



# Central Peninsula Church

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Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14  
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## When Hard Times are Good

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

There is nothing like a road trip. After Christmas our family drove out to Boise, Idaho to visit friends and attend the Humanitarian Bowl. We had a great time and drove home on New Year's Day. As we drove along with the kids asleep in the back seat Lynn turned to me and asked, "I wonder what will happen to us in 2003?" It was one of those questions that didn't need an answer, but it was a good question. Behind it I sensed a little bit of anxiety: Think of all the things that could happen to us in a year's time. Will this be a good year or a bad year? Will it be a year of adversity or a year of blessing and prosperity?

I can't remember exactly what I said to Lynn in response, but I can remember thinking that it will no doubt include some good times and some not so good times. Certainly it's the latter part of that equation that we struggle with. What hard times will we have to deal with? Cancer? Death? Unemployment? Depression? Who knows, but we can be sure that 2003 will include both what we call good times and hard times. Jesus said, "In this world you WILL have tribulation..." He didn't say, "You MIGHT have it." James said, "Consider it all joy...WHEN you encounter various trials..." He didn't say, "if you encounter" them; he said, "when you encounter them."

It's nice to know that these things don't take the Lord by surprise, but if we know hard times are inevitable, how can we keep from living in fear, always afraid of when the shoe will drop? How can we learn to live with the knowledge that not just peace and prosperity, but some degree of trouble and heartache will greet us somewhere along our path?

We've been studying the book of Ecclesiastes and the writer who calls himself "the Teacher" can help us here. In 6:10-12 he speaks of what theologians call "the sovereignty of God." He says in v. 10, **"whatever exists has already been named."** To name something meant to actually determine its character and to rule over it. Everything that we know and experience has been "named" by God. He even knows and determines the future. There is nothing that takes him by surprise. But that's not all. He speaks as well of the frailty and limitations of man. In v. 10 he says, **"and it is known what man is, for he cannot dispute with Him who is stronger than he is. For there are many words which increase futility."** In other words, we are frail and limited. We came from the dust of the ground. It doesn't pay for us to argue with God about why he allowed this or that to happen. There is no advantage to that.

In light of these two facts, he asks in v. 12, **"Who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime? For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?"** In other words, since we don't know what the future holds, since

we're so frail and limited and not God, we can't really determine what is good or advantageous to us and what isn't. We think good times are good and hard times are bad, but do we really know that? With our limited knowledge, can we say that this event is bad and that event is good? You might remember that earlier in chapter 6 he already began to rearrange our value system. He said that good times aren't necessarily good (see 6:1-6). Now in 7:1-14 he says that hard times aren't necessarily bad.

### A. What we thought were bad things may really be good things.

By use of a number of proverbial sayings, the Teacher tells us that hard things can actually be good things. Several of the proverbs he uses employ a "this is better than that" format. Each one of these statements is somewhat surprising. Each one sort of flips around what we normally think. In different ways, he tells us that what we thought was a bad thing is really a good thing.

#### 1. The day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.

**"A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth" (v.1).**

That's a weird thing to say, unless you're depressed! But look closely at what he says. He says the difference between the day of our death and the day of our birth is like the difference between a good name and an expensive perfume. One of my daughters gave me a new cologne for Christmas. I've concluded that cologne is a nice thing to wear, but it's overrated. You would think from the commercials that it would make me irresistible, but believe me, it doesn't! As a matter of fact, at the end of the day I can't even smell it. That's why a good reputation (name) is better. It lasts, and not only that, it pays off!

The Teacher is saying that a good name, especially at the end of life, on the day of one's death, is truly influential and attractive. The day of one's birth is like perfume. It holds a lot of promise, but who knows what kind of life that baby will live? But a good name endures.

So we dread the possibility of death, but if we live our life well, if we die with a good name, what we thought was a bad thing is really a good thing; better even than a birthday.

#### 2. Sorrow is better than festivity and laughter.

**“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for when a face is sad a heart may be happy. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure”** (vv.2-4).

He says it's better to go to a funeral home than to a party. It's better to grieve than to laugh.

When babies are born prematurely, they often have underdeveloped lungs. Recent studies have shown that a surprising treatment offers hope. Doctors filled the lungs of critically ill premature babies with a certain liquid that is filled with oxygen. Through this liquid the babies actually breathe. Normally, when fluid fills the lungs, people drown. But this special fluid actually saves lives. The Teacher says that sorrow can have the same effect. What we thought would drown us is actually used to save us.

Why is that? Because sorrow forces us to deal with ultimate realities. When I was a 17-year-old kid I encountered real sorrow for the first time in my life. I was out of control. I was confused. I was full of remorse. For a long time I didn't know where to turn. And then I began to turn to God. Before that time I never gave God a second thought, but sorrow brought me to my knees. In a strange way, it was sorrow that saved me. That's why we need to go to the house of mourning. When we go there we remember that is the end of every man, we remember how frail we are, and the Teacher says “the living take it to heart.” You can drown your life in food and drink and pleasure and fun, or you can take time to deal with the deeper realities of life. Sorrow causes us to look below the surface. It shocks us out of our denial systems. As hard as it is, it's good for the heart; it makes the heart happy. I never knew real happiness until I knew real sorrow.

We look at the future and the last thing we want is to have sorrow, but if we allow sorrow to cause us to deal with reality, if we allow sorrow to move us to a place where we think about our soul, what we thought was a bad thing is really a good thing.

**3. Rebuke is better than praise.** Another thing we don't really look forward to is rebuke. No one likes to be rebuked. No one likes to be criticized.

**“It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool, and this too is futility”** (vv.5-6).

When rebuked it's important to consider the source. The criticism of a wise man is worth a lot more than the flattery of a fool. He compares the praise of a fool to the crackling of burning thorns under a pot. You hear a lot of

noise, but you don't end up with anything that lasts.

When I was a new Christian I tried to convince myself and others that I could date a non-Christian girl and not compromise my standards. Deep down I knew I was wrong, but I couldn't admit it to myself and others. I even remember convincing a few of my Christian friends that I really was on the right track. And then the Lord brought a guy into my life who just cut through all my rationalization. He looked me in the eye and just said, “You have to end that relationship and you have to end it now.” I could have said, “This is none of your business,” or “What right do you have to tell me how to live?” or “Who made you my judge?” But this was the one thing I needed to hear even though I didn't want to hear it. I knew he was right and I did exactly what he told me to do and I've never regretted it.

One of the choices we all have to make is what kind of people we will surround ourselves with. We can surround ourselves with nice people, safe people, even Christian people, but they are people without the moral conviction and backbone to tell us the truth. Or we can surround ourselves with truth tellers; people who love us enough to correct us. Scripture says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”

No one likes to be criticized. No one likes to be rebuked. But if the rebuke comes from a wise and loving friend, even though it hurts us, what we thought was a bad thing can actually be a good thing.

#### **4. Waiting things out is better than taking shortcuts.**

**“For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit. Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools. Do not say, ‘Why is it that the former days were better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this”** (vv.7-10).

I hate to wait for anything. I hate waiting in line. I hate waiting in traffic. I hate waiting for my meal at a restaurant. And I love shortcuts. I'm one of those guys that loves to time my drives. My family hates it because I never want to stop and sometimes I drive too fast. But the Teacher says waiting patiently, taking the long way, is better than taking shortcuts. It's true in life. To wait things out we need patience.

There are different ways that impatience can manifest itself. In v. 7 he indicates that the impatient person is more apt to succumb to corruption. Bribery is one quick way to get things done that even the wise succumb to.

Verse 8 says another symptom of impatience is always starting new things but never ending them. We all love the beginning of a new year, but the end of the year is better. Follow-through is critical. Pride usually goes along with starting something new, but it takes patience to see things through to the end.

In v. 9 he says that those who are impatient will be quick

to anger. I have learned the hard way that when I'm upset about something, when I feel I need to set the record straight NOW and I act out of the impulse of anger, I do things I later regret. It's far better to wait thing out. James writes that we should be **"quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God"** (James 1:19-20).

In v. 10 he says impatience can lead to foolish nostalgia. When life is hard and we have to wait, it's easy to long for the good old days when things were better. Some people never stop harping on how wonderful things used to be. One person said the good old days are nothing but the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination. They're right. We should learn from the past but not live in the past.

I thought waiting was a hard thing but maybe it's a good thing. Like the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth, and like sorrow is better than laughter, and like a rebuke is better than praise.

### 5. Wisdom is better than wealth.

**"Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the sun. For wisdom is protection just as money is protection. But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors"** (vv.11-12).

It's not that wealth is bad. If you're fortunate to have both wisdom and an inheritance that's a good thing. The Teacher says that money can provide some protection or security in this life. Money buys food, shelter, insurance, safe cars and warm clothes. It brings a measure of protection. But there are some things money can't do. Money can't preserve your life. The rich die of cancer just like the poor. You can die in an accident driving a Mercedes just as quickly as you can driving a Saturn.

We think it would be a good thing to somehow land a lot of money this year. I read about Christina Onassis this week. She was living in Europe and her favorite drink, Diet Coke, was only available in the United States. So she sent her private jet to America once a month for a fresh supply of Coke, at the cost of \$30,000 per trip. On one occasion she was in Australia and realized she left her favorite David Bowie tape back home in Switzerland. No problem. She ordered her helicopter pilot back home to get it. She wanted 24-hour companionship so she offered her friends \$25,000 a month to hang out with her. She had an annual income of \$50 million dollars. She could buy anything, but she couldn't preserve her life. After a lonely childhood, four divorces, several suicide attempts, she died at age 37 of a heart attack brought on by too much dieting and the overuse of amphetamines and barbiturates.

Wealth cannot preserve your life. More importantly, it can't buy a ticket to heaven. Wisdom is better than wealth because it can do just that. In 1 Cor. 2 Paul calls Jesus Christ "the wisdom of God." Jesus, the wisdom of God, is the true life preserver. He said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." The Apostle John said, "He who has the Son has the life." Wealth offers a measure of protection but

Jesus, the wisdom from God, saves us for eternity. The problem is this wisdom is disguised. From the standpoint of the natural man, the wisdom of God is foolishness. Christ, the wisdom of God, couldn't even save his own life. In the world's eyes, he died as a loser in the Roman equivalent of the electric chair. But that cross is what saves us. So once again, this wisdom hardly seems like a good thing. But what we thought was a bad thing is a good thing. It saves our life.

### B. Accept both good times and hard times as the wise work of a sovereign God.

Up until now notice that the Teacher has said nothing about God. What he has said would be just as true for an atheist as it would for a believer. But what he says next tells us that God is behind both what we call the good times and the bad times. Look at vv. 13-14.

**"Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider - God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything that will be after him."**

That which is bent or crooked refers to all those things we call adversities - painful experiences, injustices, mistreatment, poverty, sickness, accidents, etc. His question is, "Who can straighten out what God has made crooked?" No one can! God did this. Prosperity and adversity both come from God's hands; a wise Father's heart has given them to you. William Cowper, who struggled so much with depression, expressed this truth in a great old hymn. The last two lines say,

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence,  
He hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain,  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

Job put it this way, **"Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?"** (Job 2:10). The Teacher says God has given both to us. The challenge for us is to accept that God has chosen these for us out of love and wisdom. The challenge for us is to yield to his hand. The Teacher says these things have a special purpose which he gives us in these last words: **"God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not discover anything that will be after him"** (v. 14b). In other words, God has designed life to be full of the unexpected so that we might realize that we're not in control. We're not in charge of life. The great Satanic lie that subtly comes at us a thousand times a day is that we are gods, we are in charge, we can plan, we can direct, we can control. In the freedom of will that God gives us there is enough truth to that that we easily believe the rest, that we are in ultimate control of everything.

But the lesson of the Scripture, driven home again and again, is that it's not true. God is in charge. And as his children, what he sends us is always designed to benefit. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker, an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'? Woe to him who says to a Father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to a woman, 'To what are you giving birth?'"

Maybe God has been breaking you. Maybe you are like clay this morning, being pushed and squeezed and even crushed. Don't believe for a minute that this is random. A loving and wise Father holds you in his hand. You are his masterpiece! Someone wisely wrote:

When God wants to drill a man,  
And thrill a man,  
And skill a man;  
When God wants to mold a man  
To play the noblest part,  
When he yearns with all his heart  
To create so great and bold a man  
That all the world shall be amazed,  
Watch his methods, watch his ways -

How he ruthlessly perfects  
Whom he royally elects.  
How he hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows, converts him  
Into trial shapes of clay  
Which only God understands.

While his tortured heart is crying,  
And he lifts beseeching hands.  
How he bends but never breaks  
When his good he undertakes.

How he uses whom he chooses,  
And with every purpose, fuses him,  
By every act, induces him  
To try his splendor out.  
God knows what he's about

I don't know if it was a coincidence or not, but if the ride home from Boise was any indication, it could be a long year! We managed to stretch a ten hour drive into a 13 hour drive. We had a tire problem in Winnemucca and spent an hour strolling through the aisles of Wal Mart while it was being fixed. We hit traffic in Tahoe and got held up even longer. It was a ride full challenges; things that at the time frustrated me. But we made it home safely, and now I look back on the whole thing as a bonding experience. If I could write the script over again, I wouldn't change anything. What I thought was a bad thing was really a good thing.

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