



## Feast or funeral?

***"The day of death is better than the day of birth."***

**Ecclesiastes 7:1b**

Our first reaction to these words of the Preacher might be one of alarm and perhaps confusion. The day of our death is better than the day of our birth? We celebrate birthdays. It is precisely then that we experience thankfulness, the joy of life, and companionship. But we mourn the death of our loved ones. With funerals there is separation, loss, fatigue, often frustration, and even anger. How can the Preacher say that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth?

To answer that question we need to see the connection with the first part of this verse. In order to discern more sharply the point of comparison in this verse, we may translate it like this, "As a good name is better than good oil, so the day of death is better than the day of birth." It is true that the emphasis is not on the first half of verse one. Nevertheless, it serves to set up the second half. The point is: both elements are good – name and oil, death and birth – but one is better than the other.

The oil (NIV: perfume) was extracted from olives. These grew in abundance in Israel; Moses in Deuteronomy 8 calls Canaan *"a land of olive trees."* Olive oil was a necessity of life in biblical times. It was a precious commodity and as such became the symbol for prosperity and abundance.

The Preacher uses that truth in order to vividly make his point that even better than precious oil is "a good name." By that he means an unblemished reputation. Someone who loves God with all heart and soul and strength and loves his neighbour as himself – that person has a good name. Now just as a good reputation is better than good oil, so one's day of death is better than one's birthday. Thereby the Preacher is not declaring the day of birth to be worthless, but by this comparison he goads us on to what is still greater: evaluating and leading our life from the viewpoint of death, of the end that awaits us all.

We are inclined by nature to disagree with the Preacher. Did God not create us with a love for life? Is death not the last enemy? Instead of dwelling on death while we are in our prime, we should distance ourselves from that imminent reality as long as we can.

Why does the Holy Spirit counsel us in this way? Because someone who judges and defines his life solely according to his birthday says, "It doesn't really matter how I live. I'm going to receive what has been appointed for me anyway – prosperity or adversity, good or evil – so I may as well make the best of life. Death comes soon enough." Whereas he who goes through life bearing in mind *the end* (that death is the wages of his sin) realizes, "It *does* matter how I live my life, because God has appointed for man to die and after that comes the judgment. Therefore I will enjoy every gift of God ... but then always in the light of his Word."

Although the thought of the final judgment is not explicitly mentioned in this verse, it certainly underlies it! For why would he counsel us to be aware of the end, if death were merely the annihilation of body and soul? The preacher tells us in the closing chapters,

*"Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment."*

(Ecclesiastes 11:9)

Death is not the end. There will be a calling to account before the supreme Judge of heaven and earth. And he will pass sentence on what we have accomplished *"under the sun,"* on everything we have said or done on this earth. He will do that not according to some unknown law book, but

according to the ten words of the covenant which he has given us. Consequently, one who lives his life out of that perspective will strive to *"fear God and keep his commandments."* He will offer himself as a living sacrifice of thankfulness to the Father *through* the Son *in the fellowship* of the Spirit.

Keep in mind that we have to look at this text through the window of the entire book. The Preacher was a child of Abraham, an heir of the promises of God. Also in his heart God had put eternity so that he longed for the coming city, the city with foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God. He sees, above all, the necessity for the promised Messiah to come and make all things new. That's evident throughout this book when the Preacher asks not "how" the change will come about, but "who" will accomplish it. Without the promised Messiah everything will remain futile. Ecclesiastes is a passionate cry for the Man who is wiser than Solomon. That's why the author has seen everything so clearly. From out of this world the city which endures forever will never be established. It must come from above the sun, from God.

This proverb remains pertinent for our life in the covenant as well. We are on the same path of God's salvation as the Preacher, only we are much further along. We live after the fullness of time for which the Preacher longed. Yes, there are still similarities between our time and his. We also groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Nevertheless, because greater grace has been revealed to us, we are called to live in an even greater awareness of the coming judgment. For the New Testament *"Israel of God,"* how much more meaningful are the words *"Better is the day of death..."* What the Old Testament church saw dimly, we see in the full brightness of the noonday sun. Jesus Christ is the *"firstborn from the dead."* He has taken away the sting from death. Death does not represent loss for us, but everlasting gain. On our deathbed we are closer to the full redemption of Christ Jesus than when we lie in our crib. As full as he fills the cup of life while we travel toward the city with foundations, our covenant God keeps the best wine till last. He makes the end of a thing better than its beginning.

John Ludwig

© 2014

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)