

A good name

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[0 : 00] Let us turn now to the chapter we read, the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 7, and the first verse.

Ecclesiastes chapter 7, verse 1. A good name is better than precious ointment, on the day of death, than the day of one's birth.

Now we'll get back to our studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. Broken them off now for the past three weeks. And we noticed that in looking at some of the passages in the first six chapters, that the writer was taken up generally with his search for the life that is worth living.

And in the course of that search, he has told us how he tried so many things and went along so many avenues.

But yet the conclusion of all his searching was that the life that was sought, the life that was lived in this world, considered as a foundation for human happiness, purely in terms of the wisdom of this world, that life was summed up with the one word, vanity.

[1 : 39] Along the way, glimpses were given us of the life which is worth living. A life which he sums up at the very end of this book, in the well-known words of, in these well-known words, fear God and keep his commandments.

This is the whole duty of man. In this chapter, he gives us what amounts to really a series of proverbs.

And they have their own impact, their own particular fast. He is concerned here mainly to show us the better part, the life that is better than any other life, the attitude and the emphasis, these things that are better than other things.

And this first verse brings before us the life, the kind of life that men ought to consider as their, as the shorter Catholicism puts it, as their chief end in this world.

What a person ought to be, the name that a person ought to have, a good name is better than precious ointment and the day of death better than the day of one's birth.

[3 : 26] I want to look very briefly and simply with you at the two thoughts that the verse brings before us, the good name that is better than anything and secondly the day of death that is better than the day of one's birth.

First of all we look at the value of a good name. Now this is contrasted with precious ointment.

And you know of course as you read the Bible that you gather this that precious ointment had a very special place in the thinking of the people in those days.

It had a very special place in the religious life of people. It had a special place in the home life of people.

People would spend an awful lot of money just to gather together a small jar of precious ointment which was kept in the house, stored in the house for a person's burial.

[4 : 42] It was very often used to embalm bodies. It was also as we know precious ointment was used as a token of respect in the anointing of special guests.

If a person or a special guest visited a house the token of the householder's respect was the breaking of the box of the jar of ointment and pouring it over a person's head.

It gave off a very fragrant odour. You remember the very well known instance in the New Testament where now Lord for example was anointed. Remember the day he went into the house of Simon the leper.

Simon the Pharisee rather. And he was anointed there by a woman who owed an awful lot to the Lord for his gracious and merciful and saving dealings with her.

And the Pharisee remissed it with her for wasting this, remissed it with the Lord for allowing this woman to waste the ointment. Remember what the Lord said.

[5 : 46] I came into your house and you did not anoint my head with oil but she did. That was precious ointment. If you go back to the book of Exodus and the book of Leviticus you will find that the tabernacle, that was the place of worship, what we would call today the church that was erected in Moses' day at the command of God, see that thou doest all things according to the path and so to thee in the mount.

You remember that God gave specific instructions to Moses to anoint, to anoint with oil, with precious ointment the vessels, the furniture of the tabernacle.

The priests, the kings, the prophets were anointed into office with this precious ointment. And the ointment was symbolical of gifts bestowed upon people by the Lord symbolical of the Holy Spirit indwelling a person and equipping a person for service in the work of the Lord.

And when you consider the place there for that precious ointment had in Old Testament times then you will see the force of this comparison a good name is better than precious ointment.

This ointment which was so costly, so valuable, so indispensable in certain aspects of the lives of people contrasted with it is a good name.

[7 : 18] And it comes out favorably in the comparison a good name is better than precious ointment. Now, the question that concerns us is this.

What is a good name? What is it? Well, let us look first of all at something that it isn't.

The word that is used is the word good, not great. Great. Not having the appearance of being good, but being really good.

In the past few weeks, for example, a few weeks ago, connecting with our studies in the life of David in the morning, we noticed that there was one man in the history of Israel Israel, who to all intents and purposes was good and on the threshold of becoming great.

But that assessment was based upon man's judgment. That conclusion was based upon man's judgment, man's assessment of him. He was neither good nor great.

[8 : 30] The man was Saul, of course. You remember how God said to Samuel, not only reference to Saul, but reference to David's brethren. Men look on the outward appearance, but God looketh on the heart.

So whatever the word good may mean, whatever a good name may mean, it's a specific reference to a man's heart in his relationship with God.

Whatever else it means. We must take this with us. That there's something to say to us about a man's heart relationship with God.

Not what he may seem to be. Not what people judge him to be. But what he actually is inwardly between himself and God.

It doesn't mean that having a good name doesn't mean that you acquire the language of what we refer to as good people.

[9 : 30] We would call it today the language of the Christian and be able to speak as a Christian speaker. That doesn't of itself guarantee that I am a Christian. Even though I might be able to relate Christian experiences, talk about them and tell about them, I can gather that from a very close reading of the word of God and close reading of the word of God.

And I can amass a lot of information for myself and be able to present it to other people. Balaam, after all, was able to relate things that he received directly from God himself.

And that didn't make Balaam a good man and it didn't give him a good name either. It doesn't mean that a good name doesn't mean that I have to have a good position, an unhonored position, in the church of God on earth.

There were very eminent men in the church of God who had a name. There was a church referred to in Asia in the book of Revelation who had a name that it lived and it was dead.

It had acquired a reputation. But behind it, behind that facade, there was something wrong with the church.

[10 : 52] And after all, Judas Iscariot had a position of responsibility and honor amongst the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But that didn't make Judas a good man and didn't give him a good name. Having a good name doesn't mean that we are to look for the praise of men. It doesn't mean that we are to look for position among men.

It is possible to have, as I said, a great name without being good. As a matter of fact, in some circumstances it is easy to acquire greatness.

But greatness is fickle and at the end of the day worthless because greatness is often estimated by men in terms of the sin, in terms of the visible.

You remember how, for example, in connection with the story of the rich man and Lazarus, this is said to us in the New Testament, that which is highly esteemed by men is an abomination to the Lord.

[12 : 04] There was a man highly esteemed by his fellows, but he wasn't highly esteemed by God. And it's a frightening thought to think that you and I could be in certain situations highly esteemed by men and highly esteemed in Christian circles and by Christian people.

And yet, in the presence of God, who knows our lives could be an abomination to the Almighty. there is nothing more unsavoury than a person who seeks to acquire a position of acceptance as a Christian in the presence of man.

And who, when he's aware from the presence, is anything but a Christian who, in his dealings with his fellow man, brings the cause of Christ and the word of the Lord into the gutter and who finds because of his dealings with people, who finds, he might not find it, but others will find it, that this person who has such a great name is the means of bringing reproach upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

What we need then to know is, what we need is to have us a true and a real name that lives on, not in the presence of man, but in the presence of God.

This righteous man's memorial which shall prove to be everlasting as we've sung here in Psalm 112. This good name, whatever it is, must be real in the presence of God.

[13 : 59] Now the question, how do I acquire it? What is it to have a good name? Well, it implies this, as I said earlier, that our heart must be right with God.

Now, there's a beginning to this kind of life, to this kind of harsh relationship. It begins with the exercise of faith in the heart.

Whatever that's a good man is, then we have to say this about him. First of all, that he is a man who is a believer in the Lord Jesus. Now some people may say, well, really, that's stating the obvious.

Well, so be it. You've got to begin somewhere. And after all, you know what the theologians had the way that they put it, it is faith that unites us to Christ.

faith binds us to the Lord. And until you and I are united to the Lord in faith, whatever reputation we have in the presence of our fellows, we do not have the reputation of being a good man, woman, boy or girl in the presence of God.

[15 : 12] So we begin there. The good name that a person has and that a person leaves behind him in this world is the name that is given to him when he is united by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is in short a believer. And he continues to be a believer all his life. One aspect of the life of faith is that it is a life of obedience.

The initial act of faith is an act of obedience. God calls people in the gospel to believe the gospel. And that person becomes a servant of God by the act of faith.

And he continues in the service of God by a life of obedience, the obedience of faith to the demands of God upon him. Following from that, the person who has the good name is the person who has the grace of God in his heart.

Not just the grace of faith, but all the grace, are all the graces of God in his heart. Take Stephen, just now in the New Testament. There was a man of whom we are told that he was full of faith.

[16 : 29] He was a good man, a good man. He was a man who had faith in God, who had grace, who had the spirit of God, who was obedient to the demands of God.

And he had that good man. A good man is a man for whom God has done great things, in whom God is doing great things, and through whom God is doing great things.

it means, it implies that he has other things as well. A person with a good name is a person of piety, a person who has Christian conviction, Christian courage.

Man is known, a person is known for Christian, for example, Christian graces shine through in this person. We mentioned some of them, for example, the grace of love, faith, zeal, hospitality, passion of prayerfulness, passion who was known, for example, Barnabas, was it, who was known as the son of consolation, a person who does good to other people, a good name.

In short, the person in whose heart and life the Lord Jesus Christ reigns. And of that person it can be said what was said of Mary who anointed the Lord.

[18 : 00] Remember what the Lord Jesus said of her? Wherever he says the gospel is preached, this that she has done unto me will be told and it has been told to the centuries and will be told to the end of time.

Whatever is done in his name and for his sake lives on. that's what gives a person a good name. Something else about him, a person whose claims are backed up by the life which he lives, a life which generates esteem and confidence.

And it's important to remember this in an unbelieving world, in a hostile atmosphere, to recognize that we ought to be known according to the claims that we make.

Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, reminded them of this. They were living in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation. And he says, see that in the midst of that nation ye become known as people who are blameless, living a life that honors the Lord Jesus Christ.

The person shrugs his shoulder and says, well I don't care what society thinks about me. Isn't thinking in terms of what the New Testament says of the Christian. He ought to be concerned about what society thinks of him.

[19 : 24] He ought to see that the people amongst whom he lives, recognize him as a person who is living a life consistent with the claim and the profession that he makes.

A good name. Now let you and I remember this. This doesn't come easy to any one of us. We've got to work at this. Those of us who are believers, who are Christians, and it is only the Christian who can have this good name.

We've got to work at our Christianity. It's easy to acquire another name, another name. Even within the fold of the Christian church. It's easy to become known as something or somebody else.

Easy to become known as a troublemaker. Easy to become known as argumentative. Easy to become known as a critic.

Easy to become known as a I don't know what it means, but people speak of inconsistent Christian. I suppose I mean by it that the kind of person who professes to be a Christian doesn't live up to the profession that he makes.

[20 : 36] Easy to become known as a gossip, a gossip monger, a busy body in other men's affairs, purpose of all this trying into things that are none of his or her business.

Easy to acquire a name like that, and you know, and I know, there's no need to hide your, there's no sense in hiding your eyes from this. We all know that from time to time people acquire a name like that for these things.

You see, it's Burgess that people exactly says, they come into the church, I wish he said, they had never come in, they had gone somewhere else, but they come in, and they are known in the church, and outside the church, they have a name.

But not the name that this verse speaks of. And good name is the name, the character that a person acquires when he lives consistently according to the demands that are placed upon him by the Lord whom he serves.

And that Lord sees his heart, knows his life, and whatever reputation he may have in the presence of men, the great question is, what reputation do we have in the presence of God?

[22 : 02] The good name then, is better than precious ointment. And then there is this second strand to the same. The day of death is better than the day of one's birth.

birth. Someone said that there is nothing in the first half of this verse that prepares us for the body blow of the second half.

That the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. birth. Now, why is a day of one's death better than the day of one's birth?

Of course, it stands to reason that this speaks of a special type of person. He's speaking about the person, of course, who's got the good name. Well, for that person, his death day is better than his birth day.

that's what he says. Why is that person's death day better than his birth day? Well, for various reasons.

[23 : 12] His death day has more to tell us about him than his birth day. You see, when a person is born, all we know about that person is, well, he's born.

a birthday. We'll see about that in a minute. And, but when that person, when that same person dies, you see, assuming that that person has lived that number of years, you see, the day of his death, you're able to assess the life that he lived.

You could never do that the day he was born because you had the foggiest idea what kind of life he was going to live. How his life was going to turn out. And therefore, the lessons that I learned from a person's death day are more factual, more vital, and more meaningful.

Now, notice here the thrust of the text and the context. You see, the first six or seven verses, certainly the first six verses are taken up with a compass again of the, for example, the things that are better than other things.

Better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting or to a party. The end is better than the beginning. Sorrow is better than laughter.

[24 : 40] Sadness of countenance or faith is better than a smile on a person's face. And better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools.

So on. You see, there's the contrast. Now, this seems rather a mournful kind of a passage. But you know, you look at it. You look at it.

And see what it has to say to you. When a person, take a look at it like this, at a birth, when a child is born to word and parents and friends discover that the child is well and healthy, the mother is fine.

There's so much joy in the household. You can't describe the joy that is present when a child is born in these circumstances of the world.

No wonder the New Testament speaks of it so often. Speaks of the moment of joy and the thrill of it all. The child is born and everyone and everything is well.

[25 : 54] That's a time of excitement, a time of rejoicing. People then don't normally dwell on the brevity and the uncertainty and the solemnity of the life into which that child has been born.

People's hopes then run high for the child. their aspirations and their ambitions are almost boundless. No doubt pictures begin to room before the mind of what the child would be like and what the child would do.

But you see it's all so uncertain. Now he says, you compare that moment with going to the house of mourning or as he calls it here also the house of sorrow.

In these situations people tend to be more down to earth. People tend to be taken up more with the realities of the situation.

And people then are more impressionable, more rational. And they take things through in a better way.

[27 : 17] Someone said of the great psalm of human mortality, Psalm 90, he said of it, that psalm he says, puts it with majestic simplicity, considering a person's death, so teach us to number our days, that we may apply our heart unto us, or that we may get a wise heart.

One of the things he's saying here is this, that when people are confronted with death, and when people go to a house that has been visited by death, perhaps even your own house, that more wisdom is exercised in these situations, than is exercised in joyful, exciting situations, like at the birth of a child.

And I think that any one of us looking back will accept the truthfulness of that statement, will accept the wisdom of what he says here, that there are situations in your life, the most solemn situations, perhaps even the most heart-breaking situations, when your heart is more inclined to the exercise of wisdom, than at other situations.

things. Now, for one person, the day of death is better than the day of his birth.

What person? The person with the good name. The person whose faith is in the Lord Jesus. The person whose life has been lived in obedience to the commands and to the will of the Lord.

[29 : 10] The day of his death is better for that person than the day of his birth. Not for anybody else, only for that person. Not for the life of Judas Iscariot. The Bible says of him, it was better for him had he never been born.

That's an awful, awful statement. The man who betrayed the Lord Jesus, it had been better for him had he never been born. And yet, I've no doubt about this, that the day he was born, his parents were as joyful as anybody else.

And perhaps harbored hopes like the other parents for their sons. And yet it was written of their child, better for him, had he never been born.

What a fearful statement that is. It wasn't true of Pilate that the day of his death was better than the day of his birth, because after all, he will forever be known as the man of whom the creed says, Jesus Christ was crucified, crucified under the hands of Pontius Pilate.

Better for him had he never been born. The day of his death wasn't better than the day of his birth, because he went to meet the judge of all the earth.

[30 : 29] It wasn't true of Herod either that the day of his death was better than the day of his birth. It was he who beheaded John the Baptist and for years he was haunted. He was haunted by the thought that John the Baptist had come back from the dead.

He was hearing about the disease of Nazareth. Who is he? And he was tormented even through the night. It was John whom he had beheaded. It wasn't of course, because his conscience was accusing him.

For that kind of man the day of his death isn't better than the day of his birth. Not better for the likes of Agrippa and Felix. Not better for anyone who disobeyed Jesus, who rejects the Lord.

Not better for anyone who is an unbeliever. Who then is it better for? Well of course, for the believers. Because the day of their death brings them into the immediate presence of Christ.

Brings glory to them and brings them to glory itself. It's a day in which they will be delivered from sin. from all the sorrows associated with sin.

[31 : 36] From the conflicts and the contradictions and the storms of life. It's an end for them, the day of death. They were born into a life of trouble, even as Christians.

Born into a born again run to suffer for the Lord Jesus Christ. I said that this morning. Paul reminds the Philippian church of it. It has been given to you.

Not only to believe but to suffer for his name. It's not easy to suffer. It's rewarding. There are times when the grace of God lifts you above your suffering to an experience of the wonder and the sufficiency of his grace.

Yes, but not always. Time is perplexing, it's demanding. But you see there an end to this. And therefore the day of death is better for the precious suffer for Christ than the day of his birth.

The day he was born. Joy, yes, in the household, but then the uncertainty of it all. Do you ever wonder as parents? I'm sure you do.

[32 : 48] I'm sure you do. You wonder how will it turn out for your children? what will they become? What will they become?

What kind of name will they leave behind them? What kind of destiny are they carving out for themselves? What will happen to them? Will they become believers in the Lord Jesus?

Will it be a source of joy and contentment to you as a believing parent? Or will it be the means of bringing heartbreak into your life?

You see there's the uncertainty associated with that person's birth. You just don't know what it's going to be. But then you see the day of a person's death as a believer all the uncertainty has gone.

It has gone. Everything is for sure and certain now. Everything is sure and certain. And that's what makes a believer's death. Such a blessed thing and which leaves such an aroma.

[33 : 59] Such an aroma associated with it. And to that extent such a comfort even though there's the heartbreak of parting and of losing. There is always the comfort of knowing well all the past empty is now at an end.

All the questions are now answered. the past has been left behind. The conflict has come to an end. And they are now forevermore in immediate presence of God.

They're exiled. As someone put it is over. You know that when you read 2 Corinthians chapter 5 you feel you get the impression that Paul is almost disappointed at the thought that maybe death will overtake him before the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

You see Paul wanted to go to heaven but he wanted to go there as a whole being his whole personality body and soul. That's where he wanted to be. No that's the ultimate goal for the Christian.

Body and soul to be forever with the Lord. Anything else you see anything else is short of the completion of his redemption.

[35 : 15] And Paul is wrestling with his thought. Yes he wants to be in heaven of course. Yes I know he says when this earthly tabernacle is to tell I have a body. One that comes from God.

God is going to give me a heavenly body. Whatever it means. This body fitted for heaven. I know that he says but if it be his will that I be absent from the body and to be present with him in my spirit.

Well so be it. That's better. But the best of all is to be there soul and body. with the Lord. And the days coming when the Christian will be there soul and body with the Lord.

That's his ultimate happiness. His ultimate completeness. I think it was C.H. Burton who said. I said. I wonder he said what the first five minutes in heaven will be like.

The first five minutes in heaven. Of course there will be no minutes in heaven. time will be no more. And he wondered what the first few moments would be like as he took it all in.

[36 : 24] All that he looked forward to. Born an heir of trouble. This person with a good name dies an heir of glory. And who can doubt therefore that their death day is better than their birthday.

this is their coronation. There's a story told by Charles Bridges. A man who wrote a very excellent commentary in this book.

In the last century as a minister in the Church of England. The story tells in connection with this of a Christian mother whose child, young child, was taken by the Lord to glory.

And he puts it like this. It was the bright shining of this day or day that stirred up the triumphant faith of a Christian mother who, seeing her beloved child depart for glory, looked up to heaven and exclaimed, I wish you joy, my dearest child.

She knew that a child had entered into the joy of the Lord. And that for her, that day was the greatest day of her life.

[37 : 44] In itself, as I said earlier, no doubt, a birthday is a day of rejoicing, while in itself a day of death is a day of gloom and sadness.

But nevertheless, it is undeniable, when all things are taken into account, that the day of death, for the possessor of the good name, is the more propitious day of the two, and you must accept that.

It's the most blessed day of all, but only for the person whose name is good.

We're back at the beginning with the question, do we have the good name? That's the question. You see, my friend, there's no question about this, that the day of your death will come.

There's no doubt whatsoever about that. It will come as will mine. The question mark hangs over this, though.

[38 : 55] Has the day when we acquired the good name, has it come yet? have you been born again by the power of God's spirit?

Have you exercised faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? That's the crucial question. That's the crucial one. Are you a believer in the Lord?

If you are, in the presence of God, you have a good name, but you see, you've got to take it a step further. Make sure that you're living in obedience to his claims.

Make sure of that. That you're earning, in other words, not salvation, but that you're earning a good name by living as a saved sinner in the presence of God.

And then, if you get that good name, if you live that good life, you'll have very many blessed days in that kind of life. Happy days.

[40 : 05] You'll have birthdays along the way. You'll remember days you can go back. You know, there are people here tonight, if they say, this is the young people here tonight. There are some elderly Christians in this church tonight, I'm certain of this, who can look back, and you know that there are outstanding days in their life.

outstanding days. They remember this day, that time, this season, year ago, five years, ten, twenty, thirty years, forty years, yes, fifty and sixty years.

They've got birthdays along the way. They remember these days. And they were great days, but they know this, there's a better day awaiting them, the day of their death.

And that day, everything would be so wonderful. All these other birthdays was pale into insignificance beside the blessedness of being forever with the Lord.

In a better place, with a better nature, with a sanctified nature, rendering perfect service in that perfect place.

[41 : 23] in the presence of a perfect company, praising forever a perfect saviour. The day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.

Now then, I wonder this is true of you. Will this be true of you? And will it be true of me?

There's one way in which we can make sure that it will. By receiving the Lord Jesus and from now on living according to the way that he would want us to live and giving our lives to us.

Let us pray. O God, do thou bless us and do thou have mercy upon us. Give us thyself and enable us to live the life that would honour thee in this world.

Part us now with thy blessing. For Jesus sake. Amen.