



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 6:10 – 7:14

Lesson 8 of 16

2007-08

"Advice for the Here and Now and for the Future"

TRANSCRIPT

Here we are, studying the book of Ecclesiastes tonight, beginning in the sixth chapter; chapter 6 verse 10, and we will go to chapter 7 verse 14. Because we have such a lengthy text tonight, I will not read the text, but I do want to bring to your attention a change that I am going to make. If you have an NIV, I'm going to change a word. In chapter 7 verse 3, change the word sorrow (NIV) to the word anger. It's a different emotional expression, and I will explain that as we get to that particular text.

Of course we are studying the writings of the 'man with a powerful mind', and our lesson is: Advice for 'the here and now' and for 'the future'. We are about at the midpoint of the book, and there is a marginal notation in the inspired language to that effect. This marks not only the transition of our writer's focus but also, we notice, that he drops his search for the meaning of life for the remainder of the book: Here after his agenda will be advice and commentary regarding 'the future'.

This first short section (6:10-12) anticipates the type of advice to come by telling us that the future is 'meaningless' and unhelpful. Observe that he picks up on that theme from the very beginning: For the message of vs12 is 'Life is meaningless, a chasing after the wind'. So we can now be certain what our tomorrows will be like as we seek life's meaning 'under the sun'. Next, the main section (Chapter 7:1-14); and it's structure we will label: 'Miscellaneous advice from the powerful mind'.

Well let's begin: In verse 10, the first word, "*Whatever*", is the whole of what he has obtained from all his sources: And he has used many. We know in this book he has

talked of wisdom, pleasure, honor, labor, and wealth; and he concludes that nothing new has taken place. So therefore, we shall not alter, by our lives, the way in which we or our world is made. Now think about that. That really has monumental implications in this day and time. You see, that would make vice president, and now Nobel prize winner, Albert Gore on the wrong side of the argument. God alone, and not man, is sovereign over the creation. Nothing is going to be changed in this creation. Notice (vs 10) the word 'named'. Literally it means: *"Its name has been called"*. This turns us back to Genesis chapter 1, where God called this creation into being by the power of His Word. If He names it, He knows it exhaustively, and He wills it into existence. But it's more than just willing it into existence. Jonathon Edwards said, "He wills it moment by moment into existence." That's what He's doing.

When the man in the garden named the animals (Genesis, chapter 2, verses 19 and 20) the task involved more than assigning them a name tag. In the Old Testament, to name something was to display knowledge and control over it. That's why, in Psalm 49:11, the wealthy man, who doesn't know God, is going to name his lands after himself: Because it is his inheritance, and he controls it. So, this is the idea: Our God controls His creation. And it's right here in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Now, just so that I'm not misunderstood about the environment, I do believe in being a good citizen of the Earth. I believe in clean water and scrubbers on industrial chimneys; and I emphatically believe that we ought to do whatever we can to rid ourselves of pollution. But what I do not believe is that mankind can destroy this environment. Rather, I believe the Bible teaches very clearly that man, for all that he thinks of himself, cannot and will not destroy what God has set up and established. That's the point of the text. That's the point that he's making right here in the Word of God.

Dr. Johnson would say to us students, "The more I study the Bible, the more Calvinistic I become." Now I'm no student like Dr. Johnson was. But one thing I know very clearly from my understanding and education of the Word of God is that God is sovereign and man controls very little; if anything. Only God is the creator. Man is the

creature for the day; the ‘here and now’. Remember James’ metaphor? ‘Man is but a wisp of vapor’ (James 4:14). And man’s fingerprints on this planet will not alter God’s design whatsoever.

Now what have we been told within the last two decades about the environment and about pollution? Well, Mt. St. Helens exploded; and we were told initially that the whole Northwest of the United States would be covered in black clouds, and it would alter the environment. And yet you go there today and it’s pristine; it’s clear. And when Saddam Hussein started the oil fires in Kuwait, what were we told, initially? Why we could have a potential blackout in large portions of the world; with heavy smoke and pollution everywhere. What do we have? Where did it go? Our God is controlling this environment and these environs. And He wills them to exist until He is through with His intended purpose. Now that’s the text. That’s what it says.

Verse 11. Ravi Zacharias, the critical Christian thinker, philosopher, and apologist says that it always amazes him that pagan thinkers who deny God’s existence write such big, thick books. If He doesn’t exist, why do we need to spend so many hours arguing over it? Why the need for such esoteric, abstract, convoluted argumentation? Is His existence a predicate or not? So also, says the ‘man with the powerful mind’: “The more words, the less meaning, and how then does that profit anyone?” And the rhetorical question claims that man, and mankind, have no advantage in gaining anything.

So in verse 12 we have two questions which draw this section to a close. The first rhetorically claims that ‘it is impossible to know what is good in life.’ I interpret this question in light of the context; namely the sovereignty of God and the weakness of man. So man, apart from the knowledge of God, has no ability to discern his life.

I can remember just a few weeks after I became a Christian that my life and thinking were radically transformed. I can remember in amazement the contemplation of everything in life that I thought was a high mark; making good grades, being an exceptional athlete, landing your first job, working your way up to be the president of the company, meeting the right people, and having an influence in the community. All

of those ‘things’ that we would call ‘marks’: And then realizing that you could do all of those ‘things’, every one of them, and still go to hell. It was shocking to me as I thought about it. But you see, that's the point here. Apart from God's Word, man does not know, and man cannot know ‘the here and now’ and into ‘the future’.

The second question also emphasizes man's inability to know, and to even keep himself alive. Specifically he says, ‘People are like a shadow.’ Think about that metaphor. It highlights man's frailty and man's brevity. Thus the human dilemma; death and the future uncertainty. That's what man has staring at him.

Now onto our second section; chapter 7, verses 1 through 14, the ‘man with the powerful mind’ offers his ‘miscellaneous advice’. This new section may be observed most readily by the shift in literary form. The first 12 verses here are proverbs; many constructed in the ‘*better than*’ pattern. Now there is no logical progression to any of these proverbs but the words repetition and the theme show that there is a unity within these verses. Let's observe the ‘*better than*’ repetition. In verse 1 we have the first use and 10 more times in this section (in the original language). ‘*Wise*’ is found in the NIV, verse 4, and occurs in the original 6 times. ‘*Fools*’, in verse 4, occurs 4 times: ‘*Heart*’, 6 times. And ‘*anger*’ and ‘*sorrow*’, 3 times. The themes that dominate the section mainly are on death (Verses 1, 2, and 4). And the other theme; ‘*wisdom and folly*’ (Verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12).

Verse 1 begins with a proverb that we would think has been taken right out of the book of Proverbs itself. Here he extols the importance of a good reputation. Indeed, it is more valuable than fine oil, which is considered an expensive luxury to ancient peoples. We think immediately of a text like Proverbs 22:1. "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." And yet this is as close as we're going to get to the book of Proverbs; because notice, the last part of our verse actually takes our breath away. Note that our ‘man with the powerful mind’ is driving a point home to us that is not New Testament theology. He is not saying that ‘to depart and be with Jesus is far better than to be here’. When birth occurs, it is a time of happiness and celebration. But death stops us and arrests our attention: And as we

reflect on life's brevity, we are '*better*' for it. And so this we learn about life 'under the sun': Life is short; and we need to consider that.

Verse 2. In his counsel to consider the relative advantage of death over life he says, 'It's better to go to a funeral than to a party'. The funeral helps to remind others that they too, will die. But the wise go and they will adjust their life accordingly. That's what he means by 'taking the matter to heart'.

Verse 3: A brief proverb, followed by a motive clause. It's our Teacher's opinion that anger, (here is where we change from the NIV 'sorrow'), that anger is '*better than*' laughter. And here again is what makes this book so hard. Back in chapter 5 in verse 17, he disparaged anger and encourages us to enjoy pleasure, which would coincide with laughter.

Now what about this word sorrow? That was Luther's interpretation of the word; and the NIV follows along as do many commentators. Although it is not the literal meaning of the word, I prefer the word anger here (as do a number of commentators), because it fits the theme: The brevity of life with a serious consideration of that brevity. To be angry is to be serious about life: To be serious about a matter and the exigencies of that matter 'under the sun'. This is the understanding, by the way, of a number of commentators as well. The motive clause: "...because a sad face is good for the heart" also supports the use of the word '*angry*'. The face denotes the external appearance, while the heart is the internal makeup. Thus, the troubled face reflects reality; his contemplations are serious. "What we need," said Dr. Johnson, "is more piety. The Christian should be grave." That's what he told us. And I think this proverb expresses that; not that we don't enjoy ourselves and have a good time, but life is truly a serious matter. And as the redeemed people of God we should be serious about it.

Verse 4 goes on to amplify the way he forcefully repeats what he's already told us in verse 2. He states that those who are wise, contemplate death; while fools are those who live as if there's no end in sight. Here now he's making the transition from the issue of death to the comparison of 'wisdom and folly'. The fool is one who lives his

life for pleasure while denying he must give an account at the end of his life at the point of death.

Now pleasures come to us. Over and over he's told us that there's nothing *'better than'* to eat and drink and enjoy this life. And so as believers, as God sends those pleasures of life, we thank Him for them. They're gifts. But we don't make pleasure our chief goal. And we don't embark on a life to seek for it, to search it out. But that is precisely what our 'man with a powerful mind' did. He sought it out. And now we're reviewing the writings of an exhausted man. You'll never have enough. There'll never be enough. Rather, we wait for the LORD. We trust in Him. We delight ourselves in Him. He gives us the desires of our heart. And that is the wise way to live.

Verse 5 again directs us to a sober consideration of life with a *'better than'* proverb. The antithesis is between a wise rebuke and the foolish songs. The rebuke given by a singular wise person is better than a song sung by a plurality of fools. The truly wise accept the rebuke as a harsh reality; whereas the songs of fools desensitizes and distracts. Music is often nostalgic, for it can take us back to times and places from the past. But the rebuke is for the 'here and now': To challenge who we are and what we are to be about. A wake-up call to keep us moving forward.

Now let me say one thing about *'rebuke'*, since it comes in this text. Many people believe they have the gift of rebuke or correction; and they're often very bold in their criticisms. I want to warn you that you need to be very careful. I can remember on a few occasions Dr. Johnson took me aside and corrected me. And on those occasions, I always remember feeling built up. I always felt encouraged. His correction was a blessing to me. So we just need to be careful.

Verse 6 provides the reason for his evaluation of the previous verse. Here the vivid picture of hearing the fool's laughter; so annoying, like the crackling of burning thorns under a cooking pot. James Crenshaw says, "Thistles provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise." I think of those stand-up comedians, with all their jokes; mostly profane. They give the crowd laughter; but only for the moment. What happens to the comics after the crowd's laughter dies down and they all go home? Are

they still that funny, with their entourage around them? Or are they just quiet and lonely: All alone? I don't know. But here's a better question. What happens when they die? What happens when they face God and they're held accountable for all those words that they used? I don't think there will be any laughter then.

Verse 7 uncovers the effect of a bribe on one's judgment. Even a wise person can become a fool when money is on the table. Money can corrupt us all, including the wise Christian. Judgment is affected by extortion and a bribe. The same word translated as '*oppression*' in chapter 4 (vs1&2) is translated here as '*extortion*'. In other words, it's an external force or pressure applied, with money involved, that can turn a wise man into a fool. Notice your text; "...and a bribe corrupts the heart." So let's remember this: The wise person surrenders his life to his invisible Savior and to the revelation of the Word of God. The fool, on the other hand, surrenders his life to money, and he will do anything to get it.

Verse 8, another '*better than*' proverb along with verse 9, promotes 'the end of a matter over the beginning'. '*Patience*' is highlighted here as the virtue to be considered for the 'here and now', as well as 'the future'. Many times in life injustices are done to us. Painful things happen like: We're forgotten, we're cast aside, and we're considered of little value. Life has a way of producing many insults. Now if you'll think about it, that was certainly the life of David. And it was surely the life of Joseph. As a matter of fact, it was the life of our Lord Himself; the life of Christ. And yet, when their story is fully told, and when God puts His final brush strokes on the canvas, then we see why "The end of the matter..." is far better than the beginning. Those personalities' lives were punctuated by the fact that they stayed under the providential hand of God. And when the insults and disappointments came; they persevered. Then look what they grew to become.

"My Christian friend," said Mr. Spurgeon in 1888, "the very worst thing that can happen to you can very well be the very best thing that can happen to you. But it will take some time for you to see it." The interesting thing about the aforementioned personalities; none of them retaliated for the wrongs that were done to them. We know

well of our Savior, who bore it all. But let's consider someone that we can relate to a little closer: David. He could have killed Saul twice, but he never lifted a finger. And when Joseph rose to power his first orders could have been: "Bring in Potiphar's wife and then send out a patrol and arrest my worthless brothers out in the land of Canaan." But he didn't.

You know what makes God's 'end of the matter' so beautiful? He has His own way of handing out the rebukes. Just ask Job's friends whose very lives depended on Job's meekness and prayer at the 'end of that matter'. Stay submissive. Stay wise. You've been hurt (we all have) but the story about you is not over. So stay under the trial because the blessing will be seen at the 'end of the matter'. That's God's promise for the 'here and now', and for 'the future'.

Next our Teacher with 'the powerful mind' departs from the proverbial, even poetic language, to quote a saying as common in his day as in our own. Verse 10: "Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?"” The “Do not say” directive is a warning to his listeners against that attitude; because its source is not wisdom. We say, 'we want to go back to when gas was 15 cents a gallon or when we could play 36 holes of golf and never be sore the next day'. But here's what you need to remind yourself of when you think like this: Your focus is not upon the LORD, for He alone is the author of your times. Stop getting distracted; our day is His time.

And there's so much to distract us in our day 'under the sun'. The 'things' of men; the devaluing of the dollar or some new evil tyrant in the world. That is what others devote themselves to. And I'm glad they do. But you and I need to be the people of Christ; serving Him exactly in the place that He has assigned for each of us. If that be a doctor; you be the best and do it for Christ's sake. If as a neighbor, you have the example of the good Samaritan: And there your neighbor is. Meditate upon that. This is your goal and mine: Stay before Christ and stay in that role. For the providence of God has assigned you a place; stay there and there you will be blessed. These are our times, not another's. Serve Christ with all your heart today; because today is all we have:

Only today. Carly Simon sang it right when she penned these lyrics. "...and stay right here, 'cause these are the good old days."

Verses 11 and 12 discuss the relative advantage of wisdom over riches. On the surface, verse 11 seems to be straightforward with a simple vocabulary and clear syntax. And yet, there's a disagreement among interpreters whether one takes the preposition as a comparison (and that is how your NIV translates it), with the operable word '*like*': "Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing...". Or we can take the preposition as an accompaniment. Thus the translation: "Wisdom is good with an inheritance..." (NKJV). I am no scholar to resolve such a translation issue (Where is Dr. Waltke when we need him?). So, there may be some doubt in the way that we take this sentence: But there is little doubt what our 'man with a powerful mind' is saying: Money, in this world 'under the sun', is on a par with wisdom, practically speaking. That is what he's saying. Now I'm not trying to cheapen wisdom. I'm all too aware of wisdom's value. Proverbs 8:10-11, "Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her."

So here is our question: How is money on a par with wisdom? Well, verse 12 tells us that they are both '*shelters*'. '*Wisdom*' (skill) protects one 'under the sun' from making a mess out of his life. Money can protect one 'under the sun' by being an insurance policy against calamity. But more importantly, the connection between wisdom and money has a very utilitarian value: They are both to be dispensed and used quite liberally. Now we are the shelter for the common man; for we seek to win men for Christ. Whether with our words or our pocketbooks; we take the role of 'servant' in every situation for the people that God's sovereign providence brings into our life. We want to be there for them.

And how do we do this? Well he tells us: 'Look, it all starts with knowledge'. Verse 12b: "...but the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it." You see, without knowledge we will not know how to live. Without knowledge we will not know how to act. Without knowledge we will not use our resources to Him and for Him. Now think about that; for the 'here and now', and for the 'future'. This is why

Believers Chapel is so interested in instructing you in the Word of God: For you to learn and then apply His knowledge so that you can be equipped and able to minister.

Now, in coming to the last two verses, (vs13-14) our Teacher with a ‘powerful mind’ departs from the proverbial form to give us something to ponder about our lives ‘under the sun’. Notice first, he calls upon us to “Consider” (in the NIV; literally, this word means to ‘observe’), “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?” (vs 13). This verse exalts the sovereignty and providence of God against the utter powerlessness of man.

Thomas Boston, who lived in another time, 1676-1732, preached an entire series of messages on verses 13 and 14. His sermons have been republished under the title, *The Crook in the Lot*. And here is his outline. I'm going to read this very slowly, in case you want to write the three propositions down. Proposition number one: *‘Whatever crook there is in man's lot, it is God's making’*. Proposition number two: *‘Whatever God sees fit to mar no man shall mend his lot’*. Proposition number three: *‘Realize the ‘crook in the lot’ as the work of God, and it is of His making: This is the proper means to behave under it’*.

Now, let's just apply these three principles to the life of Joseph. Proposition number one: *‘Whatever crook there is in man's lot, it is God's making’*. Let's say that the crook for Joseph was his ability to receive and interpret dreams, which God gave him. It cost him a lot of trouble: The anger and hatred of his brothers who then sold him off down into Egypt.

Proposition number two: *‘Whatever God sees fit to mar, no man shall mend his lot’*. What God marred, in His mysterious providence, was Joseph's character and dignity. Do you feel like you've ever been taken advantage of, lied about, cheated on, or stolen from? Well you're in good company: Look to Joseph. Although he rose to a prominent position in Potiphar's house, he was lied about and thrown in jail. And while in jail, the cup bearer promised to speak to Pharaoh about Joseph favorably. But he didn't: He forgot about him. So Joseph stayed there in prison, an innocent man. Proposition number two: *‘No man shall mend his lot. God saw fit to mar him’*.

Now proposition number three: 'Realizing that 'the crook in the lot' as the work of God, and of His making, is the proper means to bring us to behave under it'. What did Joseph do in his three circumstances in Egypt? First, he was a slave with Potiphar, then a prisoner in Pharaoh's jail, and finally an exalted statesman carrying Egypt through the famine. But there's something very instructive about his consistent behavior on these three occasions. In every case he worked prodigiously and honorably. He never got distracted. He never lost his faith. You remember his words to Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:9), "How could I do this and sin against God?" He realized the hand he was dealt: And no matter how wild the swings, he was accountable to God for his thoughts and actions.

Proposition number three: 'Realize 'the crook in the lot' as the work of God, and of His making: This is the proper means to bring us to behave under it'. How practical is the sovereignty and providence of God! He knows what He's doing. He knows exactly what He is doing with you right now. You just trust Him. Hold on to His Word and believe it; because the One who knows best about you is going to carry you to the end. Who can straighten what He has bent? It's Providence. So the tenor of our lives should be absent disputing and grumbling so that we might be blameless and pure children of light in the dark world 'under the sun'. Be encouraged because our times are in His hands. (Remember our word study on time: a sovereignly ordained event. Lesson 4).

So when things are good, be happy: Sing! "Sing," says James (5:13). When you're in a blessed period of Providence: Sing! "...but when times are bad, consider this: God has made one as well as the other." (14b). And is that not exactly Job's thought? In the apex of his pain, Job 1:20-21: "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." Now listen to these words carefully. "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." Absent from this very high profile sentence is what stuns us: Not one mention of the Sabeans who carried off his oxen and his donkeys. Not one word concerning the fire that fell from heaven and burned up his sheep and servants. Nor of the Chaldeans, who formed the three raiding parties and swept down upon the camels and carried them off and put his

servants to the sword. And finally, there was no recall of the mighty wind that swept in from the desert, crushing the domicile that housed all (not some), all of Job's children. 'When times are good, be joyful; when times are bad, consider this:', says our 'man with the powerful mind', 'God made the one as well as the other...'

I've been a Christian for a long time. And here's what I've learned over the years that I have '*Considered*'. God often likes me in pain; where I'm forced to count it all joy. He desires me often broken, because there I learn to be meek. He leaves me in tears, so that each trial may do its work in me: Being afraid, so that I might truly learn to trust Him. Like all men, I desire to be preserved in life and kept in prosperity. But the chief purpose of God is not my comfort. It is my character, my adherence to His Word, and my steadfastness in faith. His hard times are the things that shape me far '*better than*' bathing in prosperity.

Psalm 119 verse 75. "I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me." "What God has done," writes Charles Bridges, "He has done best." He has indeed kept His own time and used His own means: And not ours. He has made us to see, that in the end, His time and means are '*better than*' ours. Whatever seems to oppose or to perplex, remember: It is our Father's work. Let us learn to take it cheerfully. That which He has ordained for our happiness is under His guidance and will turn to our best account in His time. That's wisdom, real wisdom, for 'the here and now', and for 'the future'.

But my friends, in order to embrace that wisdom, you must know Christ: You must know Him as Lord and Savior. Know that your life 'under the sun' is ebbing away: It's short, shorter by the tick of the clock, by the sunrise and the sunset, by the turning of the calendar (we'll be into November tomorrow). I implore you, as an ambassador of Christ, to receive Him now, the Lord of the Word. To embrace Christ and stop living 'under the sun' and start living into the heavenlies where Christ is the Lord of Glory, the Prince of Peace, and the power of the heart of a Christian. May God give you the grace to do that right now.

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