

Adversity in Perspective

Eccl 6:10-7:14 (text)

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 16 August 2020, 10:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

You may remember that I once told you that my mother died young (at the age of 57) of a very horrible disease – the motor-neuron disease. (By the way, it would have been her birthday yesterday. She would have turned 97. The same age as Mr Arie Groenewegen). Well, the first time we became aware of my mother's illness was when she felt a paralysis in her toes, then in her feet & ankles. Then this disease progressed to her knees and hips. Next, her fingers and hands got paralysed – then her arms. Then her neck and tongue got lame – to the point that we had to mash all her food, and patiently spoon-feed her while, every now and then, wiping away her tears.

Within three years after she was diagnosed with this illness, the only parts of her body that she could still move were her eyelids. And so, whenever she wanted to convey something to us, she would blink her eyes!

Eventually, also the muscles between her ribs (muscles that are vital for breathing) were so paralysed that she died from lack of oxygen.

Well, those four years of acute suffering – they were, as Eccl 7:14 says, real “days of adversity” (NASB) – real *bad days* (NIV); yes, real *hard times* (NLT).²

Question: How does one handle days of adversity?

You see, about one or two months after Mum's death, my Dad told me, “I cannot understand how a loving God could allow so much suffering for such a godly person as her!”

Clearly, my Dad (even though he was a believer) did not handle Mum's hardship well! And we noticed this all through her suffering!

But, then again, how *does* one handle adversity when you're in the thick of it?

You see, since about one year ago, I have now-and-then noticed a few vehicles here in Wainuiomata and Lower Hutt – cars that have a real horrible sticker on the rear window, a sticker that uses the “F” word against cancer; yes, a sticker by which the owner of that car has done his/her best to curse cancer which causes so much hardship!

Yet, hardship/adversity is part of human life on earth – common to all human beings, even to those who believe in Jesus Christ, and belong to God!

Many of our congregation members have suffered some measure of adversity!

Perhaps some of us are going through adversity at this very time!

Question: How does one (how does the believer) handle adversity?

Well, our text gives us three main points...

- Foreordained
- The Good Side of Adversity
- Acceptance

¹ I'm greatly indebted to the wonderful exegetical work and great guidance provided by GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2010. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. pp. 157-177

² יוֹם רָעָה, literally means “day of evil/misery/distress/injury”

Foreordained

My brother & sister, in chapter 6:10 the ecclesiast (teacher) says, “**Whatever exists** (NASB, NIV) – **whatever has come to be** (ESV) – **has already been named**³...”

What does this mean: “...**whatever has come to be has already been named**”?

Well, does this not mean that whatever happens in the present (*also your & my adversity*) was already named – yes, *foreordained* by God in the past!?

And look, is this not totally in sync with Eph 1:11 which says that God “...**works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will**”?⁴

Perhaps you say, “But how on earth could a good, sinless & loving God have foreordained evil?”

My brother & sister, even though God is not the Author of evil, He had to decree the existence of evil, for how else would we have understood what good is if there was no evil.

It’s like trying to understand what light is without ever having experienced darkness!

Besides, for man to be able to love God from the heart – a heart that has been *moved* to love Him – there had to be the real possibility of evil; yes, the possibility for man to hate God.

Otherwise man’s love for God would be no love at all, but only cold, pre-programmed, one-option-only obedience!

Thus, although God is sinless and not the author of evil, He had to decree/foreordain the existence of evil!

And so, Eccl 6:10 is absolutely biblical when it says, “**Whatever exists** (yes, **whatever has come to be** [ESV]) **has already been named**...” God called it by name before the world began!

So, look, in contrast to *God* who is sovereign in all He does, what is *man*?

Well, Eccl 6:10 continues, saying: “...**and it is known what man is**...”

Well, what *is* man?

My brother & sister, the Hebrew word for man (human being) is “adam,” and “adam” comes from the Hebrew word for “ground/earth/dust.”⁵

See? See why Ps 103:14 says, “**He knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust**”?

My brother & sister, can you see what the ecclesiast is getting at?

As v. 10 says, “Weak man (made out of dust) **cannot** in his adversity **dispute with Him** (i.e. God) **who is stronger⁶ than he** (man).⁷

Look, is that not what Job discovered?⁸

³ נִקְרָא A Nif'al Participle Masculine Singular of קָרָא *call, proclaim, read* – also *name* (cf. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (pp. 894–895). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁴ Eph 1:11 ***In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*** (Emphasis mine).

⁵ cf. Gn 2:7 which even makes this link: “**then the Lord God formed the man** (‘adam) **of dust from the ground** (‘adamah) **and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.**”

⁶ תְּקוּיָה (strong/mighty) is a rare Hebrew word – it appears only here in all of the OT.

⁷ וְלֹא יִיבָּקֵל לְלִי עִם שְׂהֵתְקוּיָה מִמֶּנּוּ:

⁸ cf. Jb 42:2-6 “**I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.** ³ **Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?** **Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.** ⁴ **‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’**

⁵ **I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;** ⁶ **therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes**” (ESV).

And did not also Isaiah discover this? Hear Is 45:9 “**Woe to him who strives with Him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to Him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’**” (ESV)

Of course, also the Apostle Paul came to the same conclusion, i.e. that a clay pot cannot complain to its maker, “What are you making?” For example, “Why haven’t you given me any handles?”⁹

So can no mere creature dispute with his/her Creator!

Arguing with God does not help, for God has sovereignly set the times: “**a time to be born, and a time to die; ...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance**” (Eccl. 3:2,4).

So, as 6:11 says, the more words the person in adversity throws at God, the more *futility* (NASB) there is, i.e. the more wasted *breath*!¹⁰

Why?

Well, as v.12 insinuates: *Only God knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his fleeting life on earth – days which pass like a shadow!*¹¹

My brother & sister, it’s clear: God has foreordained your/my good days *and* our days of adversity – and in such a way, that you/I cannot even tell what will happen as soon as a second from now (or as 6:12 says, “...**what will be after us under the sun**”).¹²

Well, so far re Point 1: “Foreordained.”

Perhaps you say, “But if even our adversities have been inescapably foreordained, how can we then deal with them?”

Well, that brings us to point 2...

The Good Side of Adversity

My brother & sister, I’m sure none of us really likes adversity. You & I won’t deliberately seek out hardship – never!

We cringe at adversity! So, it’s just as well we don’t know what’s waiting for us in the future!¹³

We hate adversity!

But look what the ecclesiast/teacher now does in 7:1-12! He gives us a series of proverbs (12 in total!!) to point out – can you believe it? – one *good* side of adversity!

You say, “But that’s crazy!” “What *good* side could adversity possibly have?”

Well, the ecclesiast’s point is that adversity forces us all to think further than just our *current* circumstances – yes, it forces us to even think about the far future and our eventual death!

And then – *if we are wise* (repeat) – we will arrange our lives in such a way that we will reverence God (Eccl. 12:13), **for God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil** (Eccl. 12:14)!

⁹ Rm 9:20 “**But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’**” (ESV)

¹⁰ A mere huff & puff (*breath*)! That’s, after all, what the Hebrew word *hevel* (הֶבֶל) literally means!

¹¹ Eccl 6:12 “**For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?**”

¹² Not just 6:12, but also 7:14

¹³ cf. again 6:12b “...**For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?**” (ESV), and 7:14c “...**so that man may not find out anything that will be after him**” (ESV).

Besides, if you make good use of your adversity (if you handle it correctly, i.e. in awe and reverence of God), you will enjoy “higher living,” living which is pleasing to God and even a blessing to yourself as it will preserve your life (as Eccl 7:12 says)!¹⁴
But (I’ll say it again) *you must react wisely to your adversity!*

What’s the “spin off” of reacting wisely to your adversities? Well, that you will – as bonus – also grow in character; yes, even to the point of earning for yourself a good name – a good name before God and man, which as 7:1 says, *is better than precious ointment*, for – after all – one can *buy* ointment, even *precious* ointment, but *you can never buy a good name!!* So, protect it, and react wisely to adversity!

Turn adversity into a time of spiritual growth!

Yes, let your adversity move you to absolute awe & reverence before God! And then – as a result of that – change! Become a better person!¹⁵

See? See how, in this regard, a death-day (as 7:1 says) – yes, a day on which a loved one passes away – can be better (be of greater benefit) to you than a day of birth, i.e. a day on which a new baby is born into the family!?

After all, is it not true that every time a loved one passes away, it does something to you/me? And what is that *something*?

Well, that, unless the Lord Jesus returns soon, one day it will be your/my turn to pass away¹⁶ and meet our Creator before whom we’ll have to give account!?

No wonder the ecclesiast then says in v.2 as much as: it’s better to go to a funeral than to a party,¹⁷ for, says he in v.3, *sorrow is better than laughter*, in the sense that, *if you receive sorrow wisely, it will teach you something of higher value*; yes, of your relationship with your Maker!

No wonder v.3 says that *sadness of face* has one good thing about it, i.e. it makes the *heart*¹⁸ *glad* even amidst adversity!

My brother & sister what else is our passage saying but exactly the same as Ps 90:12 “... *teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*”! (ESV).

See why v.4 says as much as: *The heart of the wise is at the funeral (house of mourning), but the heart of fools is at the party (the house of pleasure)*?¹⁹

And think well with me: Is this not so true? Which party – and I don’t want to make *all* joyful celebrations bad – but, which house of frivolous *pleasure/joy*²⁰ has ever taught anyone an awe (a reverence) of God?

But adversity is a school of learning... *for the wise*; why also v.5 says “*It is better to accept rebuke from a wise man than to take praise from fools*” – from those whose lives are empty & without God!

Why?

¹⁴ cf. 7:12c to which we will come to in the conclusion.

¹⁵ As 7:2 says, “*The living will take this* (that adversity has a good side) *to heart!*”

¹⁶ cf. v.2b “...*for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart*” (ESV).

¹⁷ v.2a “*It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting...*” (ESV).

¹⁸ The control centre of man; yes, that part of your psyche from where springs the fountain of life cf. Prov 4:23 “*Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life*” (NASB).

¹⁹ Eccl 7:4 *The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure* (NASB).

²⁰ That’s what the Hebrew word *simhāh* (שִׂמְחָה) literally means.

Well, as v.6 says, *the laughter of fools is like the quick-burning, spark-making thorns in the fire under a cooking pot* – lots of sparks & noise, but it is soon spent!

My brother & sister, do you & I consider ourselves not fools, but wise?²¹

Well, v. 9 tells us that, in times of adversity, it is the fool who gets angry, but not so the wise, for they (the wise) see adversity as a schoolhouse – yes, as training – in reverence of God!

And, going by v.10, the wise person will not complain about his/her current adversity, saying: “I long for the good old days! **“Why were the former days better than these?”**”

No, he/she who is wise, will see the *good* part of adversity, i.e. that it can bring the wise closer to God!!

Well, at this point someone might want to ask: “But what advice did our Lord Jesus give as to how we should handle adversity?”

The answer is: Jesus (THE “Ecclesiast”/Teacher) gave exactly the same advice as the ecclesiast/teacher.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount (Lk 6:20-23)?

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (See the adversity?)

²¹ **“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.**

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

²² **“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!**

²³ **Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.** ²²

Also remember Mt 5:4

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Perhaps you ask: “But did Christ then teach a social gospel: that *adversity* – and not the *sacrifice of Jesus Himself on the cross* – makes us right with God?”

No, my brother & sister, Jesus did not teach that one has to be poor in order to be right with God.

But *this* is true: that those who suffer adversity *are more likely* to humble themselves before God; to cry out to Him, and find the good side of adversity, i.e. that adversity is God’s instrument to make them stand in awe of Him!

And, in the language of the Ecclesiast, those who humbly receive adversity as coming from God – well, it is they who are wise!

And it’s this wisdom about which Eccl 7:11 & 12 say that it is like an inheritance,²³ i.e. like land that you have inherited and now own – land that can be worked; land that can bring an income which can keep you alive!

²¹ Well, be careful, for here is a sad reality: v.7 indicates that even wise people are capable of falling for extortion & bribes! And so, one will never know how well even the wise have conducted/behaved themselves until, as v. 8 says, a particular transaction/deal has come to its final end. Thus v.8 belongs to v.7 in the sense that, because of the danger that even the wise can be sidetracked in life, the end/outcome of a matter/deal is better than it’s beginning (cf. Greidanus, *ibid*:174).

²² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Lk 6:20–23). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

²³ The NIV’s rendering makes more sense: ***Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. ¹²Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.***

Yes, the wisdom which makes good use of adversity is like money! And, yes, money cannot buy all things. Yet, in times of hardship money *can keep you alive!*

Well, that's exactly what *wisdom* in times of adversity does to you. As v.12 says: "...***this wisdom protects the lives of its possessors!***"²⁴ – ***preserves the life of him who has it!***²⁵

Did you hear that?

This wisdom – wisdom which uses adversity well; yes, as a means to reverence God – such wisdom gives *life* to its possessor!

See why Christ once said, "***And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the one and only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent***"? (Jn 17:3).

See why He also said: ***I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,*** ²⁶***and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die...***"?

Perhaps someone will say, "But why can't God do something conclusive against hardship?" "Why can't God cancel all cancers, motor-neuron diseases and wars?"

My brother & sister, God has begun the killing of all adversity/hardship – and to do that, He even *got His hands dirty* in our sin-marred world! Yes, remember how He has crushed His very own Son to make you & me new; and to, eventually, bring in the new heaven and earth in which there will be no hardship/adversity – no pain and no tears!²⁶

What's more, to prove to you and me that He can do this and complete what He has begun, God raised Christ from the dead! See the proof of God's ability and plan to totally annihilate adversity!?

Well, this was point 2: "The Good Side of Adversity!"

Here is now point 3...

Acceptance

Question: How will you handle this adversity?

Will you/I doubt in God? Worse: Will we get angry with God?

Will you question God's goodness & love, like my Dad did at the time of my mother's suffering & death?

And why was my Dad's faith in God so much shaken?

Well, my brother & sister, I cannot see with God's eyes, but this I can safely say. Dad did not handle Mum's hardship well, firstly, because, let's face it, mum's illness was horrible!

Secondly, Mum's illness started just after she and Dad had moved from a small town to the big city of Pretoria and had not yet settled into their new church! And although I'm relieved to say that, near the end of his life, my Dad did walk more closely with God, I think that at the time before and during Mum's suffering, my dad was quite a nominal Christian.

And let's face it: It takes more than a nominal Christian to, by grace through faith, accept your God-sent adversity on His terms and for His glory!

²⁴ NASB

²⁵ ESV – Hebrew: הַחֲכִימָה תַחַתֶּיהָ בְּעֵלְיָהּ:

²⁶ Cf. Rv 21:1-4, ***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."***

And what are God's terms? Well that you & I will accept that *all* things that happen to you & me – yes even *adversity* – have been foreordained by God;²⁷ and, seeing that you & I cannot argue with God,²⁸ neither can we make straight that which we think He has made crooked;²⁹ and seeing that God works our adversity for our eternal good and has proved that by first crushing His very own Son for us and then raised Him from the dead as proof – yes, seeing all of these, what will be our best attitude?

Will it not be to, in faith, do what v. 14 says: “***In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other...***”?

And remember also this: that nothing – not even death – “***can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!***”³⁰

AMEN (2,815 words excluding footnotes)

²⁷ cf. 6:10

²⁸ cf. 6:10b

²⁹ cf. 7:13 “***Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?***”

³⁰ cf. Rm 8 especially verse 39.