

Ecclesiastes 7:1-22

Consider the Crooked Way of God's Wisdom

A. Where One Learns this Way

The theme of chapter 6 continues: man cannot contend with God and he also does not know what is good for him (6:10, 12). The old theme is still under consideration: what is crooked cannot be made straight (cf. 1:15 with 7:13).

Apparently there is some annoyance among God's people about the injustice they have experienced. Some are in danger of becoming unfaithful to the God of the covenant. (In the letter to the Hebrews a similar situation is portrayed.) There is a great danger that the church will exchange her good name (bride of Christ) for fine perfume; she gambles away her reputation in the world for the sake of earthly advantages. Therefore it is better to be faithful and poor, than unfaithful and rich (v. 1a)¹. Note that in this context there is mention of extortion and bribery (v. 7). When corruption enters the church, she denies the messianic future. The present is then more important to her than the salvation that God, according to his promise, will reveal. But the church must remain faithful, look ahead, and believe that God is advancing with his way of redemption. (This is expressed in the New Testament in Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17, 18).

The good name of the righteous man remains (Proverbs 10:7), while the precious ointment is transitory. We must pay attention to the end, and look to the future. And thus v. 1b says: the day of death (The Teacher speaks in the covenant) is better than the day of birth. This idea is not yet pronounced in v.1. But, The Teacher means that you are closer to your actual destination on the day of death than on the day of birth. The Teacher wants to say that God continues with his people, even though you *see* demolition and the vicious circle of history. This also applies to the church as a whole and for all of history, which God makes. Again we have a messianic perspective here (cf. Matthew 24:6-14; Luke 21:28).

However, such a conviction of faith does not come by itself. Therefore we are called to a house of mourning where man thinks about the meaning and purpose of life. Verses 5 and 6 are to the same effect.

What v. 7 says about oppression and the taking of bribes might be inexplicable for some in this context. For the listeners in the congregation it was completely clear: it points to the condition of a dominated and oppressed nation (cf. 3:16; 4:1; 5:8).

In this connection v. 8 is clear. The end of a thing is better than its beginning. This can only be said by someone who has eternity in his heart (3:11) and who looks forward to the messianic future. The following is also clear then: better is the patient in spirit who hopes in God (James 5:7-11) than the proud in spirit who decides himself how history should proceed and who takes "right" into his own hands.

¹ *Ed. Note:* 'faithful' likely refers to having "a good name", and 'rich' to having "fine perfume".

In this context the warning not to be quickly provoked is also clear. This happens easily when a nation's privileges are destroyed, especially the privileges of the covenant which it has received from the LORD. Think of Asaph, who was a brute beast till he entered the sanctuary and paid attention to the final destiny (Psalm 73). That is what The Teacher wants to emphasize.

B. How this Way Progresses

The Teacher does not want God's people to turn around and praise the "good old days" (v. 10). The fool praises the past, but the wise (pious) man looks ahead, and believes that God progresses with his church, straight through injustice. The new good times are approaching; the messianic age when all things will be renewed. Therefore The Teacher again praises wisdom as a great treasure and a gift of God (cf. 2:26). It also gives shelter (protection) just as money does (or rather: death, 1 Corinthians 15:55). The wise person has a perspective on life and lives to all eternity. Wisdom also opens one's eyes to the world of God. No one can make straight what he has made crooked (v. 13). The word, "crooked" does not refer primarily to the mystery of God's government (as some have suggested), but to the fact that God uses what is crooked (sin) in the fulfillment of his plan of redemption. This verse echoes chapter 1:15. We cannot correct God's work or anything that happens according to God's ordinances (cf. 3:9-11), including sin (Belgic Confession, Article 13). Whoever remembers that God has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11) will not want to do this either. The church must submit to a wicked government: the authorities have been instituted by God (3:11,14; Romans 13:11).

The church can and must pray and witness against sin, but she cannot intervene violently. God has also made the political and national evil days. Reformed dogmatics speak about God's "active permission". Article 13 of the Belgic Confession talks about his "ordinance" (which is stronger). Through faith we know where God's way will finally end, but how that way will go, no one knows beforehand (v. 14b).

C. The Attitude that Belongs to This Way

Verses 15-22 do not promote a "happy medium". But there is a righteous man (one who lives faithfully in the covenant with the LORD) perishing (dying untimely) in his righteousness. There is also a wicked man living long in his evildoing. The Teacher does not just posit such a case here - the church of his time lives in the midst of that situation. This can provoke reaction. Verses 8 and 9 already pointed to people who take "right" into their own hands. One can be over-righteous towards injustice and be over-wise (wiser than God) by saying: it cannot go on like this; and then one starts to hammer away at it. But whoever does that, destroys himself (cf. Matthew 26:52). He wants to straighten God's crooked line, and thus opposes God. He summons untimely and arbitrary conflicts, and is justly punished (cf. Romans 12:19). The history of the church is full of such examples. Whoever does this, acts as if God does not exist (3:17); he aligns himself against God, which no one can do without receiving punishment.

The Teacher also sees another danger threatening the people. He describes this as exceedingly wicked before he mentions it – as a warning. It is wicked because there is no possibility for forgiveness or reconciliation for that wickedness. This has to do with a sin which is unforgivable.

You see, one can also act very ungodly by not caring a bit about anything, and by declaring (in word or deed) one's solidarity with the heathen world powers and their accomplices. This is foolish because men of treachery and injustice will not live out half their days (Psalm 55:23). Even though there are wicked men who live long, this does not mean that God will let their wickedness go unpunished. Verse 17 refers to betrayal of the church and desertion of the covenant. The punishment for this is God's covenant wrath.

Both sins (fanaticism or zealotry and neglect of the covenant) occurred in the church at the time of The Teacher, and they will always exist: both a fanatic zeal which does not stop to think, and indifference. The temple (revelation) warns us against both of these extremes: one ought not to reach for the sword too quickly to defend one's point of view. On the other hand, one ought not to give up too easily either and join the camp of the wicked. Whoever fears God (this is the constant call of The Teacher (3:14; 5:6,7; 12:13)) will escape both these sins.

It all comes down to wisdom (v. 19), i.e. piety, a bond with the temple. The result of it is: no revolution against the instituted powers however wicked they are, but do not go along with them either. It becomes clear here (v. 19) that The Teacher does not recommend passivity. The wise man possesses a power (faith, witness, prayer (cf. Revelation 11: the two witnesses)) against which brutish violence cannot prevail. Thus the church preserves her reputation on both sides (v. 1); a witnessing power proceeds from her.

In all this the righteous man must not forget that he also is a sinner (v. 20ff). Be careful and humble, then, and avoid premature conflicts. Do not desire to know and hear all that is being said. You must ignore many things, and not react immediately. If you reacted to everything, you would not be alive. Eavesdroppers often hear their own disgrace. You cannot always pursue everything. This is not a preaching of passivity but a confirmation of the theme that for everything there is a time (3:1-15). The great feast is coming.

Questions

1. Is it possible to pray during a time of celebration: Teach us to count our days?
2. Does a sad face always prove that it is well with the heart? Can you give examples?
3. What is sinful about praising the "good old days"?
4. Does chapter 7:17 mean that you may be a little wicked?
5. Where (in the history of the church) do you find the tendency to condemn something too self-righteously? Does that tendency still exist today?

6. Where do you find the opposite, that is, relativism and the denial of all norms and values? Does Daniel 11:30,32 say anything about this? (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:32-34)
Do you find the book of Ecclesiastes to be very realistic?

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