

**A BETTER WAY FORWARD**  
**Tragic Hope Series - Part 5**  
**Dan Burrell**

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*“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. 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. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.*

*Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools. Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.*

*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 many not find out anything that will be after him.”*

Good morning Life Fellowship. It is good to see you this morning. To those who are watching online thank you for joining us as well. It is always good to hear from you as well, so please keep in touch with us by sending us a message, or just leaving us a comment as you are watching this morning, or later on this week. Thank you for being faithful last week. I was out of town last week so Pastor Justin spoke. He had a super busy week this week and I am so thankful for his ministry in our midst. Pastor Justin is also our student ministry pastor and he did a great job teaching through Ecclesiastes Chapter 5 last week.

This week we had our REALvival Conference for our teenagers and it was awesome. Pastor Justin asked me to speak, and I spoke on ‘How to Hear God’s Voice,’ to two groups of our young people. And by the way, we just have some of the greatest young people on the planet here. If you are parents of teenagers sometimes you may just wonder whether or not our civilization is going to survive. But let me just tell you our teenagers are just off the hook. They are just wonderful. Some of you adult volunteers were working in it yesterday, and I thank you as well for being a part of that. I left really, really encouraged.

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You know there are so many good things going on but because of the pandemic we can't highlight them because we are in and out and so forth. I was just watching the Praise Team this morning and did you realize we had teenagers up here this morning? We also had twenty somethings, thirty somethings, forty somethings and fifty somethings on the Praise Team. It is very specific because our goal is that we have a multigenerational church. That is why we have two teaching pastors of different ages. We have older elders, and we have younger men who are being disciplined to be future elders. It is very strategic, because I think it is very, very healthy to have a perspective of life from beginning to the end. It is important, and that is part of what we are going to be talking about this morning in Ecclesiastes Chapter 7.

We are going to be finishing this book up during the book of November. After today we have two more weeks of Ecclesiastes, and then we are going to take a break for the Christmas season and we will have a series of sermons with Christmas themes. We will have communion together as a church family. Even in a pandemic we are going to have it on the last Sunday of the year, and of course we want to do it carefully.

Then beginning in January we are going to do a nine week series on the Beatitudes that I am really excited about. We are not planning a full year in advance simply because of the pandemic, so we are just kind of going in quarters at this point. But tentatively we are looking at some things for missions in March, and then April we have Easter and a couple of things going on. Then we may be looking at something with worldview and apologetics and another book study in the spring as well. So we have things moving forward. I want you to always know that even though we are kind of disjointed because of the pandemic, God is doing some really cool things.

By the way, last week the reason I wasn't here is because I was at Hilton Head at a conference for the Timothy Initiative, which is our church planting partners. Remember last year we did our first big offering for them and we wanted to do it again this year. We were setting our goal and for three hundred dollars they can train a church planter. By the way I have some videos I will put on social media soon that shows the churches that are now being planted with what we gave last year. And we made a commitment that we are going to adopt a state in India where there are hundreds of millions of people living who do not know the gospel. So we are hoping to be planting thousands of churches there over the next three to five years.

I talked to Carolyn Kozlinski, who heads our missions team, and Bennett who is on our staff, as well as the rest of our team, and we decided a reasonable goal we could expect to have in the middle of a pandemic would be to raise enough for thirty more

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churches. And then we talked about maybe we should try for thirty-five. And we finally decided we would try for fifty. We would try and plant fifty churches which would be fifteen thousand dollars. And I just want you to know that last week I took a check from Life Fellowship Church and instead of doing fifty churches we ended up doing one hundred churches. So I took a check for thirty thousand dollars to them last week.  
*(Applause.)*

And by the way I have seen more banks come in so we will be writing another check to take us even above that. So praise the Lord, and thank you for your faithfulness. It has been so cool also during this pandemic to now see some people come back to volunteering so thank you for that. And I know the pandemic is still going on but North Carolina is 46 out of 50 on the good end of that so hopefully we are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. And hopefully the vaccine is coming soon so we can get back to normal before too much longer.

The elders approved the other night for me to present an opportunity to those of you who want to participate to do some upgrades in the Kid Life. I know a lot of folks at the end of the year take a look at their giving, and if they have a little extra chunk they may want to give to a couple of new projects. One of the projects is an upgrade in the Kid Life because when our kids come back after the pandemic we want it to be a place that is very practical and very exciting for them. So we have some things going on. We have a discipleship area that they would like to emphasize. There are some new Life Groups starting and many other good things. So do not be discouraged. I know things sometimes seem bleak, as it has been 2020 all year long. Right?

But do not be discouraged because God is doing some good things, and I think there is a good reminder about this in Ecclesiastes Chapter 7. We are not going to do every single chapter in the next couple of weeks, but we want to hit some points that allow us to see the transition of Solomon's thinking; the Preacher, as he is preaching to the ecclesia, to his assembly, about what is going on. There is a transition that occurs between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, because it is halfway through the book. In fact Chapter 6 and verse 10 is the exact halfway point.

The first half of the book we kind of have this darkness that is coming from Solomon. Doing the intro he is kind of contemplating as an old man who has seen it all, had it all and done it all. And he is saying it is all just a bunch of smoke and mirrors. It is all just a vapor. Here it is and then it is gone and nothing seems to really matter. And in the midst of it he kept saying to just enjoy what you can. Enjoy the life you have, enjoy it while it is okay.

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But as he is transitioning he is now moving to something deeper and more contemplative. He says don't just live on the good parts of life, but he wants us to understand the life that you are living. He wants us to understand where we are at today and what is ahead of us. So as we kind of close out our study I want to kind of shift our emphasis to just looking deeper into the life we have that at times seems very 2020ish. At times it seems like a lot of smoke and mirrors. At times it seems like there is a lot of tragedy and not enough hope. I get that, but Solomon is saying we have to quit looking at life as if we are the center of the universe. God is doing something bigger, and we are not all that. But we are a part of what God is doing that glorifies Him and that completes His plan and His will. And in that we find our peace, and in that we find our place, and in that we find our purpose as well.

So we heard the first fourteen verses of Chapter 7 read, and there is something that I want to kind of point out to you as we get started. And by the way it is one of the rules I emphasize from time to time on how we understand Scripture a little better. It is kind of a rule of hermeneutics, a rule of study, and it is called the rule of repetition. When God repeats something multiple times He does so to get our attention, or to introduce a theme. If you were listening carefully you may have picked up on a word that was used repetitively in this passage of Scripture.

If not, let me see if I can help you find it. If we look in verse 1 of Chapter 7 it says: "***A good name is better than precious ointment.***" In verse 2 it says: "***It is better to go to the house of mourning.***" In verse 3 it says: "***Sorrow is better than laughter.***" In verse 5 it says: "***It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise.***" In verse 8 it says: "***Better is the end of a thing than its beginning.***"

Are you getting the theme yet? It is the word 'better.' And we need to understand this in the context of what Solomon was saying here, '*There is a better way to see things. There is a better way to look at it.*' At times you look at your choices and they seem kind of the same, or they seem without hope, or they seem unrelated. And yet in the midst of it, what we have is Solomon speaking to his congregation and he says, '*There is a better path forward.*' And I want you to have that in your mind as we look at these verses today.

I had such a good time with our teenagers, and I know I am repeating myself, but I just love young people. I started off as this middle school and high school English teacher and then a school principal. The kids looked at me like I was a thousand years old, but I have literally been in school for fifty-four years without stop. Either as a

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student, as a teacher, or an administrator, or a professor, I have consistently, without one single year gap, been part of education. So I love working with young people. I love their orneriness, I love their inquisitiveness, and I love everything about them. As I was teaching yesterday I started thinking about when I was their age. I grew up in a church culture and we had youth activities on Friday nights. Some of you may remember Friday night youth activities.

And it was to keep us out of trouble. In my home town most teenagers cruised on Friday night up and down the streets. And to avoid us getting involved in that and some of the things that went with that, our church had Friday night youth activities. And we would do something called a scavenger hunt. Two or three times a year they would have a big list of things that we would go out and try to find. They would be odd and weird things. On another kind of scavenger hunt we would use a Polaroid camera. Now some of you may not remember Polaroid cameras, but it was the first instant print camera. With the first ones you would take a picture, wait sixty seconds and then you would peel it off real carefully and there would be the photograph. I know that those of you under twenty are thinking, *'Wow. Was there a big puff of smoke that came out?'*

But that was a big deal back then. Eventually they had the kind where it would make a really loud noise and the print would come out the front of it and you would have to wave it around until it was dry, which would take about sixty seconds, until the picture would magically appear. That was big time for us. We would take a Polaroid camera out and they would have given us a list of weird things to take a picture of. You know like a person with the biggest nose you could find. And we would literally go up to people and say something like, *'You have a fine nose, could I take a picture of it?'* It was a wonder we didn't get shot at some point.

Well, my favorite youth activity was a game that we played that was called, 'A Bigger and Better Hunt.' Has anyone here ever been on a 'Bigger and Better Hunt?' Okay, there are a couple of you. You probably grew up in a church with a youth program too. But here is what it was. They would give you a little item and then you would go to someone's house, knock on their door, and say, *'Would you trade this item for something that is bigger and better?'* Now again, this was the seventies and things were different then. Can you imagine taking fifty or sixty kids today and dumping them off in a neighborhood telling them you would see them in two hours? *'By the way go knock on random people's doors and negotiate with them.'* Now we didn't have cell phones either. And they might say, *'Sure, come on in while we are looking for something bigger and better.'*

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Today we would wonder what in the world were those people thinking to send kids out like that, but it was a different time and a different era. So we would get like a Lego block or a paper clip or a toothpick and off we would go scattered across a neighborhood screaming like crazy people. We would go and knock on someone's door and say, *'Sir, I am from such and such church on a bigger and better hunt. I have this toothpick and would you trade me something bigger or getter for it?'*

And it was amazing because they would say, *'Well yeah, I will be right back. Come on in.'* And we would stand there and wait, and we can hear them going through drawers looking for something bigger or getter. Sometimes they might come back with an ink pen because it was bigger and better. We would grab that and head to the next house. *'Sir, I have an ink pen, can you trade me something that is bigger or better?'* We might get a can of peas or something and by the end of the evening we might be hauling a couch down the street, because it kept getting bigger and better. It was how we spent some evenings and it was a lot more fun than it probably sounds to you today.

Sometimes we live our lives like that, don't we? We are searching for the next bigger or better thing. The first car we get and it is just a jalopy, right? It is horrible, it belches smoke and dripping oil, but it is ours, and we are happy with it. But then we want a two door not a four door. Then we want one with a sunroof. Then we want one that is newer, and we want one that is a different color, and we want one that is more powerful, and we want one that our neighbor doesn't have. And it is a constant pursuit of the bigger or better.

We get our first apartment and it is so cool to be living on our own. It is just one bedroom but it is ours. And then we decide we need a second bedroom, then we need three bedrooms, and we want a garage and a yard. And we keep trading up for bigger and better. We like our first jobs. We are glad to be working at a cash register, but then we would like to be a manager. Then we would like to have our own offices at corporate. And we keep going and going looking for the bigger and better.

And one of the things that Solomon is saying is that there is a pursuit of bigger and better that leads to emptiness. But there is also a bigger and better that leads to satisfaction. And it is the wise person who understands the better path, the better way. And that is where we are going to head this morning. There comes a point in most of our lives where we realize that a lot of the bigger and better pursuits that we have chased aren't all that. At some point in our lives we are going to bump into disappointments, or injustice, or some vain pursuit, or some empty pleasure. And the satisfaction that we thought was going to be there wasn't.

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And sometimes it gets very, very personal to us. Someone close to us dies, or someone that is wicked that we know flourishes. We watch the cheaters win, the agitators live in peace, and the peaceful live in conflict. Maybe we have been assigned to carry a deeper constant aching pain in our hearts that was left there by an illness, or a death, or a crime, or a betrayal, and it burns in our chest. And we wonder, *'Is this really how it all is supposed to work out? Is this the end of it all?'* And we may face oppression, or disillusionment, or a loss of hope, or crushing isolation. We ask ourselves, *'Couldn't it have been a little better?'*

Well, we have a choice. And the choice is located here in Ecclesiastes Chapter 7. We can choose to enter a world of denial and escape and bitterness and depression where we exude negativity, we chase mindless pleasures, or we revel in our brokenness, or we numb ourselves with alcohol, or chemicals, or promiscuity, but in the end we have to decide which path we choose in a broken world. We have to decide whether we are going to go for that which is significantly better, or temporarily seems to be better. We can choose frivolity, denial, escapism, or we can choose wisdom.

Wisdom sometimes is purchased with the currency of heartbreak, plus time, plus faith, plus patience, plus trust, and plus perspective. We can learn to live with wisdom and dignity and purpose in the world that God created and which is now broken, or we can succumb to the vanity, the smoke and mirrors, the vapid emptiness and accept the limitations of our condition. So the choice is ours. And Solomon, as he is now shifting gears, is saying, *'Choose the better path. There is a way of escape. There is hope to be found. There is a satisfaction that is not temporary.'*

So let's look at it as we kind of march through Chapter 7. Don't quit. Don't give up. Don't succumb to the darkness. Don't buy into the lies. Don't run toward escapism. Don't drown your sorrows in a bottle. Don't chase the cheap thrills made by lies that are appealing and promises that are empty. Choose the better path, the path of wisdom.

Look in verse 1 and we see the first road mark on that path. It says: **"A good name is better"** here we go again, circle the word 'better,' **"than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth."** Here is the first principle that Solomon is telling us. He is saying this: *'Your reputation is important. Your name is important, and all that is attached to it. Everything that someone thinks about when they say your name, don't forget the importance of that.'*

By the way we often will see parallels in the book of wisdom, which is the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is not a book of promises; some people mistakenly look at it that

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way, but it is a book of truisms. It is called the book of Proverbs, not the book of promises. So we understand that these are ideals, these are things that we hope for, these are things that are often the case, and these are things that we can generally count on in a world that is largely broken. And if you remember in Proverbs Chapter 22 and verse 1 the Scripture says there: “*A good name is to be chosen, rather than great riches.*”

I remember my dad drilling this into my head when I was growing up. Often before I would go to work, or if I was going out on a date, or if I was going out to represent us in some way, he would stop me as I was going out the door and he would say: ‘*Remember your name.*’ Now when he would say to me, ‘*Remember your name,*’ he was saying, ‘*Remember your reputation.*’ He often would say to me that what takes you a lifetime to build up can be destroyed with one bad decision. What takes you years and years and years to build up is your reputation, and it can be destroyed with one stupid action. So remember your reputation. Remember your name.

And that is simply what Solomon is saying here. From the first day of your life you begin working on your epitaph. The first day that you are born is the day that you will begin working on what they are going to put on your tombstone. On that little part of your tombstone that is the dash between the day of your birth and the day of your death. What is it that that will represent, that little dash will represent?

Julie and I are kind of history buffs, and for some reason over the years we have liked to walk through cemeteries. She and I have done this together many times. When I used to teach in Boston every year sometimes I would go to downtown Boston where there is a big square. I think it is called Beacon Hill, or something hill, right in the middle of town near the old North Church and the Cheers Bar. And there is this huge cemetery and it has history galore in it. You can literally be in there for weeks and not read all the tombstones.

Over the years Julie and I often would like to drive through Cade’s Cove. Do you know where Cade’s Cove is over in the Smoky Mountains? If you ever go over to Gatlinburg or Dollywood, in that area you can go through Cade’s Cove which is about a fifteen mile long drive. And if you go through there the wrong time of the year it will take you hours because of all the tourists. But there is about eight churches all along the way and each of those churches has a cemetery. And we would stop and look at these cemeteries and read the tombstones. Now it is kind of a tourist attraction which his weird, but it also is significant.

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And there is one cemetery I remember clearly where there was a large tombstone for the husband, another tombstone for the wife, and then there was a series of small tombstones. So we would look at these small tombstones and we noticed they represented the short life spans of children. Some had passed away at three years old, or five years old, or seven years old, and several showed that the day of their birth was also the day of their death. There were other tombstones showing they had lived to be seventy, or eighty, and some even in their nineties. Those had had long full lives, and yet their entire lives were summed up in never more than a brief paragraph of two or three sentences.

Sometimes there would be just a single word or two, like 'Mother' or 'Wife' or 'Pastor.' And sometimes it would just be a simple sentence, 'He finished well,' 'She did her best,' and that was the summation of their lives, their reputations. It is very rare that we put on a tombstone something like, 'Dirty Cheats,' and 'Lying Dog.' We don't usually put those kinds of things on there. We put the good things, the things we want remembered. But it is amazing how many of us live our lives with little regard to the reputation of our name, to the character that will be left behind.

The other day I was in a restaurant and some lady walked by me. Apparently she really liked the perfume she had on, so she had put like a triple dose on. Now I didn't really notice it as she walked by, but after she had passed by I realized I could smell perfume. And it was interesting because the perfume she was wearing was the exact same perfume that my grandmother used to wear, and for just like a brief moment I was like, 'where's grandma?' Now my grandma has been gone for fifteen years, but I still think about her, and that smell brought her back to me. Sometimes it may just be a phrase we hear, or a favorite dish, or a copy of a book, or an envelope we find in a box, and all of a sudden the memories and the reputation come back to us.

Here is what Solomon was saying, *'People are not going to remember you for the kind of car you drove. They are not going to remember you for how big your walk in closet was. They are not going to remember you for how much you had in retirement, or how many cruises you had taken. They are not going to remember you for the size of your property. They are not going to remember you for the location of your office. But they are going to remember you for your character and for your reputation. So pay attention to that. Look at what really matters.'*

Here is another thing, and I am going to spend more time on this one because the others kind of flow from it and we will kind of hurry through those. But Solomon seems to be encouraging the reader to consider the end and not just the journey. We all know

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life is a marathon, it is not a buffet. And yet so many today live their lives for all the different experiences they can have, rather than the winning point at the end of the marathon that is miles or years long. Yet the buffet is kind of what appeals to us, isn't it?

When my kids were growing up they were the biggest fans of the Golden Corral. I mean if we saw a Golden Corral on vacation it was like, *'Dad, we have to stop. We have to stop there.'* They would be so excited. We were on vacation one year, and it seemed like the Golden Corral would always have a new something they were featuring, like *'all you can eat steak,'* or *'all you can eat shrimp.'* And this year it was the arrival of the *'chocolate fountain.'* It showed a big old chocolate fountain, and my kids were like, *'Dad, it is vacation. We are going to stop at the Golden Corral and we are going to eat at the chocolate fountain.'*

Now there is something about eating at a Golden Corral for me that causes short term memory loss, because every time I eat at a Golden Corral, as I am walking out of it, I turn to my wife and I say in the most authoritative tone with the most definitive expression, *'I am never doing this again. I will not enter this place ever again as long as I live. I feel bloated, I feel greasy, I feel disgusted with myself. The food was nasty, the service was horrible. I will never do this again.'* And that lasts until we go on vacation again, and then I do it again. But my kids talk me into it this time, and they are all standing in line at the dessert buffet quivering in anticipation. Their little hands are tightly clasped around their plates as they wait in line to get to the chocolate fountain. And they are just so excited planning on having this and this.

And there is this little girl right in front of my four kids and she is acting like she is just in heaven. She takes her plate and puts on some banana and some angel food cake, and she runs them back and forth under the chocolate fountain. It is dripping off the sides of her plate and it is all over her hands. She licks her hands and says, *'Oh, this is so good,'* and she sticks out her fingers to get more chocolate. At that point, I am like, *'Okay, I am done.'* But not my kids, they are like, *'I am going to do that too. This is wonderful.'*

We look at those brief experiences and think, *'If only I could have this. Just one more piece of chicken, all you can eat steak, all the shrimp I can hold, and there is this wonderful chocolate fountain.'* And we go through life thinking if we have the big car, if we have the fancy job, if we have the second house, if we have this number of kids, if we have the trophy spouse, if we have all these things then we will be satisfied and we will be complete. And as we are walking out, we think, *'What was that all about? Why did I think those things were so important? Why did I invest so much in that?'*

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And here is what Solomon was saying. Keep the important things in front of you. It is not about what you possess, or what possesses you. It is not all the words you use, but the words they use to describe you that are going to matter in the end. Life with an awareness that the long term project of building our character is more important than the short term thrills of living in the flesh is choosing the better path.

I have much more I wanted to say on that, but I am out of time, so here is my second point. Look in verse 2, “*It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting.*” Again that seems to sound contradictory. Who would rather go to a funeral than a party? But understand this, in the end we need to focus on what really matters, and he is saying that the day of your death, the day of mourning, the funeral service is more important than the gender reveal. It is more important than the wedding day. It is more important than the big reunion. We need to keep the end in mind.

In his book on leadership, Rudy Giuliani had a chapter that I will never forget. Now I realize that Giuliani is kind of like Donald in the last several years, but he had a brilliant philosophy that emerged right after 9/11. And many people don’t know this, but Giuliani who was mayor of New York when 9/11 happened, went to the funeral of every single first responder that died that day. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of funerals over the course of several months, and you could count on the fact that the mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani was going to be there.

And in his book on leadership he had a chapter entitled, ‘Weddings are optional; funerals are mandatory.’ And the premise was this: funerals are where you show respect, funerals are where you honor accomplishment, funerals are where we recall sacrifice; be present at those moments. And that is what Solomon was saying in his own way. We have to appreciate that life is brief. There comes a day of accounting when the dash is placed, the final date is inscribed, and at that end for the believer it is the beginning. It is the start of something even better and even greater. But you need to remember your life has a conclusion and there will be a funeral.

Why would Solomon say that the sad house is better than the glad house? Life is brief, it is a vapor, a puff of smoke, it is *havel*, but as I age I remember this. Funerals call me to account and mourning makes me remember. I love weddings, and quite frankly to be honest with you, I love doing funerals. Not because I am rejoicing in a death, but I like to rejoice for a believer who has lived their life with Heaven in mind and that can be a cause of celebration. The Bible says that to the eyes of God the death of His saints is a blessing. Why might that be? It is because He knows the whole picture. He knows what

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is ahead. He knows what we have escaped from and He has freed us. Life is brief so we need to consider the day of our mourning, the day of our conclusion, the day of the ending. Living with the future in mind and not in the moment with an acknowledgment that there comes a day of physical death and eternal judgment is choosing the better path. It is walking in wisdom.

Now if we look in verse 5 it says: ***“It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; that also is vanity.”*** If you have ever gone camping you may know that you need a little bit of kindling at the very beginning of starting a fire. And you may not be aware of this but thorns make excellent kindling. I grew up in an area where there were a lot of locust trees and they had big clumps of thorns. If they were dry you could take a clump of thorns and lay it down under wood and it would just take off. I don’t know what there was about them, but they would pop and crack. It would be kind of like pine needles here in this part of the country.

A big thing for us was to have a live Christmas tree every year and the burning of the Christmas tree in the back yard was a big deal for my family. We would take the Christmas tree out and light it on fire. Sometimes the neighbors might think we had lost our minds because it would be this huge pyramid of flames and black smoke, but it would only last about sixty seconds. For a moment there would be this big explosion of pine needles crackling. And this is kind of the imagery that Solomon is writing about here. He says ***“the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools.”*** It is kind of like ‘*Ha, ha, did you hear this joke?*’ There is laughter, and then it is over. It is gone.

Solomon says to remember there are some people who are not going to make you laugh; they are going to make you cry. They are the critics. They are the people that call you to caution and call you to account. They rebuke you when you are being an idiot. They say, ‘*Hey, maybe you ought to think through that a little bit more.*’ So we need to see the purpose of learning from the critics, the purpose of learning from criticism. It has often been said that we will learn more from our critics than we will from our friends.

And I would suggest that maybe if you never hear criticism from your friends, you may need some new friends, because good friends tell you what you need to hear and not what you want to hear. Sometimes the correction of a friend hurts most but also helps most. But in the end there are some who absolutely run from any suggestion of negativity, any criticism, anything that doesn’t affirm even their stupidest choices. Instead they pursue laughter, frivolity, jokes of silliness, and the crackling of thorns underneath the pot of life.

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Solomon is saying, *'Hey, you know what? There are times when you need to listen in humility to those who may see things that you are not seeing in your own life.'* I think there is something about age and experience and failure that create humility, and if you live long enough you are probably going to experience that. And those are important lessons to learn. So don't run from criticism; instead consider it.

We see in verses 8 and 9 that Solomon goes on and says, ***"Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit."*** I wish I had time to take you through the full word study on this, as it is really quite fascinating, and I hope you get a chance to go through it later on this week. The word 'patience' is another word for 'perseverance' and so sometimes this word actually is talking about perseverance. And there is another word that comes from the Hebrew and that is the word 'longsuffering.' And the term longsuffering is kind of an important one because it has the idea of perseverance, patience and difficulty all tied up with it.

Here is the bottom line - sometimes waiting is hard. Sometimes enduring difficulty takes time. Letting something negative in your life play out to the conclusion is difficult. And yet in that difficulty we may be learning the important things, and we may be being humbled so that we can recognize the things that we should be learning. Sometimes life does humble us. There have been times in my life where it seems like everything I touched turned to gold, but there have also been times in my life where everything I touched turned to dust. When I look back on it the lessons I have learned from the difficult years are far more valuable to me today than the ones I learned during my golden years. And what I see during my golden years was a lot of hubris and arrogance with a side of cockiness.

If you live long enough you are going to fail. If you live long enough you are going to be disappointed. If you live long enough you are going to be like Solomon as you are sitting there in your palace that doesn't seem so cool now, you are looking at all of your wives who are not all that you thought that they would be, you are looking at the gardens that you spent all that money on that you can't even go out and walk in them anymore, you think about all the power you have that you don't care about anymore and you are asking yourself, *'Was this really worth it?'* But in the long run, you also remember the lessons you have learned along the way. Patience really is a virtue and it is something that as we mature can be a gift that we share with others as well.

Proverbs Chapter 14 and verse 29 says: ***"He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly."*** There is a temperance that comes

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with maturity, with aging that allows us to say, *'Don't quit. Don't give up. The last chapter hasn't been written. You are still on the right side of the sod. God is still God. Don't give up.'*

So the election didn't turn out the way you thought it should. Don't quit. You didn't get the promotion. Don't quit. Your kids are driving you nuts. Don't quit. You lost your job. Don't quit. You didn't get the house you bid on. Don't stop, be longsuffering. Literally what this verse is saying is to be long in spirit is better than to be high in spirit. You see we want the thrill with winning. We want the thrill with acquiring. We want the thrill that comes with success. But sometimes the better lesson, the better path, the better way is the patience that comes with suffering long. Remember this is smoke and mirrors. This is a vapor that appears for a while and is gone. The best is yet to come.

Then if we could quickly look in verses 10 through 12. ***"Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it."*** The bottom line here is we need to learn to be satisfied with the life we have. Impatience and pride is what makes us say things like the guy in verse 10 said. *'Remember the good old days. Remember the former days. They were a lot better than this.'*

And don't we do this, and it is really annoying. I do it all the time and it annoys me to death, but I keep doing it. My kids hear me say something like, *'Back in the good old days when I was a kid life was so much better. Back when I started my ministry it was easier.'* And I can see them out of the corner of my eyes going, *'Oh here goes dad again.'* It is a tendency of living long enough that you start looking at the old days. And we sanitize them and we glamourize them.

I looked around in a restaurant the other day and everyone in there was looking at their phones. Of course I had just finished looking at my phone, but I am superior, right, and I had a reason. So I started thinking things like, *'Look at everyone looking at their phones. I remember the day.....'* And I was going into cranky Dan mode. *'I remember the days when we sat at the dinner table and had meaningful and intelligent conversation, and we discussed great books that we read and on and on.'*

But if we stop and think about those days when we didn't have cell phones life was different. Whenever my mom needed to tell something to my dad, she would tell me

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to go find him on the back forty acres. It was a thirty minute walk through the snow at twenty degrees below zero. And that was not fun and that was real. I get in my car now and to start it I have a fob in my pocket. I slide into my heated, comfortable seat which is leather, rich Corinthian leather, and I just press a button and my car starts.

How many times did I slide across the cold cloth seat covering of my car in the middle of a Missouri winter, turn the key to start the car, and have it just - click. So what I would have to do is get out of the car, open the hood which usually falls on my head, and then I have to find the big spray can of ether. You would loosen the carburettor and squirt the ether in there and then you would realize you had no battery left. So I would have to get a jump from someone who had a car that did start in the cold weather. If no one was available and I had a manual transmission so I would have to get the tractor out and then pull the car with a chain. Those were not good days at all. I am thankful to live in the day of a push button to start my car.

But what we do is we glamorize the past. Were there good times in the former days? Yes. Are there good times today? Yes. It is a matter of perspective. And we need to be satisfied with our life as it is today. I am glad to live in a day with hand sanitizer, and as bad as Covid is, it is not as bad as other pandemics that killed forty percent of the population of the world at that time, like the Black Plague did in Europe. So I am glad that even if I am dying they can give me drugs so I don't have to scream my way into eternity. I am a sissy. I like toilet paper, even if it is in short supply. We live in a great time. We live in a wonderful day. We live with great opportunities, and for us to curse this day is to curse what God has a time for us to use for our good and His glory. Solomon said we need to learn to be satisfied with our lives and to quit talking about the past.

The last thing is this, which is the most important thing, and we see it in verses 13 and 14. "***Consider the work of God.***" And if there is one theme that I hope to hammer into us by the time we conclude this book it is this - God is God, we are not, and we are not all that. Most of the frustration that you and I feel is because we want to be something in this universe that God did not create us to be. And that is the center. We live this life of entitlement, with an expectation that the world revolves around us, and that God exists for our pleasure. And as long as we live that way, from Solomon's lips to our ears, we need to remember it is going to feel empty. We have to accept that we live in a broken world that is designed by a sovereign God who in the end has provided us a way of escape and promises us an incredible eternity.

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But we are not in the eternity yet. We are still in the broken part. And the world does not exist for our pleasure but for His pleasure. The heavens declare the glory of God, not the glory of Dan. The firmament declares His majesty, not my majesty. I am an ant on a giant universe of ant hills, and when I accept my role and who God is, I can take pleasure in my assignment. Now that runs counter to what the world wants to tell us. *‘Be all that you can be. It is all about you. What your mind can conceive you can achieve. Live your best life now. Your happiness matters. It is all about me. Live your truth.’*

Those are all lies from Satan. It is all about God. There is one truth and it is His truth. We are created in His image and blessed to be so, but we are the creation not the creator. There is joy to be found in our existence but it is the joy of the creation not the joy of the creator. God does not exist to serve us. God does not exist to make our lives better or more pleasurable. We exist to do that for Him. And until we accept the way the universe is run by a loving God we will always feel dissatisfied.

But when we can say, *‘Because I know Him, and He knows me, and I am one of His, I can be satisfied today with what I have and where I am, because this is not all there is. And the best is yet to come.’* When we get to that point we have reached wisdom. And when we follow that path, we have chosen the better path. There are those today who live frustrated lives of broken dreams and constant loss because they think this is all there is. They live in the moment, they want an experience, and they are putting their hands under every chocolate fountain they can find, and then wonder why they still feel nasty.

For many it is because they don’t know their place, and they don’t know their creator. There is a godly, holy satisfaction that can exist in our lives whether we live in a palace or whether we live in the ghetto, whether we are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, regardless of where we were born or when we were born, there is a place of godly contentment that God desires for us to have. And then we will see Him for who He really is, we will have peace in this moment, peace in this day, a peace that cannot be purchased with another palace, another wife, a longer life, or anything else. So for us we should choose the better path.

*The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.*