

Response in Hard Times

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Preacher: Colin Horne

- [0 : 00] I'd ask you to take your Bibles and turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 6. Ecclesiastes chapter 6. We're going to read beginning in verse 10 and read on into chapter 7 till verse 14. Ecclesiastes chapter 6 verse 10.
- Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known. No man can contend with one who is stronger than he.
- The more the words, the less the meaning. And how does that profit anyone? For who knows what is good for a man in life during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?
- Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone? A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.
- [1 : 02] It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting. For death is the destiny of every man. The living should take this to heart.
- Sorrow is better than laughter because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.
- It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools.
- This, too, is meaningless. Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.
- Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. Do not say, why were the old days better than these?
- [2 : 07] For it is not wise to ask such questions. Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter.
- But the advantage of knowledge is this, that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor. Consider what God has done. Who can straighten what he has made crooked?
- When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.
- Well, good evening. It is good to be with you all. I am so just thankful each time that myself and my family can be here to worship with you, to fellowship with you.
- I grew so much, and I'm so thankful for the time that I had to be a part of this church, to attend here, when I was in college and in seminary. And I didn't think it was that long ago that we were here, in terms of attending here.
- [3 : 17] And then I was with the youth for the youth retreat this year, and I was like, who are these kids? Like, I don't recognize them. They've all grown up. And I thought, maybe it has been a little bit longer than I thought since we were here.
- But it is good. It is good to be with you all. As we were having lunch with Casey's parents today, I was asking about the service from this morning, and I had been purposeful when I was preparing the sermon for tonight.

And I had looked on the website, and I had seen it had been a decade since you all had been in Ecclesiastes. And I thought, okay, we're going to have something a little different. And then I heard about the sermon, and I was like, all right, I think maybe the Lord is going to be layering the truth of his word, because we're going to have some, hopefully, similar themes and similar applications brought out.

So we are in Ecclesiastes, in Ecclesiastes chapter 6. Well, we all want to avoid pain, naturally. We want to avoid things that may hurt us, things that may cause us discomfort, difficulty, adversity.

And I don't just mean just physical pain, emotional pain, spiritual pain, all forms of pain. Anything unpleasant, we don't want that, naturally.

[4 : 33] We want to experience pleasant things. We work hard to avoid things that may be difficult, that may be hard or uncomfortable or distressing. Like nobody wakes up in the morning and goes to their dentist appointment and rejoices when their dentist says you have five cavities and you need two root canals and we're going to have to put a crown on this tooth and another one to replace this one.

We don't want that. We don't embrace that. That's why we brush our teeth. We want to avoid the pain of those kinds of dental appointments and just the emotional pain of I'm embarrassed.

That was a lot of things that I have to get done. Nobody is jumping for joy when they get reviewed at work and the evaluation comes back and they say, you're doing poorly.

You're doing poorly. Nobody wakes up and hopes that life will be especially difficult for them today. Nobody wakes up and says, I hope today is vexing. I hope it is just hard.

More comfortable, maybe. More financially stable. More interesting. More enjoyable, sure. But more difficult? No. We don't want sadness.

[5 : 39] We don't want hardship. We don't want pain. We don't want sorrow. And rightly so. We long for a day, as Revelation speaks, when Christ will make all things new and no more sorrow, no more pain, no more sickness, no more sin.

All of that will be done away with. And so we seek to avoid these things. But here's the reality. We can't always avoid those things, can we?

The book of Ecclesiastes presents us with truth. And it helps us to think and to respond appropriately to pain and to difficulty and sadness and sorrow in life.

And so our natural tendency, when these kinds of realities intersect with our lives, is to push them away. To ignore them. To minimize them. But God says in Ecclesiastes, there's a better way.

There's a better way. There's a way to think and to respond to adversity. There's a better way to think and to respond to those things in life that distress us.

[6 : 46] The fool avoids, but the wise considers. The fool ignores, but the wise ponders. The fool brazenly balks at God, but the wise humbly submits himself to him.

So let's dive into our passage this evening. And I know that we've already read the passage up front, but I would still like to read through it in segments as we go. So we're going to look at the last three verses of chapter 6.

And just to forewarn you, I am reading from the ESV, so my translation may be a little bit different from yours. So Ecclesiastes 6 verse 10.

And so the teacher here in Ecclesiastes is teaching us something that he's said actually before.

And so if we were in a sermon series, maybe this would be causing some bells to go off in your mind. He's taught this truth before. We are not God. We are not God.

- [8 : 11] It's a theme that runs through the book of Ecclesiastes. In chapter 3, one of the most famous verses of the book, chapter or verse 11, it says that God has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
- From the beginning to the end. So God has given us this desire for eternity. But he doesn't let us grasp it. And it's a reminder to us that God is God and we are not.
- Then in chapter 5 verse 2, we read, Do not be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God.
- For God is in heaven, and you are on earth. We see the same idea here again in chapter 6. We are to remember our position. We're to remember our place.
- We're to remember our status. So that's the first point of this sermon. How do we respond appropriately? How do we respond rightly to adversity? Well, first, we remember our position.
- [9 : 19] The teacher is telling us here in these last few verses of chapter 6 that God holds all the authority over us. We don't dictate the terms of the relationship.
- He does. God is in heaven and we are on earth. And as we're going to see as we work through this passage, that is such a good thing.
- That is for our good. Again, my natural tendency. God is in authority. I'm not. I want to rebel against that. I want to put myself in authority.
- And yet it is for our good. And so when the teacher says, whatever has come to be has already been named, he's telling us here that God is in control.
- That God from eternity past has already named whatever comes to be. He's already planned it out. Whatever you see or experience it, it didn't catch God off guard.
- [10 : 20] Whatever has come to be has already been known. It's already been named. Think back to the Garden of Eden. God gives Adam the task of naming the animals.
- And that was a very, very concrete way of showing that Adam had dominion over the animals, that he had authority over them. God has named all things that come to pass, meaning that God has authority over every moment of time.
- God's providentially controlling all that takes place under the sun. And we need to be reminded that God's authority, it extends to our lives as well.
- So we remember our position. The teacher says, it is known what man is, who we are, the place that we hold in God's ordering of all creation.
- It's known. It's understood. So what is our position? What is our place? It's in submission to God. He says, man is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.
- [11 : 24] God is in heaven. We are on earth. God is on the throne. And we're to bow before him. We're to humbly trust him with our lives, even when everything doesn't make sense.
- It doesn't always make sense. The way life works under the sun can be difficult to understand. God allows for things into this world that are horrible and awful.
- And filled with sin and the effects of sin. Our church just this week, someone in our church, they lost a loved one through a terrible, tragic event.
- Terrible suffering. There's injustice. There's oppression. There's sickness and disease. There's deep heartache. There's broken relationships. There's all kinds of things that rightly upset us and discourage us and they make us yearn for God to make all things right.
- And we could respond by shaking our fist at God and saying, I know better. God, how could you let that happen?

- [12 : 32] I know better. But when we do that, when we put God on trial, we're forgetting our position. We're forgetting who we are and we're forgetting who God is.
- We're thinking that we can dispute with someone stronger than ourselves. We're thinking that we can contend with God and we can't. The teacher says, you're wasting your time.
- God can't be contended with, so stop trying. But we don't. We still try. And the teacher says, all those words are futile. Save your breath.
- The more words, the more vanity. I remember there was a time when one of our children was getting out of bed routinely after we put that child to bed.
- And they would come out and they would have something different to say. And we've learned, probably could have done some better parenting than we did because we weren't too great at ensuring that this child went back to bed.
- [13 : 32] And so they would come out with something else to say and something else to say. And each time it was like, you know what's going to happen, right? We're going to go back to bed. My favorite was when this child would come out and just say, I have a question.
- Okay. What's your question? Okay. Okay. Let's. Take you on back to bed.
- The more words, the more vanity. But we can do the same thing with God. We can dispute with him. We can come to him with a lot to say about how to run the universe.
- We can come to him with a lot to say about how to order the affairs of our world. And yet, the more words, the more vanity. There's no advantage to arguing with God.
- There's no profit to disputing with him. And so to drive this point home, the teacher asked two questions. Do you see those in verse 12?
- [14 : 30] To help us remember who's in charge, who holds the authority over our lives, he asked these two questions. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?
- For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? And the answer to both is God. It's God.
- God knows what is good for us while we are alive. And God knows what will become of this world after we've departed from it. God knows what will be after us when we're no longer in this world.
- And that is humbling. That's humbling. Unless God gives us a window into the affairs of this world after we die and we go to be with him, we would have no way of knowing what would come after us.
- And that's hard. Like, I want to know what becomes of my kids, what becomes of my grandkids, what becomes of my home, what becomes of the place that we worshipped with God's people, what becomes of my church family, what becomes of the company I worked for, or what becomes of things?
- [15 : 42] What's the legacy I left? What difference did I make? I'm wrestling with these questions. And apart from God revealing that, I don't know.
- And so maybe God will let me know, but maybe he won't. It's a tough pill to swallow. I want to know. I want to have knowledge. I want to have a sense of control.
- Because if you know something, you feel like you have control. Like you have power. Like you're something special. You get the inside scoop from your friend on a special event in their life and you know it before everybody else and when they reveal it, you're just relishing.
- Like, I knew that already. I already knew that was happening. Who can tell me what will be after me? Who can bring me to see what will be after me?

I can't do it myself. The answer is only God. We are finite and limited and frail and our lives are brief.

[16 : 40] We are sinners, but God is not. We are not God. God is in heaven and we are on earth. And so we must first see to remember our position.

And that is so incredibly important that we get that straight. Because if we understand who we are and we understand who God is and if we understand that we humbly submit ourselves to God rather than disputing with him with many words, then everything else, everything else in this passage that follows makes sense.

You see, the teacher has already told us that we should remember our place and now he tells us to face hard things. Because if we remember God is in heaven, God is in authority, God is sovereign, then I can face hard things with a different perspective.

So beginning in verse 1 of chapter 7, we're going to get this list of proverbial sayings. And it would be easy to read it and kind of think that they're just some disconnected Proverbs.

Much like in the book of Proverbs, you can find lots of different sayings, maybe close together, but with very little that actually connects them. But here, the teacher is being more purposeful.

[18 : 00] It's not a random list. It's a very orderly list. And it's really an answer to a question. A question that has already been posed. A question posed to us at the end of chapter 6.

For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life? And the answer to that question is, remember, God. God knows.

So what does God have to say? Good thing he gave us his word. Right here, he has something to say. In this list of Proverbs, it's the answer.

God is telling us what is good for man while he lives out the few days of his vain life. Look no further. Your answer is right here. Chapter 7, verse 1. So the teacher says, face hard things.

Don't avoid the weighty matters of life. Don't fill your life with empty pleasure and folly. Don't distract yourself from thinking about and from meditating on significant, important realities.

[19 : 07] As hard as that may be, as sad as that may be, face hard things. And we get three examples. The first one is death.

So look with me just back at verse 1 of chapter 7. A good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death than the day of birth.

That's a strange verse, isn't it? It makes us wonder, why would the teacher say the day of death is better than the day of birth? And it really hinges on understanding the first part of the verse because they're parallel ideas.

If we understand what the first part means, we can understand what the second part means. But the first part might be just as strange, if not stranger, to our sensibilities as the second.

A good name is better than precious ointment? I'm not one to make much of precious ointment. It's not like on my list of highly valuable items. If you and I start talking about ointment, we're probably going to go down the road of like desitin and baby diapers, not like precious commodities like perfume or cologne or precious gems.

[20 : 22] But in biblical times, ointment was very valuable. It was desirable. People wanted it. You couldn't just go to Meijer and pick up some ointment. It wasn't cheap.

It was a luxury item. It was difficult to top in value. And yet here, God says that a good name or a good reputation is even better than one of the most sought-after expensive items of His day or of that time.

And a good reputation isn't given at birth. It's developed through the course of one's life. We don't come out of the womb with a good name, but we can go to the grave with a good name.

It's at death that our reputation is solidified. What kind of life we lived, it will be cemented cemented then. But we don't want to naturally think about death.

We want to avoid hard things. And so the teacher says, beginning in verse 2, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

[21 : 28] For this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow, verse 3, 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. When our family was looking to buy a house, we looked all over Warsaw.

And we had a friend who told us about a house that hadn't actually even been listed yet, but that we should just go look at it, just drive by, see what it looks like, and it would be on the market soon.

And so we went to check it out, and from the street view, we really liked the look of the house. It was a nice looking house. It had a good sized yard. We were, it didn't, it wasn't on a busy street.

But there was one thing that just made me cringe. It butted up to a cemetery. And I thought, I just, I don't want to be reminded of death.

[22 : 32] I don't, I don't want to. Just in my, my natural way of thinking, I didn't, I didn't want that. It wasn't appealing to me. And yet here, God is saying, facing death is a good thing.

I should have bought that house. We need to do it more often. We need to consider something so weighty as death. Fools, they run from it.

They avoid it. They distract themselves from thinking about it. But the wise consider it. The wise ponder death. It's a, it's a good thing.

It's a necessary thing to lay it to heart. Now we fill our lives. We fill our lives with pleasure so that we don't have to think about death. So that we don't have to lay it to heart.

I don't know what, what your coping mechanisms may be in that sense. But we try to escape thinking about hard things. It could be simple things even like watching TV, reading books, playing games, devoting ourselves to hobbies or to work or to any number of things.

[23 : 40] More likely than not it's a combination of those things. We try to stay busy so we don't have to think about difficult things. I mean, think about the age of smartphones now.

I mean, we're standing in line at like the grocery store and we whip that thing out. Now it's probably not because we're like, I don't want to think about death so I'm going to get my phone out. But when we do that, when we inundate ourselves with just constantly distractions, constant distractions, when we whip out our phones to check a text message or emails or sports stories or the news, you name it, we're giving ourselves no opportunity to think about the weighty things in life.

My phone died. Casey and I were out on a date night. Thank you to her parents. And we were out at Old Navy and my phone died. And she was trying on clothes in the dressing room and I was like wandering aimlessly, trying not to look like really dumb because why, what's this guy doing?

He's just standing around. Like he needs to be looking at clothes. I don't want to look at clothes. Or he needs to be on his phone. And it was like, how do I spend my time? Like we're lost. I'm talking probably to like the 30 and under, I guess.

All of you older people are like, what is he talking about? It's just a moment of inactivity. It's a way to ward off boredom, but it keeps us from thinking about significant matters.

[25 : 01] I don't want to be bored, but I also, I don't want to think about life and death. And so, God says, that's the way of the fool.

The reality is, we all will die. Unless Christ returns before death, we all will die. Verse 2, for this is the end of all mankind.

And the wise lay it to heart. The wise go to the house of mourning. They face death. But death isn't the only hard thing that we ought to face.

We also need to face rebuke. We need to face hard words. Look at verse 5. 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. So those who go to the house of mirth, they do that to avoid thinking about death.

[26 : 03] But they also go there to avoid hearing hard words. We don't naturally like to be called out for our sin. I don't make it a habit to pursue the rebuke of other people in my life.

I don't regularly ask people, is there anything in my life that you see off? Any sin that you see bubbling to the surface? I don't want to invite rebuke and I'm certainly not eager to receive hard words uninvited.

It's one thing to go to somebody and say, do you see something in my life that I should change to be more like Christ? It's another thing if that person just comes to me and says, Colin, I've seen this in your life. And yet, God says it's a good thing to hear rebuke.

Just like it's a good thing to think about death. Face hard things. Face hard words. Don't avoid it by listening to the song of fools. Don't avoid it with the laughter of fools.

Face it. Because it will make you think about things that matter. Like your character. Like your sanctification. Like your growth and looking more like Christ.

[27 : 12] You fill your life with the song of fools and the laughter of fools. You'll have a good time, but you will have nothing to show for it. We don't really talk about thorns crackling under a pot in our culture.

Like, it's not really a bad thing in my mind. It's not really like a thing. I don't know if you've ever used that as an illustration to talk about thorns crackling under a pot. But you could figure out it's not useful. It's not profitable.

Crackling thorns under a pot. They're an annoyance. They're just an empty, useless activity. And so, the teacher is telling us, don't waste your time listening to the songs and the laughter and the merriment of fools at the expense of the rebuke of the wise.

Which is easier? To go to a ball game and to sing Take Me Out to the Ball Game with a bunch of strangers? Or to hear your spouse or your close friend tell you the ways that you still need to put off the old man?

Ways that you could still kill sin in your life? Now, going to a ball game is fine. I love baseball. I'm probably the only person here. I love baseball. Enjoying pleasure in this life, it's a good thing.

[28 : 20] If there was ever a book that promoted pleasure, it's Ecclesiastes. Eat and drink and find enjoyment in your toil. Eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry Heart! Enjoy life with the wife whom you love!

God, speaking through the teacher, extols the pleasures of life as a gift from God. But he also is telling us don't enjoy those pleasures in an attempt to avoid and distract yourself from the hard realities of life.

Wisdom says we ought to willingly face those realities. So we face death, we face hard words, and finally we face difficult situations with patience when we would like to escape.

Verse 7 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.

[29 : 30] 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.

See we are naturally or maybe just I am but I think I can say we are naturally bent towards impatience. We're bent towards anger and frustration when faced with the harsh realities of life.

We see oppression we see wrongdoing we see sin around us and we respond foolishly. We say things like remember the good old days and the teacher says nostalgia will deceive you.

You may think things were better in the past but that's because we usually don't remember the past clearly. We naturally view it through rose colored glasses. We forget how equally difficult and sin filled and painful the past was to the present.

and even if it was better in the past the teacher is saying what good will that do to talk about things that have already come. So don't try to escape the harsh realities of life by dwelling on the past.

[30 : 41] The teacher says that we face those harsh realities with patience. The fool becomes angry. The fool becomes impatient. The fool becomes proud. The fool sits around and just thinks on the past and all of this God says is devoid of wisdom which is why he says that wisdom is such a good thing.

We need it. It's an advantage to us. Those who possess wisdom are protected from foolishly engaging with difficult realities in life. Dealing with a difficult neighbor or co-worker or family member.

Ask God to keep you from foolishly engaging with anger or pride. Ask God to keep you from wanting to escape by just thinking about how good things were before that difficult situation arrived.

Ask God to give you wisdom and how to deal patiently with whoever or whatever you're facing. Because ultimately all of the hard things we face whether it be situations we'd rather escape or harsh words we don't want to hear or the reality of death we'd not like to think about all of these sorrow producing realities that we want to avoid come from the hand of God.

Verse 13 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 may not find out anything that will be after him.

[32 : 13] so what God has done man cannot undo we can't thwart the hand of God we can't dispute with one stronger than us the more words the more vanity God gives the day of prosperity and the day of adversity all that we know and experience is under the sovereign control of God and that should be a comfort to us because if anything were to be able to slip outside of God's purview that gets pretty scary if anything gets by God and is somehow outside of his control that that's a scary thought because all that comes to us has been vetted by God like like when Satan's attack against Job it was vetted by God anything that comes to me that that God has allowed I can trust that God because he is perfectly good and perfectly loving and perfectly wise he knows best and so

I want everything to fall within his sovereign arms I am thankful that that is true that is a comfort knowing that God is in control and working even the most difficult hard to understand circumstances of my life for good of your life for good if you are in Christ and so the teacher concludes here and he says that all we experience in life the day of prosperity and the day of adversity all of it comes from God well how then should we respond we rest in him we trust him we find our refuge in him how do we think and respond to adversity we remember our position and when we remember our position we can face hard things and as we face hard things we can rest in our good God the fool runs from adversity the fool ignores hardship and difficulty and sadness but

God says there's a better way there's a better way to think and respond to things in life that distress us and ultimately it's to entrust ourselves to him we rest in him we humbly submit ourselves to him and trust that he will never let us down because he has our good at heart now what God defines as good oftentimes is not what I think of as good and what God thinks it looks like to never let us down may not be what we would naturally think it looks like to not be let down but that's why the teacher has bookended this not God we don't know what's best for us remember the question from chapter 6 verse 12 for who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life the implied answer we don't know but God does and what God gives us the good that

God brings into our lives it might look a lot less pleasant than we would like things like death and hard all of that we probably not characterize as good opportunities to grow we work hard to avoid anything that might be difficult or uncomfortable or distressing do you know who didn't work hard to avoid those things Jesus Christ he didn't work hard to avoid death in fact the book of Luke says that he set his face to go to Jerusalem what awaited him in Jerusalem the cross he's drawing from the language from the book of Isaiah describes the servant of the Lord as one who set his face like flint Jesus did that he set his face to go to the cross how else did Isaiah characterize this suffering servant a man of sorrows!

and acquainted with grief and yet this man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief he took our sorrows upon himself he took our sin upon himself he didn't avoid the sorrow of life he faced it read his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane he entrusted himself to a faithful judge he entrusted himself to his father he didn't avoid the sorrow of life he faced it and he faced it for us and consider what good came from that joy abounds in Christ for those who trust in him I don't know all of your stories here tonight but if you haven't trusted in Christ there is no greater joy than can be found with him pleasures forevermore are found at the father's right hand and Jesus it's in him that we find those pleasures he died on the cross you trust in him you can have those pleasures the eternal life with the father an eternity of joy and delight and pleasure that we can share with him and so let's submit ourselves to

[37 : 38] God let's face hard things in life remembering our savior who did that for us and let's exercise wisdom by trusting God because he will always do what is good for us and he will always do what brings him glory let's pray together father god it's a sobering thought that life is difficult that we face adversity and yet lord what what a comfort it is to us that we can entrust ourselves to you that we can find our hope and our peace and our comfort in you and so pray lord that you would help us this week as we enter into another week as we face difficulty in life that we would remember you are god we are not and we can submit ourselves to you so help us to that end by your grace help us to remember your son who faced sorrow who faced death who did that for us help us to rejoice in him he is our joy he is our delight he is the one in whom we now are heirs of the riches of heaven and it's in his name we pray amen