

## *Trust Him for His Grace*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 23, 2023.

Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? 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? A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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 (Ecclesiastes 6:10–7:14)<sup>1</sup>

Our passage begins with a three-part description, presumably of God, his foreordination, omniscience, and omnipotence, followed a warning for our words, and three questions, which may essentially be summarized as two: Who knows what is good for you? And, who knows what will happen to you? Proposed answers to these questions may abound, but theorizing is unnecessary; the answer is simple: God knows. But the questions aren’t simply asking for identification but rhetorical, contemplative even, implying omniscience specifically and sovereignty generally. Indeed, God knows, for he is God; trust him.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>2</sup> God has ordained, or “named” as Solomon describes it, whatever has come, is, or will come; as such, he knows it all. Jesus said that God knows when every bird falls, the number of hairs (or lack thereof) on your head (Matt. 6:25-34), even the next word you will speak before you speak it (Ps. 139:4). He directs the king’s heart like streams of water (Prov. 21:1) and sustains and directs every molecule of creation. As R.C. Sproul put it, there are no maverick molecules.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> “The Confession of Faith” 3.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 12.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/ultimately-with-rc-sroul/no-maverick-molecule>

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Therefore, God knows what will happen to you, because he is the primary cause of everything that comes to pass. And he knows what is good for you, because “he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:4). From dust we came, yet made in God’s image, to reflect his glory. We are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14) but *made* not the Sovereign, not God but man, not the Divine but dust, not the Creator but created.

Why then do we dispute his providence, arguing with God, as it were, perhaps not in so many words but in our attitudes and actions? When it comes to this life, we think we know what is good, tomorrow better, and ourselves best. In our “boastful arrogance,” the apostle James says, we presume that tomorrow will be like today, but it’s a faulty presumption: “What is your life?” Stop and think about it: “For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:13-14). Not only do we not know tomorrow we may not even be here. While the presumptions of our vaped existence leave us irrationally exuberant, when adversity shows up, it surprises us. Then, we are either angered in our distrust and disbelief or sobered into a sanctified seriousness that would never come but for the grace of God.

### **The Grace of Mourning**

At the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes, “The whole sum of our wisdom—wisdom, that is, which deserves to be called true and assured—broadly consists of two parts, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> When I first read that I was surprised that the great theologian would couple a knowledge of self with a knowledge of God. But then Calvin explains that the purpose of knowing ourselves is to show us “our weakness, misery, vanity and vileness, to fill us with despair, distrust and hatred of ourselves, and then to kindle in us the desire to seek God ...”<sup>5</sup> Seeking God is not what we typically think of as the purpose of self-knowledge, nor do we want a clear picture of who we really are. Who wants to grapple their own weakness, acknowledge their own misery, or gaze into the reflection of their vanity and vileness? It’s enough to make you despair, distrust, and loathe yourself, and who wants that?

We would rather a birthday party than a funeral, but will cake and confetti impact your life as substantively as gathering with the church militant to mourn the death of a beloved saint? Today, funerals are out of vogue; we’d rather amuse ourselves to death than mourn the dead. Carl Trueman observes,

Christian attitudes to death are too much in accord with the age’s strategies of distraction and denial. We often judge Christian accommodation to the world in terms of lax attitudes to sex and sexuality. But if our rebellion against nature is more fundamental, then attitudes to death may be a more significant measure of our worldliness. Take the

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, trans. Robert White, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, French Edition, 1541 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

creeping intrusion of ‘celebrations of life’ into Christian churches as the default liturgy of death.<sup>6</sup>

What Trueman observes is Solomon’s point: We’d rather gather for a service of mirth than mourning, subsequently denying the devastation of death and ignoring “the vulnerability and mortality of those left behind.”<sup>7</sup> Wisdom is in the funeral.

In the history of the church, funerals have been important gatherings of the saints, not for the deceased but the living, not to celebrate but to mourn. Once upon a time, our church yards were filled with gravestones, which on the Lord’s Day were reminders of our mortality. Today, our cemeteries are on the outskirts of town, conveniently out of sight, and as our culture testifies, conveniently out of mind. While our culture is obsessed with violence and death confined to media entertainment, we aren’t comfortable talking about death. Funerals often go unplanned because we’d rather avoid the morbid topic. Claiming to be wise, our mirth renders us silly and shallow.

Solomon challenges our superficiality saying, “Sorrow is better than laughter” (7:3), and wisdom is in the “house of mourning” (7:4). Why? Because death is both an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26) and an evangelist.<sup>8</sup> It takes our loved ones from us, but it also forces us to consider our lives in light of death. What will be said at your funeral? What is your life preaching? Is it Christ crucified and resurrected, or the accumulation of trinkets, amusement of the trivial, adoration of the temporal. Daniel Fredericks says that death “is the great mentor for diligence, sobriety, love, generosity, reverence, and humility. Death forces the most profound questions to be asked, but mercilessly mocks those who sleep through its lessons.”<sup>9</sup> Mourning is therefore a grace of God, revealing the thievery of death and sobering us to reality of our mortality, a grace that imparts wisdom.

### **The Grace of Wisdom**

Solomon says that “the day of death” is better than “the day of birth,” and the apostle Paul agrees, saying, “to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). In Christ, we are assured that to be absent from this life is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), a truth in which we hope, but what about the span between birth and death? Are we simply living to die? Or, is there purpose in our living under the sun? And if so, how should we then live? Solomon advises living wisely with purpose.

What does the way of wisdom look like? Solomon says, “It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools (7:5), but our carnal ears are attuned to the sirens’ song, ever enticing us to destruction, so our hearts must be taught, reprovved, corrected, and trained by the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Solomon says, “as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Trueman, “The Final Enemy,” *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/06/the-final-enemy>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 136.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel C. Fredericks, Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 177.

laughter of the fools” (7:6). Like the leaves and twigs you use to light a campfire, foolish laughter burns out quickly, but the flame of God’s wisdom is eternal. Solomon says, “Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart,” and “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (7:7-8). We are indeed prone to wander in our carnal desires, but the wisdom of God teaches us to get off the racetrack of temptation and slow down, to consider the way of the Lord and his loving purpose in all things, even when they don’t make sense.

Solomon says, “Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools” (7:9). We may be wronged and hurt, but God gives the grace to forgive and the wisdom to do it expediently. Only the fool harbors anger, resenting rather than blessing, keeping account rather than bestowing grace. Solomon says, “Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” (7:10) because our memories are biased, often distorting the truth. Instead, wisdom teaches us not to dwell on the “glory days” but to enjoy the gift of today. Solomon says, “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” (7:11-12). There are benefits and limits of wealth, of which we are stewards, but wisdom is infinitely valuable, though it too has its limits. Wisdom cannot answer all of life’s questions, but by God’s design it is far better to be wise than foolish.

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, “Therefore consider carefully how you live—not as unwise but as wise, taking advantage of every opportunity because the days are evil. For this reason do not be foolish, but be wise by understanding what the Lord’s will is” (Eph. 5:15-17 NET). But the Lord does not leave us to our own efforts to derive his will but “equips us with everything good that [we] may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ” (Heb. 13:21). The grace of wisdom is our sanctification, lived out dependently upon God’s gracious provision in Christ. And it is his wisdom that teaches us what is good for us, even when we can’t see it ourselves.

### **The Grace of Adversity**

In his book, *The Crook in the Lot*, 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish theologian Thomas Boston expounds upon Solomon’s rhetorical question: “who can make straight what he has made crooked?” By “lot,” Boston means our “lot in life,” and by “crook” he means the adversity we encounter in this life, or what Paul calls “the sufferings of this present time” (Rom. 8:18). Boston says that to consider this, we must first understand, “Whatsoever crook there is in one’s lot, it is of God’s making” (viii).<sup>10</sup> If God is sovereign (and he undoubtedly is!), then God has made the day of prosperity as well as the day of adversity. As such adversity is a common characteristic of the fallen human condition, for saint and sinner alike.

You may look at your neighbor and assume that he doesn’t have the struggles you have, but it’s a fool’s perspective. Comparisons tell us nothing and teach us less. But here the Christian has the advantage over the unbeliever, knowing we “have been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 3).

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his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:28-29). The child of God sees adversity differently, because we know our loving Father’s purpose is in it.

Second, we must understand, as Boston puts it, “What God sees meet to mar, no one shall be able to mend his lot.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, in our strength we cannot change what God has purposed. This is not to say that we may not pursue change (We are not Determinists!) but we must see adversity in our lot as the easy yoke and light burden of Christ, that we may learn his gentle and lowly way (Matt. 11:29-30), that we may learn contentment in God’s good pleasure. As William Cowper teaches us to sing,

God moves in a mysterious way,  
his wonders to perform.  
He plants his footsteps on the sea,  
and rides upon the storm.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
but trust him for his grace.  
Behind a frowning providence,  
he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
unfolding ev’ry hour.  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
but sweet will be the flow’r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
and scan his work in vain.  
God is his own interpreter,  
and he will make it plain.<sup>12</sup>

The crook in our lot is often not plain to our sight, because we live here, under the sun: “For now we see in a mirror dimly,” Paul explains, “but then face to face.” Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). This side of glory, we do not, we will not, we cannot see God’s sovereign purpose in what he has ordained. And if we interpret this through the folly of unbelief, we will wallow in vanity and dive deeper in despair. But if we trust the Lord, for our good and his glory, we will rest contented in his loving provision, even in adversity.

God knows what is to come because he has ordained it. God knows what is good for us because he ordained that too. Let us trust him for his grace.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/god\\_moves\\_in\\_a\\_mysterious\\_way](https://hymnary.org/text/god_moves_in_a_mysterious_way)