

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 9 - "Seek Wisdom"

Text: Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on March 8, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** There's an old story about a U.S. Navy Radio Transmission.
 - Voice 1 comes on the radio and says, **"Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid collision."** Voice 2 answers, **"Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid collision."**
 - Voice 1 replies, **"This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course."** But voice 2 will not budge and says, **"No, I say again, divert your course."**
 - The captain's voice is getting angry and declares, **"We are a large aircraft carrier."** Voice 2 calmly responds by saying, **"It's your call but we are a lighthouse."**
- It is one of the great delusions of our modern era that we can change reality however we want. Oh yes, the ship of our civilization is powerful and more technologically advanced than any before it. But reality is a solid rock that cannot be moved.
 - For the past few weeks King Solomon has been the voice from the lighthouse. He has been forcing us to accept reality. And what is reality? That everything in life is hebel; everything is fleeting (including our very lives) and that we cannot ultimately control our lives.
 - For all the effort we put into life, we will all die and be forgotten. For all our effort we cannot ultimately control the changing seasons of life. This is the hard rock of reality. Solomon hasn't said all this to be cruel. Rather, like the lighthouse keeper, he is forcing us to face reality so that we can learn how to live wisely and with joy.
- But now he is done making this point. He has used the phrase "striving after wind" seven times but this phrase does not appear again. The point has been made.
 - Now the question shifts to **"How should we live in light of reality; in light of the fact that everything is fleeting and we cannot control much of life?"**
 - You can see the change of language in verse 12: **"For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his hebel life, his breathlike fleeting life?"**
- So, life is like a long sail over the ocean, through storms, through peaceful waters, and between islands. Much of it we cannot control but now Solomon turns to talk about what we can do; how we can avoid certain hidden reefs and how we can make it through storms. Do you want to learn what is the good and wise way to live in your short life?
 - Then listen as Solomon calls you to do three things: First, *admit you cannot chart the course of your life.* Second, *develop wisdom to navigate the sea of your life.* And third, *rest confidentially in the Captain of your ship.*

ADMIT YOUR CANNOT CHART THE COURSE OF YOUR LIFE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First, **admit you cannot chart the course of your life.**
 - Ecclesiastes 6:10-14 introduces Solomon's next theme. It's a bit tricky so just follow the verses with me and then I will summarize it.
- **READ 10-11** - **Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more [breath], and what is the advantage to man?**

- To name something is to demonstrate authority over it as Adam named the animals. Who has named all the seasons of life? God has. As the poem in chapter 3 has declared, God has set the seasons of life and he knows what human beings are.
- So as Solomon transitions to the next theme of the book he confesses again that God rules over all things and points out that it would be foolish for human beings to dispute with God's ordering of the world. To speak such words against God is a waste of breath and does not help us in any way.
 - We need to accept reality and so we say, ***“God, I am not powerful like you. I cannot chart the course of my life.”***
- Since we cannot do this, we need to call out to God for how we should live. We should ask the question of verse 12. ***READ 12 - For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his [fleeting] life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”***
 - In other words, we are asking, “What is the right way to live when all of life is fleeting like a shadow?”
 - That is the question that he now turns answer for the remainder of the book and that brings us to our next point.

DEVELOP WISDOM TO NAVIGATE THE SEAS OF YOUR LIFE

- Here is the answer: **(SHOW SLIDE 3) develop wisdom to navigate the sea of your life.**
 - If you have been with us over the past few weeks you recall that Solomon has forced us to see the reality that no matter how wise you may become you will still end up dead just like the fool. But all along, he has also said that despite this fact, we should still pursue wisdom.
 - Yes, we will die, but only a fool doesn't watch out for hidden reefs that will damage their lives along the way. Yes, we will die, but only a fool doesn't divert course when an island lies ahead of them. We need to develop wisdom to navigate the seas of life.
- That is what Solomon wants to help us do. Notice that chapter 7:1-13 are all short sayings. They are all about developing wisdom. Nine times he says one thing is better than another.
 - Wisdom is not simply knowing the basic rules about what is right and what is wrong. Wisdom is knowing what the better choice is when faced with two good things or knowing how minimize damage when faced with two difficult choices.
 - So here Solomon speaks about three areas that will help you develop wisdom to navigate the seas of your life.

LEARN FROM DEATH

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4) First, develop wisdom by learning from death.**
 - Death is our great enemy for we cannot steer our ship so as to avoid the rocky cliff of death ahead of us. But Solomon says the wise person can even learn from their greatest enemy. In this sense, death is our friend for it can teach us how to live. How so?
- **READ 1 - A good name is better than precious ointment.** That makes sense for there is no point smelling nice to others with your \$100 perfume or cologne if they get sick by how you live your life. Your reputation is far more important. But then look at the next part.

- **READ 1b - and the day of death than the day of birth.** That's odd. Wouldn't you say the opposite, that the day of birth is better than the day of death? Why is the day of death better? Only in the sense that it is a better teacher of wisdom.
 - A coffin is a better teacher of wisdom than a crib. A baby is all about unknown potential but when a person dies their life is well known and many lessons can be learned from it.
- That is why he goes on in verse 2 to say, **READ 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.**
 - Again, he reverses what we think is better. We would rather go to a party than a funeral. Solomon is not against parties but if you want to learn how to wisely navigate life you will learn more at a funeral than at a party.
 - I would suggest that one reason we lack wisdom in our culture is because we ignore death. We turn off the radio voice that warns that our ship is headed to its cliffs. We hide death from sight. Furthermore, we do not allow ourselves time to sit alone in quiet with our own thoughts. We fill every second of quiet by looking at our phones, filling our lives with work, hobbies, and entertainment.
 - Other cultures and times are very different. I remember being in Tanzania and attending (**SHOW SLIDE 5**) this rural church where my brother was a missionary. Can you see that there is a wooden object just sitting on the side wall? I've cropped the picture to zoom in.
 - (**SHOW SLIDE 6**) It's a bit blurry but you can see it looks like a small bridge with hand railings on each side. I asked my brother what it was. He said it is to carry the dead bodies. The railings are handles. It was basically a stretcher.
 - It sits right beside the main doors because they use it so much. There are no professional morticians to do the job. When your father dies, you carry his body. When your child dies, you carry the body. Everyone is aware of death in a culture like this.
 - It has been the same through history. I was reading about famous Puritan author named John Owen. The Puritan era was during the 16th and 17th century. Owen married a woman named Mary. They had 11 children, ten of whom died in infancy. Their one daughter grew up, got married, but then died of tuberculosis. Mary then also died. Eighteen months after Mary died John remarried a woman named Dorothy.
 - Do you want to know one of the most common questions people asked pastors in Owen's day? It was such a common question that pastors wrote short booklets to help their people navigate it. The question was how long should a man wait to get remarried after his wife dies in childbirth? He has 10 other kids to raise. There is a house to run. But how much time should be given to grieve, rightly choose another wife, and start again?
 - We have created a culture where we hardly ever see death. But one way to grow in wisdom is to attend a funeral or to walk in a graveyard. Such an experience forces you to think about the brevity of life, how you are living, and the reputation you will leave behind.
 - This is why he goes on in verse 5 and 6 to say, **READ 5-6 - 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.**
 - He's not speaking against laughter or parties, but he is saying a fool only pays attention to what makes them laugh. The wise person learns the path to joy by reflecting on death.

- All this was brought home to me again as I attended Russell Anderson’s funeral a few weeks ago. There was a slide show of his life. Russell had a few best friends and I knew some of them very well from the church I pastored in Vancouver for 13 years. I saw many pictures of these men in their younger years, with obvious strength and vitality, enjoying life with their wives and children. But, of course, the slide show also shows each man getting older and older. And now, almost all these great men and women I have had the privilege of knowing are gone.
 - I realized afresh how fleeting life is. I realized that if God permits me to live a typical life, then I am really in my prime years. Both sets of our parents are still alive and healthy. Heather and I have been married for 21 years and so have worked out a lot of the problems of marriage and are enjoying each other. Our children are between 8 and 15 and so are all still at home where we can enjoy them. I still have some athletic ability and can enjoy the sports I love. I have much more to learn about how to be a faithful and effective pastor but I am no longer the young and naïve pastor I was at 25.
 - All this really impacted me. I went home from Russell’s funeral and thought, **“I need to focus more on enjoying my kids while they are home and my parents while they are here. I also want to use these prime years to pour out my life in service to Jesus. For the day will come when my energy will fade and I will need to pass baton to younger leaders.”**
- So you see it is not morbid to take a walk through a graveyard. It is not morbid to think occasionally about death. If you want to grow in wisdom to navigate life then learn the lessons that death teaches you. Solomon doesn’t spell them all out. You are supposed to go to a funeral, or sit with someone who is mourning, and learn them yourself.

LISTEN TO WISE CRITICS

- We are still on the second point of learning wisdom. The next thing he says is **(SHOW SLIDE 7) if you want to grow in wisdom to navigate the seas of life then develop wisdom by listening to wise critics.**
 - Look at verses 5-6. **READ 5-6 - ⁵It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. ⁶For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.**
 - Notice he doesn’t not say to listen to anyone who criticizes you. But you should listen to the rebuke of a wise person who cares. This is painful but it is far better than a giant party where people sing the lyrics of songs that mean nothing. Proverbs 12:1 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 8) “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”** Receive constructive criticism in order that you might avoid some hidden reefs in your life.

THINK ABOUT WHERE THINGS WILL END UP

- Solomon then adds another area. If you want to grow in wisdom to navigate the seas of life then **(SHOW SLIDE 9) develop wisdom by thinking about where things ultimately end up.**
 - **READ 8a - Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.** A foolish person is one who is rash. They don’t look to where things lead but rush in quickly. Developing wisdom means looking ahead to see where your actions will lead the ship of your life.
 - For instance, in verse 7 he mentions taking a bribe in business. That may seem like a wise short term solution but it is not wise for it corrupts the heart and leads to destruction later.

- Or look at verses 8-9. **READ 8-9** - 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 of fools.*
 - The wise person knows that an outburst of anger can ruin a relationship forever. Even worse, anger lodges in the heart and ruins your own life.
 - Frederick Buechner writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** *“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”*¹
 - So the wise person thinks about where their anger will take them in the end. The wise person is patient and deals with situations carefully.
- And then he mentions one other area where we need to keep the end in mind. And that is in the way we nostalgically look to the past instead of trusting God to lead us into the future. Look at verse 10. **READ 10** - ¹⁰ *Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*
 - This verse provides tremendous wisdom to contemporary Christians. I continually hear Christians lamenting how much our culture has moved away from God. To lament is not wrong. To think it is not wrong. But I see a lot of conservative Christians falling into discouragement and despair, longing for bygone eras when they think things were so much better.
 - But Solomon says it is not wise to ask why. Maybe they were better. Maybe they weren't. The fact remains that you live right now and God's invisible hand is still guiding all of history.
- And how do you know where God is going to lead our culture in the future? Christians often say, “It can't get much worse than this.” Actually, it can get far worse than this.
 - Think just about the days of Jesus in the Roman Empire. We may be concerned with the fact that people watch violent horror movies but they went to gladiator shows and watched people butcher each other for entertainment.
 - The sex lives of Roman people included everything in our culture and far worse. For instance, one of the most common practices was for a young boy of about 12 years old to choose an adult male whom he would perform sexual favours for and in return the adult male would teach him how to be a man. Things may be bad but I am very grateful that it is still illegal to for an adult male to be with a 12-year-old boy.
- So, you see, it is not from wisdom that we pine for the good old days. Besides, who knows what God will do with our culture? God ordained a specific time when he would send His Son into the world and that time was during the Roman Empire. It was in this Roman culture that the early church had its great success.
 - Perhaps the de-Christianization of our culture will be the means by which the hope of Jesus is seen more clearly and millions come to Jesus. The point is that we live in the present, so let us live for Jesus in the present.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking Transformed by Thomas*, 117.

- Gandalf, the wise wizard in *The Lord of the Rings*, said the same thing to Frodo. Frodo was lamenting the rise of evil during the time in which he lived. **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”**²

REST CONFIDENTALLY IN THE CAPTAIN OF YOUR SHIP

- Let’s wrap all this up now and say that if you want to live rightly during your short sail through life then **(SHOW SLIDE 12) rest confidently in the Captain of your ship.**
 - Look at how he sums it all up in verses 13-14. **READ 14 - Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? 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.**
 - You should act wisely to change those things that can be changed. But Solomon counsels an acceptance of those things that you cannot change. If God has brought a season into your life that is crooked then you cannot make it straight. If he has brought a season of prosperity then be joyful.
 - But here is the big point: God has made them both. You cannot find out his reasons or what the future holds but you can rest that you are not ultimately the Captain of your life. God is the Captain who will guide your ship.
- You can trust him even in the stormy seas for you are secure in his love. This is why Paul declares that we will not just conquer all the worst things in life. We will more than conquer them? Why? Because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. God is for us. Therefore, nothing—not even death—can ultimately prevail against us.
 - Oh yes, we are all sailing toward the cliffs of death. We cannot sail around them for they extend in both directions. We cannot go under death or over it. Is there any hope then? Yes, for God sent his Son into this world to die for our sins. The wicked men of this world captured the ship of his life, tore it to pieces, and drove it straight into the cliffs. Jesus, sank down into the dark depths of death. He lay before it’s towering cliffs as just another conquered victim.
 - But on the third day God raised him from the depths. He shot up through the depths and blasted a channel right in the middle of death itself. And now he stands calling all sailors to come to him for he can guide you safely through the cliffs of death to other side—to a land beyond death where there are no more funerals, no more anger, and no more evil days.
 - Jesus is the only one who can save you. Have you called upon him to do this?
- Once you have, then listen to him on how to live wisely in this world and rest confidently that, Jesus, the Captain of your life can bring you safely through death itself to walk upon the shores of God’s new world.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, The Return of the King*, (HarperCollins Publishers), Kindle Edition,