

The Good and the Bad

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Ecclesiastes 6:10 – 7:14, Romans 8:28

Today, we continue with a look into the book of Ecclesiastes with chapter seven. The writer refers to himself as Qohelet which is a Hebrew word meaning “Teacher” or “Evangelist.” In the first six chapters Qohelet shares his search for wisdom and meaning in life. He asks “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” A common theme that Qohelet keeps repeating is how things are like “vapor.” We may put a lot of energy into the things we do, but in the end the work can disappear like vapor in the wind. Good things often don’t last. Qohelet observes how there are many problems and bad things connected with our toil, but there are also a few things that are good. We can enjoy life as a gift of God, live in community, and find joy in our work.

Qohelet begins the second half of Ecclesiastes, moving from the theme of human toil, to a questioning of just what is good. We may think that we know what is good or bad, but that is not always the case. For example, many studies suggest that wheat flour is not as good for us as we used to think. For some people, the gluten in the flour seems to be the cause for many problems such as weight gain, headaches, joint pain, and allergic reactions. Not just with flour, but with all kinds of foods, some things that were thought to be good for us are now considered not so good, and other foods that were thought to be bad for us are actually healthier than we thought. For example, I remember that chocolate was considered bad for you. Now, studies have shown that there are health benefits from eating chocolate, although it is still understood that too much chocolate is not good because of all the sugar that is usually mixed in... In other words, in our lives, what is good or bad is often not always clear. We then need to trust in God to receive wisdom. How has God led you? I want to look a little bit at what Qohelet writes, then look at the story of Joseph, as well as a personal example to illustrate how life often flips between good and bad. In the end we can then see how God has led.

In chapter seven of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet lists a number of “good”, or “better than” statements. It’s tough to understand just what Qohelet means with this list, since he is likely not just trying to give a list of wise proverbs. He is more likely trying to show how “many words” increase “vapor” as he says in chapter six, verse 11. Words have value, but the value is limited. This list in chapter seven is what Qohelet uses to explore today’s theme which is found in chapter six, verse 12, “For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?” We are limited in our understanding. Things may be less clear than we realise. To show this, a lot of Qohelet’s statements are the opposite from what one might expect.

Qohelet points out that some bad things can end up good, and some good things can end up bad. For example, he begins with saying that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. The “house of feasting” expression was often used in relation to the marriage celebration – so he’s saying that going to a funeral could be better than going to a wedding. One reason may be because at funerals people are forced to think about what’s important in life. Qohelet also says that “Sorrow is better than laughter.” It’s sad that sometimes people feel sorrow on the inside even while laughing on the outside. On the other hand, sometimes when people feel sorrow, for example at a funeral, it can become a very good time including meaningful conversations with family and friends. In other words what we see as good isn’t always good, and what we see as bad isn’t always actually bad. This is the reality of our lives. If we only seek pleasure, we miss the reality that much of life is filled with pain, we miss the reality that there are many perplexing things in life that we can’t explain. Despite what some people may think, with all his negative statements, in the end, Qohelet is not depressed. He is just trying to see how life has both positive and negative aspects. He concludes, “In the day of prosperity be joyful...” God is the source of the blessings we receive. But, Qohelet also recognises that life is not always prosperous. There is another side to life where we will also need to endure adversity and challenges. God allows these to happen. Our knowledge of what is good or not good is limited, but we can trust

that God is in control, working for good.

As the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter eight verse 28, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Those who reject God, head down the road leading to misery and confusion. But, those who seek God’s leading can trust that although there are many hardships in life, God is ultimately in control, working things out for good. According to one commentary, the biblical story of Joseph starting in Genesis 37 is a great example of how life often flips between good and bad. I’d like to spend some time now sharing how the story is summarized:

The story begins when Joseph brings a bad report to his father about his brothers, but the news for Joseph himself is good: he is a favourite of his father, receives a lovely coat, and has dreams of grandeur. But this is *not* so good because his bothers resent him, attack him, and throw him into a pit. But this *is* good because they do not kill him. Yet it is *bad* because they sell him into slavery. But this is *good* because he is purchased by a [good] man, who soon puts him in charge of his household.

Yet this turns out *not* to be good because the man’s wife lusts after him, propositions him, and falsely accuses him of wrongdoing so that he is thrown into prison. Yet this is *not* so bad because he is soon put in a position of leadership, is able to interpret the dream of a court official, and anticipates [being released soon]. Yet this turns out to be *bad* because the official forgets Joseph. But it turns out to be *good* because the official remembers him at an [important time], and so Joseph is brought out of prison, interprets the king’s dreams, and is placed second in command of the country. But *bad* is about to happen in the form of a famine. Yet it is *good* that Joseph has interpreted a prophetic dream that enables him to warn the king, who can prepare for the famine.

These circumstances bring Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food, a potentially *bad* situation, at least for the brothers. But Joseph arranges for *good* to happen when they receive not only grain but also their money returned. But it becomes *bad* when their youngest brother is accused of theft and threatened with prison. But it turns to the *good* when his oldest brother offers to stay in his place, Joseph reveals himself to the brothers, and the family – with bad relationships now restored – is reunited and prospers in the land. There is one last possible scenario for *bad* when the brothers fear, following their father’s death, that Joseph might harm them. But Joseph announces, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen.50-19-20)

Life often brings many surprises. Have you experienced anything like the story of Joseph, where something initially seems good but turns out to be bad, or bad, but later turns out to be good? Last week, we were looking at some old photos and found one taken after an accident where we’d flipped our van upside-down along a snow covered highway! It was bad that we had the accident, but it was good that no one was seriously injured. It was bad that the van was damaged beyond repair, but good that we could receive insurance for the damages. In fact, we’d been hoping to sell the van. In the end we received more money from insurance than we’d expected we’d receive if we were to sell it. It was bad that we were stranded outside in the cold, but it was good that someone who had seen our accident offered their vehicle for our kids to keep warm. They also called police, ambulance, and a tow-truck. After a ride into town, it was bad that our cell phone wasn’t working, but good that we found a phone we could use at a large coffeeshop. It was bad that we had to spend a long time trying to call various places to arrange lodging for the night, but it was good that one of the coffeeshop customers offered to buy our kids a meal. It was bad that all the hotels were booked and we couldn’t find a place to stay, but it turned out to be good that the tow-truck driver knew of an apartment where we could stay for a

reasonable price. We are thankful for God's leading through all the good and bad associated with our accident.

The realities of life do not guarantee that everything will work out for us. Some people even spend years wondering where God is at work as they suffer. The reality is that God knows our pain. God experienced the pain of rejection, torture, and death on a cross through Jesus. In Romans 8, if we read to the end of the chapter, we see Paul's declaration that nothing can separate us from God's love. Verse 38, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Let's pray.

O Lord, thank-you for the insights to life that we receive from Qohelets words. We easily get confused at what is right or wrong, good or bad. You alone know what is best for us. We confess that it's easy to get stuck in our own struggles and forget about the fact that you are all powerful and in control. Forgive us for our arrogance in thinking we know more than we do. We pray for the humility to admit that we are limited in our understanding, to admit our need for you. In times of joy, may we give thanks to you, and when challenges come, may we trust that you are able to give us strength and continue to lead us through. In Christ we pray, Amen.