6 and 7. Solomon is going to help us *live with* – not solve – some of the greater mysteries of life.

Review --- Context for Today

If you remember, Solomon is writing a diary, Ecclesiastes, where he tells us the unvarnished truth. He is coming at us like a coach – with not a lot of honey, just truth and it is sometimes harsh. Solomon’s life story is that he was the third king of Israel. God paid him a visit and asked him what he would like in life – one wish. Solomon wanted great wisdom, which God gave him; so he had unimaginable wisdom. Because Solomon asked for that, God granted him his desire and said: *Because you are asking for wisdom, I will also give you unparalleled wealth as king.*

What did Solomon do with his wisdom, wealth, and power? He spent it on selfish ambition, he became decadent, and he lived a miserable, terrible life. Solomon wanted us to learn from it and so he journaled his experiences, writing: I have some insights for you so you don’t have to do what I lived through. He says that life is a great mystery. Life is perplexing and does not fit. It does not work together. There are too many contradictions that seem to happen. Life is meaningless.

He starts off this book: *Meaningless, meaningless*, says the Teacher. Everything is meaningless. In some Bible translations, it reads: *Vanity, vanities*. Other translations read: *Everything is futility*.

Solomon says this, not because life is not worth living but life as human beings is exceptionally frustrating because there is a mystery that God has given us an insatiable desire to know how things work together. We know there is a key out there which will unlock the door to this grand, beautiful plan but God holds the key and He is not letting go of it. Ecclesiastes 3:11 summarizes this difficulty that mankind lives with.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

This is what separates us from the animals, that we have a long view of the past and we have a longer view of the future. We think that we can see a common thread through that. God put eternity in our hearts. God made this beautiful plan, putting eternity in our hearts; that means that we long to know that plan but God does not tell us the plan. He does not show us the plan. So we live in frustration with many different expressions of when it does not appear that there is a plan at all and if there is a plan, it is a long way from beautiful to us.

In Chapters 6 and 7, what many people will never come to a point of understanding, and what would take most of us decades to experience, Solomon is going to share in two short chapters -- how to live with – not make sense of – this disparity of why good things keep happening to bad people and why bad things keep happening to good people. It is as though if there is a God in charge, He saves up fame and fortune, notoriety and wealth, for the people who could not care less about Him and they are just living self-indulgent, self-centered lives and He gives them blank checks. Meanwhile, it is as though God is saving up suffering, sorrow, and death for the people who are pursuing Him and who are desirous of an intimate relationship with Him. That disparity does not seem like Someone has a plan and it does not seem like the plan is all that pretty.

So, why do good things happen to bad people and why do bad things happen to good people? That is what Solomon is going to try to reconcile in his vast living experience. He wants to say: *Well, here is how to negotiate that.*

Ecclesiastes 6: Not all good is good.

Solomon says: Good is not always good. You are upset and envious. You look over the fence and see the way other people live. You think: why do good things keep happening to bad people?

Solomon says, not all good is good. Happy things do not make happy people. Enjoying eternal things makes people joyful.

Ecclesiastes 6:1, 2 I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on mankind [*who have eternity on their hearts*]: God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

So, wealth and honor do not make people happy because there is something missing in the wealth and the honor. They lack nothing their hearts desire except the ability to enjoy that wealth and honor. Temporal

things cannot fill an eternal void and God is withholding the ability to enjoy wealth and honor because they do not give God credit.

Last week I said, you put First Things first [acknowledge God, eternal things], and then you put Second Things second (temporal things).

These who do not enjoy their wealth and honor, they are putting Second Things first – putting things in front of God. So, they do not acknowledge God.

Solomon is saying: The unhappy people do not give God the time of day, acknowledging Him, and He does not give them the joy of ownership of all their stuff. – Who would know better than Solomon? A million dollars a day – power and authority and notoriety – but when you read this book, Ecclesiastes, he is miserable because Solomon did not acknowledge God's greatness and, therefore, God did not give him the joy of those possessions and that notoriety. Happy things cannot make you happy because we have something everlasting in us.

Illustration: When I was a senior in high school, my father and some friends bought a rather exclusive restaurant from an IRS takeover. If you have ever seen this happen, it is a little frightening. Without notice, the IRS comes into a business and put locks on everything, and everything now belongs to the IRS. Another entity purchases that business from the IRS, which includes the keys to all the locks on the business. If the trashcan was full when the IRS attached the business, that is included in what you are buying. You get the money in the cash registers, as is, the whole thing. This was the nicest restaurant in San Antonio at that time.

My dad and his friends got the keys from IRS and walked into the double, walk-in freezers, filled top to bottom with filet mignon and lobster tails. We bought an extra refrigerator to put in our garage at home to house as much as we could of this food. An individual could not buy this quality of meat – at least back then; they had a restaurant grade of meat that the average buyer could not get in order to encourage people to go to restaurants. This food was like something you could never buy for yourself unless you owned a restaurant.

The first week at our house, we were eating this food up. My older brother and sister were in college at this time. So at our home, it was just me and then my younger brother and sister who were too young to appreciate this quality of food. We just cut up hot dogs for them and told them they were having filet. I was having the surf and turf, and I said to dad: *Is this heaven?* He said: *No, but it tastes like heaven.* – Two weeks later, we were thin-slicing the filets and putting it on toast with mustard and relish. Six weeks later, it was like: *Dad, don't you have any friends we could give this stuff to? Not lobster tails*

again. – The dissatisfaction was there because our stomachs were full but our spirits were still suffering hunger pains because we were just feeding our anatomy but not our souls.

Things are not designed to fill our hearts. You know this. You might have had an experience like this.

You can see a child who loves her parents and is grateful towards them. She has one toy in her possession and she skips, hums, and sings the praises of that toy and of her parents.

Next door, there could be a child who has rooms filled with toys and there is nothing to do and they always want the other widget that is better or bigger and this well-set kid is looking over wanting your kid's toy. This child suffers from ingratitude and entitlement.

That is what Solomon is referring to here. If you don't love the Giver, you cannot enjoy the Gift.

Now, he is going to give a test case, which is the thesis in Ecclesiastes 6:1, 2. In Ecclesiastes 6:3, 4, Solomon is going to give extreme examples, off the chart examples, so that you understand that not all good is good.

Why do good things happen to bad people? Not all good things are good.

In Ecclesiastes 3, this is how they keep score.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he ...

He can have 100 children – the more kids the better back then. You are famous because you have 100 children and you are living a long life. But you never enjoy it. You have this funeral where it is said: Here lies John Doe who was miserable the whole time of his life because something was missing and he never found it. – It says that it would be better that John Doe died at birth, that there was a miscarriage because a child of a miscarriage does not know about destination sickness. That is what this person suffers from – a figure of speech that means *they arrived*. Most of us never get to the destination that we long for. *If only, if only – better job, better house, better wife, better, better, better.* This Giver says: I gave you all the time you needed and all the children to keep score with, and you got there; but the person who received all the children and long years says: *There is nothing here. Everything under the sun is temporal, vanity, not working.* -- I am chasing these stupid rabbits around the track which are not real and you never can catch them. [Analogy used in first sermon in series] He experienced the misery of destination sickness. It

would have been better had he not lived at all. In his ignorance maybe he would think: Maybe there is something in life and I just have not been there yet.

Let's give him more time.

Ecclesiastes 6:6 ... even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

There are two reasons why living 2000 years does not work in giving contentment.

If you add finite years, you still don't get the infinite. So, you want to live 1000 years? Good. Or 2000 years? Keep running. You will go to more places and say: *Is this it?*

His other point is: What happens at 2000 years and a day? So you lived long, then you die and are lowered into the grave – just like everyone else.

It is not the number of years, friends, but the knowledge of God and that is what matters. You are contented because you know who the Giver is and your lot in life, the cards you were dealt and you are resting in that.

Paul says in Philippians 4:12 – I have learned the secret of being filled and of going hungry, of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things (how do you live that way?) through Christ who strengthens me.

Solomon says: I am not going to try to make sense out of this. I am going to try to make you understand a little more about your problem with the disparity of the world where all good things seem to be happening to bad people. Solomon says: Take it from me, a million-dollar-a-day guy – not all good things are good.

Here is how Solomon says we should make some sense out of life. He says: Let me bring some conclusion to this.

Ecclesiastes 6:10-11 Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known; no one can contend with someone who is stronger.

:11 The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?

Whatever exists has already been named: The beautiful plan has already been named. In the film industry lingo: It is in the can and there is no more editing to this. It is sealed; God is in charge; He has got it and does not need your help. Thanks.

The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? : Why do you keep talking about what might have been, could have been, the lot you do not have, the hand you did not get dealt? So you are going to wear God down with words?

In verse 12, he continues with: Who are you talking to? You can't contend with someone stronger than you.

Ecclesiastes 6:12 For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?

You don't know what the future looks like. You are just a shadow passing through, little guy. A man has to learn how to talk. Meaning, talking to God about what is wrong with God's plan and we cannot comprehend it – yet we have to learn how to talk. We will forget how to talk. We will just keep talking to God about it. The more words, the less the meaning. I don't understand; You did not check in with me, God.

Let me put it another way more graphically. A human being as a toddler has to learn how not to go to the bathroom on himself. Later, he will forget again. You will wear diapers twice in your life and you wanted to tell God what is what? Who are you, o man, who answers back to God – it says in Romans 9.

Be careful – every one of us these days will have this experience. You will be placed in a box, a cheap one, which is put into an incinerator, and your ashes will be put inside a vase about that big. Then it will be given to a family member who will pass it around to other family members uncomfortably, not knowing what to do with the urn, until someone deals with it, usually without telling anyone else and then it is gone. From dust we came and to dust we shall return.

Solomon says, this plan – let's please not talk about the unrighteous people getting all the good things. We know so little because we are so little. Not all good is good.

One person said: We do not know what tomorrow holds but we know who holds tomorrow. Rest in that.

Here is another way of putting it. Do not let what you do not know about God or His plan overthrow what you do know about God and His plan. – Do not let what you do not know about what is going on in your life or in the world supersede what you do know about God and His nature.

That God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever would believe in Him would have eternal life and would not perish. He did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world. [John 3:16]

You know that. He must be the Author of a beautiful plan. If the unrighteous get blessed, what is that to you? Stop wearing Him down with words.

That is one of the problems where we see inconsistencies with a God who is running the universe and it is a beautiful plan.

Ecclesiastes 7: Not all bad is bad.

Another problem is how come bad things are saved up to happen to the good people? How about the friends that we know, or in our own lives, where we think that we are pursuing God as much as we are able to and yet calamity comes banging on our door? There is a line forming outside of our house of bad things happening to us.

Solomon says not all bad things are bad. In the grand scheme of things, think about it. Not all bad things are bad.

Ecclesiastes 7:1 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.

The first part talks about sweet perfume – in that culture they were supposed to enjoy the woman who walks in and she fills the room with her aroma because that is expensive. We now know that she has money and is well-to-do and kind of classy. We wish we could have that. --- Solomon says: A good name is better than that – a good reputation, a walk with God supersedes that aroma of wealth.

Your day of death is better than the day of your birth. What? On your birthday, you have nothing to do with it. We all start off somewhat similar at that point. But on your death day, that is when all the points are totaled. That is when you know who does well. That is when you know if they have a good name. Later on he says: A good funeral, a good finish, they made it. They didn't trip, fall or stumble. They have a great reputation. How you end is much more important than how you start. A great reputation or good name is far superior to a great aroma. The smell of righteousness is the smell of sweat.

I bet you have been to a funeral of a person who was laid into a casket and their fingernails still had grease underneath them. They died barely making minimum wage but the auditorium could be filled with people who were cared for by this great soul. He cared more about God's love overflowing in his life into other people's lives than he cared about a house payment or a zip code. A great name is far better – that aroma is what you are supposed to be living for – not these big things.

So, how does a person get a great name? Most of the first half of Chapter 7 deals with how does a person find their way into this caliber of depth and understanding of God and of the meaning of life? Unfortunately, they experience the very things that we shake our fists at God about. Death, hardship, righteous anger towards injustice – there are 4 or 5 things listed in the Scripture and we only have time to talk about two of them: death and sorrow.

My point is that while we are arguing: *Oh dear God, why do bad things keep happening to good people?* **One of the things we can find in common with all good, holy, deep, significant, righteous**

people is that they all suffered. Suffering does not cause maturity but you cannot get maturity without suffering. Suffering does not cause maturity but your response to suffering and hardship will determine whether you grow deeper with understanding and knowledge about the greatness of God. That is the common denominator. Not all bad is bad.

Look at death, for example, in verse 2.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.

So you are going to have family time together and say: *Hey kids, here is the thing. We have two outings planned and you guys get to choose. We could go downtown where there is a festival and a lot of free stuff, balloons. We could maybe go down on the lake. Or, there is a friend we both know who died and there is going to be a little memorial service for them. Swim suits or your black dress up clothes? What do you guys want to do? Really, you can be honest with that.* – Absolutely we are going to the lake.

Solomon is saying: No, as a person who had Gatsby-like parties on a regular basis, he says, nothing of significance happened as a result of that enjoyment. But funerals are places where some people finally wake up.

They say that everybody lives two lives and the second life happens when you realize you have one life. Many people are one funeral away from that realization. When you realize that you only have one life, that is the day the universe changes. No more games, no more piddling around, no more playtime. It is about ending well. It is about seeing God face to face with your shoulders back and your head up. I get it and I want to invest in something that lasts for eternity. I want to love my Maker and love His creation. That happens at funerals when you stare at a box and think: *I am next*. You can go to a 100 of them but one time you will realize: *I could be next*.

So Solomon is saying: Look, it is better to go to the house of mourning because death is the destiny of everyone and the living should take this to their heart. Death is a good thing.

The other thing he wants you to know is that sorrow is better than pleasure. Why do sorrowful things come to people who love God? Because sorrow is better than pleasure sometimes.

Ecclesiastes 7:4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

:5 It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools.

Not all bad is bad. Going to the house of mourning where you think deep thoughts and they can be melancholy or even morose is better than superficial party talk. It is far better for you to be reprimanded and corrected by a person of wisdom, than to be schmoozed and kissed by a betrayer, or even just one of

your party pals. Solomon is screaming at us saying: *There is meaning and purpose to life and you cannot find that a lot of times while you are laughing. It is the difficult times in life that make you real.*

Malcolm Muggeridge is arguably one of the most insightful reporters/journalists in the 20th century. He worked for BBC and went all over the world. He has a wonderful biography. He started off as a communist and atheist and ended up as a Christian believer who spoke well for God. Here is what he wrote in his biography towards the end of his life about suffering and how much he had learned to love suffering instead of complaining about it. [*A Twentieth Century Testimony*]

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo, as Aldous Huxley envisaged in *Brave New World*, the result would NOT be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be enduring. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.

He saw that suffering makes us well and in his musings, he saw the Cross and said: That is the ultimate expression of that value, that suffering heals. That is what drew him to Christ – the truth that not all bad is bad. There is this Cross and he said: That is the penultimate expression of that.

So, why do good things happen to bad people? Not all good is good.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Not all bad is bad.

How do you live?

How do you live? What I love about this Book of Ecclesiastes is again he is talking to us like a coach. Solomon is efficient with words and he speaks right to us about how do we live in a world where we cannot make sense out of injustice, immorality, and some people getting off in everything, it appears, and they are making money and living extravagant experiences. Meanwhile, the righteous seem to be panned? How do you do this?

1. **Lean in with everything in your life.** God has a beautiful plan and it has a name. The plan is set and He is not asking for any more help. That is your lot so lean into that. When you have a great time in life, lean in to that. When sorrow comes your way, lean into that.

Ecclesiastes 7:13 Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?

He is not talking about fatalism again. If there is hunger that needs to be addressed, we need to address it. If there is injustice, we need to do everything that we can to make justice prevail. What Solomon is saying here is: If God has bent it this way, what are you going to do about straightening that, o man? Why don't you, instead of fighting God about the lot you have been given (Ecclesiastes 3:11 refers to this idea of the lot not just to man collectively but to you individually) and wishing you had someone else's cards [I wish I had their family or their job or their children or whatever that might be] what difference does that make in the long term of things? Does it change anything? No, it does not change anything. If God has bent it, what are you going to do about it? So instead of being morose about the hand you got dealt, Solomon says to lean in and play the hand you have been dealt.

Say, you grew up with alcoholic parents, as an example. Terrible things happened in your living room. Okay, so there. That is your hand of cards. If you would take the hand that you used to shake your fist at God and with more words there is less meaning, and find out that isolation and loneliness are one of the most despairing experiences in the human soul, if you could just take that hand down and hold someone else's hand who grew up in another alcoholic family and you could say this to them honestly: *I know how you feel*. Their life would not be so alone and neither would yours. Stop fighting and live your lot, he is saying. You will not unbend this. The plan has already been named.

Remember Doris Day singing:

Que sera, sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours to see
Que sera, sera
What will be, will be.

That is a song of a person who has accepted their place in the universe not to know. The future is not mine to see. Whatever will be, will be. I can live with this. I will lean into this and what God has bent, I will not unbend. It is a great song.

2. **Lean in when times are good and when times are bad.** Verse 14 does a wonderful job of summarizing this.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy. But in the day of adversity consider (reflect) – God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything about the future.

You will not know what the future holds. The future is not ours to see. But you can do this – in good times he says *Lean in*. When times are happy, don't wait for the other shoe to drop. Some people have this view of God. *If you are happy, you will be sad soon – so don't be happy for too long.*

Solomon says: No, you lean in. If you have a great job, or if you have a good meal in front of you, don't chew twice and swallow; enjoy every bit of it and roll it around on your tongue. If you have some good, sweet wine you can do that too. If you have a marriage, enjoy the marriage. If you have good things going, then give credit to the Giver and He will give you the gift of enjoyment.

But if you are in the sorrowful part of your life, Solomon says to reflect, think about these things. Lean into that and consider – Don't miss this blessing. You are most teachable, most vulnerable, most likely to change - like Muggeridge said – when you are crying, not when you are laughing. Don't miss this but lean into it. Seize the moment. Feel the presence of God in your loneliness, in your sorrow, in your heartache and stop shaking your fist. More words = less meaning. Let God run His universe.

I have looked forward to this day, being over 50 years old, to study this book and I think if I could give something to you who are younger, I would give this to you. I would give you my fatigue. I am so tired and that has been such a blessing. When I was younger, I had too much energy available to me to fight and I just kept fighting. I kept arguing. I wanted to see the big picture. I wanted to peer over the wall. I would see some of it and then it would grow blurry and then I would be angry again. I had so much energy to be angry and to tell God the way it ought to be.

Now, I cannot care any more. We are not to understand God but to enjoy God. These are the cards you were dealt so play them. Let God enjoy you playing the cards.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all that other stuff will be added to you. [Matthew 6:33]

Lean in. Let God love you.

Sometimes I feel like the little kid who is screaming and fighting and arguing with dad when I don't know what I am talking about. Then I argue and scream myself into tears and then in exhaustion fall asleep on the couch. God, in His grace, will carry me to my bed where I will wake up the next morning and forget anything ever happened. Be the boy who wakes up in the morning – not the boy who screams at night.

That is true and right out of the Bible. That is Ecclesiastes and that is why we are studying it. I hope you live well.

Lord Jesus,

Let us put the appropriate faith in your providence and your sovereignty, that you are in control. You have this beautiful plan and you are able to pull off the plan. The plan is bigger than anything we could ever hope or imagine. Maybe we will never understand the plan. I hope it is that big. I hope that when I am in Heaven, I still cannot grasp it all. I hope it takes all eternity for me to figure it out. I hope I never figure it out.

But right now, right here, Lord, I ask that you would give us peace in the lot we have been given. Help us quit looking at other people's lives, other people's cards, and just look at ours and enjoy it. Let us lean into them.

You turn death into resurrection. I want you to do that in our lives. Turn the sorrow into something worth rejoicing over. Lord, I ask that you would do a wonderful, miraculous thing in our lives. Give us peace so that we might enjoy you. In Jesus' name. Amen