

In this chapter, Solomon shares with us some statements of wisdom he has learned during his search for the meaning of life. In many of these statements he contrasts various pairs of opposites, such as the day you die versus the day you were born, mourning versus feasting, sorrow versus laughter, and so on. His choice of which of the pair is more beneficial isn't always what we would expect.

1 A good name *is* better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.

“A good name is better than precious [good; valuable; beneficial] ointment [oil]” – Ointment refers to oil used for medicinal purposes, and the word “precious” refers to the healing nature of the oil, which is the likely reason for its desirability. A good reputation can be of greater benefit to a person than soothing ointment.

“and the day of death than the day of one's birth” – The context of having a good name implies that Solomon is saying that a man who dies with a good reputation no longer has to work to maintain it. He can no longer tarnish the reputation that took a lifetime to build. The labor of building a good reputation was still in the future on the day of his birth.

2 *It is* better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that *is* the end of all men; and the living will lay *it* to his heart.

It is better for people to attend a funeral than a banquet. At a funeral they are reminded that death comes to all and that they should prepare for it. Preparation for death is typically the last thing on people's mind at a banquet.

3 Sorrow *is* better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. 4 The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.

“Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better” – Sorrow forces us to be serious and learn from reality while laughter typically causes us to ignore reality. What we learn through sadness causes us to be better prepared for the future.

“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” – The wise will dwell on the things that cause us to mourn in order to learn and be better prepared for the future, while fools ignore these things because they would rather laugh than face reality.

5 *It is* better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. 6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so *is* the laughter of the fool: this also *is* vanity.

“It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools” – It is good to hear a rebuke coming from someone who knows what they are talking about since we can learn from it. The wisdom gained from such rebukes, though they may be unpleasant, is preferable to listening to songs of fools pertaining to things of little value, from which we learn nothing.

“For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool” – The laughter of a fool is nothing but sound and has no more meaning than the crackling sound of thorns burning in a fire over which you are cooking a pot of food.

“this also is vanity [vapor]” – The sounds made by fools are no more substantial or significant than a vapor that quickly dissipates.

7 Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.

This verse shows how that both adversity and prosperity can tempt even a wise man to abandon his wisdom and morals.

“Surely oppression maketh a wise [skillful; shrewd; prudent] man mad [to make a fool of; to make into a fool]” – A wise man might be tempted to “fight fire with fire” when he is being oppressed and respond in similar manner to which he is being treated. Such a response is unacceptable to God and is unwise (**Rom. 12:17** “Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men”; **1 Th. 5:15** “See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men”).

“and a gift destroyeth the heart” – The gift mentioned here is a bribe which destroys the integrity of the person who accepts it. Rather than being a man who stands on truth and righteousness, this person has made himself available to the highest bidder.

8 Better *is* the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: *and* the patient in spirit *is* better than the proud in spirit.

“Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof” – There are benefits of being at the end of a project that cannot be enjoyed at the beginning, such as the satisfaction that it has been accomplished and the use of the finished product. This is preferable to the beginning of the project, when the work and potential problems are still ahead and a successful conclusion is still in question.

“and the patient [slow to anger] in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” – Those who are slow to anger are better able to remain in control of themselves and of their circumstances. The proud, on the other hand, believe everything should be done as they desire and thus easily become angry and lose control of themselves and their ability to reason. No one can think clearly when they have lost their temper. In fact, the definition of the expression “to lose your temper” means that you have lost control of your emotions.

9 Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

Continuing the idea started at the end of v. 8, Solomon advises us to always keep our tempers in check because being “hasty” (quick) to become angry is a characteristic of fools. The word “resteth” means “to remain; to reside.” Anger always resides inside of fools and it can quickly come to the surface with little provocation.

10 Say not thou, What is *the cause* that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this.

It seems we have a tendency to think fondly of “the good old days,” as if they were carefree and without the problems that we have today. Solomon tells us that it is unwise to ask ourselves why things were better in the past than today. Although they may have been different from the problems we have today, the past had its problems as well. It has been said that longing for “the good old days” comes from a combination of a bad memory and a good imagination, and often this is true.

11 Wisdom *is* good with an inheritance: and *by it there is* profit to them that see the sun. 12 For wisdom *is* a defence, and money *is* a defence: but the excellency of knowledge *is, that* wisdom giveth life to them that have it.

“Wisdom is good with an inheritance: and by it there is profit [advantage] to them that see the sun” – Inheriting money or property is certainly an advantage to “them that see the sun” (those who are living). However, it is only an advantage when used wisely. There have been people who have won the lottery only to be in worse shape financially a few years later because they did not use the money wisely. Their “inheritance” was not an advantage to them because they did not also have wisdom.

“For wisdom is a defence [shadow; shade], and money is a defence” – Like a shade can protect you from the hot sun, wisdom and money can each serve as a “defense” (shade) to protect you from the problems of life.

“but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it” – The most excellent thing we can know is to recognize that wisdom has the ability to give life to those who possess it. Money alone cannot do it unless combined with wisdom.

13 Consider the work of God: for who can make *that* straight, which he hath made crooked? 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.

“Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?” – Solomon urges us to recognize the hand of God in our lives and the lives of others. Why do we think we can change what God has done? When we see something that is “crooked” we naturally want to correct it and make it “straight.” However, can we truly alter or “fix” what God has done?

“In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider [observe; pay attention]” – If God has allowed prosperity in our lives, we should appreciate and enjoy it. However, when adversity comes to us, we should pay attention and try to discern what God is doing. He may be giving us an opportunity to grow spiritually or to repent of our sin through this adversity.

“God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end [reason; purpose] that man should find nothing after him” – The idea of something being “against” something else is an old expression meaning that these things are near or beside one another. Solomon is saying that God places both prosperity and adversity in our lives as He sees fit. The reason that He does this is so that we cannot predict or guide what will happen in the future. God wants us to place our future in His hands and not in our own plans.

15 All *things* have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just *man* that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* that longeth *his life* in his wickedness.

Solomon had seen everything that you could think of in his empty life. For instance, he has seen good men who lived shortened lives and wicked people who live long lives. We would naturally think that God would allow righteous people to live long lives and shorten the lives of the wicked.

16 Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? 17 Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?

“Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” – Solomon’s frustration that righteous people can live short lives makes him uncharacteristically conclude that it’s pointless to work hard all your life to be excessively righteous or wise. Many commentators believe Solomon is referring to self-righteousness and wisdom that is not quite genuine.

“Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?” – Solomon addresses the opposite extreme: being excessively wicked or foolish will likely shorten your life.

18 *It is* good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all.

“It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand” – It is good if we take this advice (v. 16-17) to heart and always live by it.

“for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all” – People who fear God will not rely on their self-righteousness nor will they be overly wicked. As a result they will “come forth” (escape) the destruction and shortened life he has warned us about.

19 Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty *men* which are in the city. 20 For *there is* not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

“Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city” – Solomon gives us more context for vs. 16-17 by not dismissing the value of wisdom. He admits that wisdom is worth more than ten mighty men defending a city.

“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” – Solomon also makes the point that even the most just and righteous people on earth are still imperfect sinners.