

Living in the Past – Ecclesiastes 7:10

I. Introduction:

- A. I don't get around very much. I married a wonderful wife 55 years ago, and am usually at home with her.
 - 1. Furthermore, I became your pastor nearly 35 years ago, and I don't run around on you either.
 - 2. I don't "window shop," watching other women or other preachers.
- B. I don't subscribe to any religious journals, so I'm not an expert on religious trends.
 - 1. But I have heard – I have been told by others – there's not much doctrine being preached out there.
 - 2. And I have heard that many ministries in this country rarely get down and dirty.
 - 3. I have been told that in fear of offending people, many pastors avoid preaching the Bible's *"do's and don'ts,"* rare even coming to the Ten Commandments.
 - 4. I have been told that deacons sometimes tell their pastors not to preach on *"hell."*
 - 5. They may preach faith in Christ, but not Christ's Lordship and our required submission to Him.
 - 6. I hear that a great many ministries are more about positive things in contrast to negative things.
 - 7. But what do I know? I'm so self-centered and locally focused that I can only repeat what I've heard.
- C. Assuming what I have heard is true, consider our text from *Ecclesiastes*.
 - 1. Do you know what *"Ecclesiastes"* means? Look at the title just before chapter 1. *"The preacher."*
 - 2. King Solomon may have been the penman, but he lays his crown down & bare headed picks up his Bible.
 - 3. And to be honest the two paragraphs which begin this chapter would not be enjoyable to preach.
 - a. Even though there are no *"thou shalt not's"* in here, these are rather dark verses.
 - b. Even though there are some *memorable statements*, they are for the most part *not fun verses*.
 - c. Let's read them so you can see what I mean.
- D. If these are texts Bible preachers are supposed to expound, then many preachers should come away rebuked.
 - 1. Here are words like *"death," "mourning," "sorrow," "fools," "vanity,"* and *"anger."*
 - 2. These are not up-beat subjects, and maybe that is why they need to be especially addressed in days.
- E. But I'm not going to start a series, preaching through *Ecclesiastes 7*.
 - 1. Let's skip over the first nine verses and park ourselves on *verse 10*.
 - 2. The preacher exhorts us, *"Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? For thou does not enquire wisely concerning this."*
 - 3. If indeed the former days were better than today, then it might be a worth our time to ask why?
 - 4. But the truth is – creation was cursed long before the day in which we live.
 - a. Governments have been corrupt since the days of Nimrod, and many economies have struggled.
 - b. Maybe we have new addictions today, but addictions have been around since Noah brewed some wine.
 - c. People have gotten sick and died since time immemorial. Grief is not something new.
 - 5. And what we may remember as being better days may not really be so.
- F. There is a softening power in distance and in the passing of time.
 - 1. A mountain may actually look like that proverbial mole hill, when seen from miles away.
 - a. But get right up under those Canadian Rockies and we see that they are huge, majestic and sometimes terrifying.
 - 2. And *"time" up close* compared to *time far away* has the same characteristics.
 - a. Something which embarrassed us horribly years ago is now something we laugh about.
 - b. And something which terrified us in the past is more like a dust bunny under our bed now.
 - 3. And similarly, we may read a biography or a bit of history and think how wonderful it would have been to live along side those people in those exciting days.

II. Solomon, the preacher, tells us that those old days were not as exciting as our ignorance suggests.

- A. When it comes to wishing we lived in the days of Christ Jesus, or David, or when the Separate Baptists evangelized the East Coast of this country, we rarely remember the whole story.
 - 1. We remember the highlights and the best parts.
 - 2. How many of Christ's disciples died in their beds at the end of long peaceful lives? Not one of them.
 - 3. David may have been God's chosen king, but for some time he lived as fugitive in the wilderness or caves.
 - 4. Several of the early Baptists of this country were jailed, stoned, whipped, otherwise abused.
 - 5. Is that what we remember when we romanticize those old days?
- B. Let's say that you just finished reading Laura Wilder's *"Little House on the Prairie."*
 - 1. Life was simple, families were tight, love abounded, game was plentiful, fish filled the streams, etc. etc.
 - 2. Oh that things were like that today. But would you be willing to give up your nice warm house, your nice warm jacket & your nice warm boots in the midst of a sub-zero blizzard?
 - 3. Are you ready to exchange your bathroom with its shower for an outhouse and a weekly wash in a bucket?
 - 4. Those people didn't have painless dentists, or penicillin, or refrigerators, or Starbucks.
 - 5. We don't really want to give up all we have today, just a few selected things.
 - 6. The person who wants the past has forgotten too much about the past – even his own past.

III. This kind of attitude usually indicates a spirit of discontent.

- A. Most of the time, it is not the situation that is messed up, but the heart of the person living in the mess.
 - 1. I can't prove my theory, because the means are not longer available...
 - 2. but I am reasonably sure that the person who yearns for the past probably wasn't satisfied with the past he had at the time.
- B. This sounds like I'm changing the subject, but not really...
 - 1. What all of us need is a sense of our own unworthiness – a bit of humility.
 - 2. What we possess today is in all likelihood more than we deserve – more *"stuff"* and even less troubles.
 - 3. The more we grow in Christ, the more godly and Christlike we become, the more we should enjoy the grace in which now live. *"Contentment"* is a Biblical subject and exhortation.
 - 4. God hath not dealt with us according to the depths of our transgressions.
 - 5. His greatness and goodness have been showered upon us – rained down on us – poured out on us.
 - 6. Rather than looking back to the good-old-days of our grandparents or the earlier days in our lives, we should *"Count our many blessings, counting them one by one."*
- C. An **attitude** of discontent usually supercedes the circumstances against which we are discontent.
 - 1. The disgruntled man is usually someone who would have been just as disgruntled in the past.
 - 2. And he will probably be disgruntled in the future, because as long as he's in the world he'll find the world – and himself – less than perfect.
 - 3. The grass is not always greener on the other side of the street. But it may be nothing but Astroturf.

IV. Solomon doesn't come out and say it, but the backward looking man may be AFRAID to look forward.

- A. Over & over again, the Bible shows us that with the right spiritual make-up our difficulties can become ladders.
 - 1. And climbing ladders and reaching new heights can be scary.
- B. As you know, with God's blessings Israel escaped Egypt, beginning their march toward the promised land.
 - 1. Through their sins, life became difficult, and they started looking behind them.
 - 2. They became the perfect illustration of Solomon's text.
 - 3. Oh, how good those Egyptian leeks and garlicks used to taste.
 - 4. They forgot about the taste of blood caused by the whips on their backs.
 - 5. What if Israel had succeeded in returning to Egypt?

- C. History abounds with the names of people who overcame handicaps, conquering greater things later.
1. Yesterday, I was reading the biography of James Fanch who died in 1767 after a long and useful ministry.
 - a. His biographer said Fanch's *"bodily presence was by no means favorable to his ministerial character."*
 - b. *He had a speech defect that 'stood rather in the way of his popular acceptance.'"*
 2. That biographer wrote: *"his penetration into divine subjects was so deep, his knowledge so clear, his judgement so sound and his exertions accompanied with such primitive simplicity..."*
 - a. *That those of his hearers who **regarded** the **MATTER** rather than the **MANNER** were highly delighted,*
 - b. *and even those of a contrary cast often found their attention so arrested that they were compelled to admire what at first they were disposed to despise."*
 3. Some of the people of God in the Bible overcame physical handicaps to become great servants.
 - a. Jeremiah felt like he spoke as a child, perhaps referring to his education.
 - b. Amos was little more than a cattleman.
 - c. And Paul apparently had physical restrictions.
- D. The thing to keep in mind is that the God who made us what we are, also us controls all our circumstances.
1. When we move forward in His will, the past becomes unimportant. Egypt becomes **history** not **futurity**.
 2. The solution to our current dilemma., whatever it is, is found in obedience to the Lord, walking forward in the light He gives us..
 3. It is found in surrender to Him and striving to make the most of the lives He has given to us.
- E. Maybe you know the story about the frog who fell into the pail of cream – maybe it was in the back yard of the little house on the prairie.
1. The frog thought that he would die. This wasn't the pond water he was used to.
 2. But he kept swimming, kicking his feet and circling the bucket – again and again, for hours.
 3. It turns out that the more he swam and kicked the more the cream solidified, and eventually he stood on solid cream and hopped right out.

V. Backward looking people **LACK TRUST** and **HOPEFULNESS**.

- A. Think about those last verses of **Romans 8**.
1. Who is there in the universe with power to separate us from the love of God? There is no one and nothing.
 2. Is there any place where we can go to somehow step beyond the sight or the hand of the Lord?
 3. *"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead, me, and thy right hand shall hold me."*
- B. What is the likelihood that in the dark days of David's life, he longed for the good-old-days.
1. No matter how much he might have longed to return to the old pastures and his father's sheep, he couldn't return.
 2. But while he looked around, yielding himself to his God, he was filled with the Spirit and he was led to pen some of his sweetest Psalms.
 3. He didn't give up as Solomon saw some people trying to do.
- C. In 1930 James B. Hargis and Charles Creighton drove a Ford from New York to Los Angeles and back again.
1. That was before the Interstate system and when many roads were dirt and gravel – the trip took 42 days.
 - a. The most interesting part of the journey was they drove their roadster backward the whole way.
 2. If I tried that, I'd be in trouble. I have a hard time backing into a parking spot, in an empty parking lot.
 3. I'd make a mistake at some point.
 4. The same is true with life in general. Looking back causes accidents.

- D. Paul teaches us to *“forget about those things which are behind, and to reach forth unto those things which are still before us.”*
1. He teaches us to *“press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”*
 2. Our target and standard are before us not behind us.
 3. Let us set our affections on things above, not on things on the earth.
- E. Do you recall when Paul was being carried to Rome for trial before the Emperor.
1. The ship was caught in a storm of life-stealing proportions.
 - a. After Paul’s warnings and encouragement, some of the sailors thought about taking to the life boats and escaping.
 - b. *“Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved.”*
 2. We are in the ship for which the Lord had bought us passage.
 - a. It might be taking us to the promised land of America, or it might be a prison ship taking us to Australia.
 - b. It might be a warship of some kind.
 - c. You might think the sea is too wild to bear us up.
 3. But it is the Lord’s ship, the Lord’s storm and the Lord bought the ticket.
 4. Don’t give up the ship
- F. That is the application of the preacher’s text.
1. *“Trust in the Lord and lean not unto unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your path.”*