

Teach Us, Qohelet (Part 11)

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14

Pastor Edward Cheng

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When we go through the passing of a loved one it can change our perspective, attitude, and values. Death is an awful thing, that's why there will be no death in the new creation. But in Ecclesiastes 7, *Qohelet* seems to be saying that death is a good thing. While he knows death is horrible, he also knows that it can change us for the better. That's why I don't avoid talking about death to my children, because it's something we all have to face. The acknowledgement of our mortality helps us understand what is important.

In 7:1, *Qohelet* says that death is better than birth, just as a good name from right living is better than just smelling good. He states almost as a matter of fact that death is better than birth, mourning is better than feasting, and frustration is better than laughter. This isn't obvious at all though, because death is so bad. *Qohelet* uses hyperbole here to stress the point that although death is bad, it has a good effect on how we live. He says in v. 4 that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. The phrase "house of mourning" in vv. 2 and 4 form an *inclusio* that brackets the statement that death is the destiny of every man, and the living should take this to heart. The wise meditate on their own mortality, and they live differently when they see reality through the lens of death. Usually people don't like going to the cemetery to visit deceased loved ones, but it helps reflect on what is important and on eternal things. Just like frustration is better than laughter (v. 3) because the frustration with the pursuit of wealth and worldly pleasure leads us to eternal things, so too the house of mourning is better than the house of pleasure because death reminds us not to waste our limited time chasing temporal things of this world that don't satisfy. So although death is awful, it is the destiny of every man, and we should take this to heart.

By now we know how *Qohelet* thinks. He has talked about how pursuing worldly things is meaningless and just leads us closer to death. So it's no surprise that he lifts up death as a way to change our perspectives about the world, so that we focus on eternal things rather than chase after the wind. When we meditate on death we realize what is important. Suddenly petty differences and grudges go away. We realize that the things of value cannot be bought with money. We see the true value of community, relationships, peace, and harmony. And most of all, we focus on the eternal, and on our Creator. In chapter 12 *Qohelet* will conclude by telling us to

remember our Creator in the days of our youth. The word “remember” in the original Hebrew is *zakar*, which connotes deep consideration, valuing, and treasuring. While we are young and far from death, let us treasure our Creator. Consider your death and don’t wait until you are at death’s door to realize that God is the most important thing in your life. Death is horrible, but it can turn our eyes away from meaningless things and toward God. The foolish in 7:5-6 who do not contemplate death will live for the present. Some today may actually contemplate their death but then use it as an excuse to have and experience as much as possible before they die. But when they approach death they will realize that all this effort was wasted on things that are meaningless. Paul agrees with *Qohelet* in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. He tells us not to focus on the temporary things that are seen, but instead on eternal things that are unseen. This is the effect death should have on us. Let the idea of your death turn you to God. If it weren’t for the death of my parents, I don’t know if I’d be here today in ministry. Death has shaped my life. Death helps us recalibrate our lives and understand what is important. Let us consider death, however awful it is, because it will help us focus on the spiritual and on our Creator.