

Ecclesiastes 7:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.

Analysis

This chapter opens with a series of paradoxical 'better than' statements that challenge conventional values. 'A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.' The Hebrew 'shem tov' (שֵׁם טוֹב, good name/reputation) refers to lasting character and integrity, while 'precious ointment' (shemen tov, שֶׁמֶן טוֹב) represents costly, fragrant oil used for anointing and pleasure. Reputation built through faithful living has more lasting value than temporary sensory pleasure. The second comparison is more startling: 'the day of death' proves 'better than the day of one's birth.' This isn't morbid pessimism but sober recognition that birth begins life's uncertainties and trials, while death for the righteous concludes earthly struggles and begins eternal reward. Only at death is a life's true value known—birth holds potential, but death reveals reality. For the faithful, death is entrance into God's presence (Philippians 1:21-23). The verse teaches that eternal values trump temporal pleasures, and a life well-finished holds more significance than one merely begun.

Historical Context

Solomon's culture valued aromatic oils highly—used in anointing kings (1 Samuel 16:13), in worship (Exodus 30:22-33), for personal grooming (Psalm 23:5), and at feasts (Luke 7:46). Precious ointment represented wealth and pleasure. Yet Solomon elevates intangible reputation above tangible luxury—reflecting wisdom's characteristic prioritization of character over possessions. Ancient Near Eastern culture shared modern concern for posthumous reputation, as evidenced by

elaborate tomb inscriptions and memorial practices. The second paradox resonates with Job's lament (Job 3:1-3) yet offers theological nuance: for the righteous, death brings rest and reward (Revelation 14:13). The verse anticipates New Testament teaching that believers need not fear death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57; Hebrews 2:14-15). Church tradition emphasized 'dying well'—a holy death as the capstone of faithful living, making one's death day more glorious than birthday.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does your pursuit of reputation and character compare to your pursuit of possessions and pleasures?
2. In what ways does the hope of resurrection and eternal life transform your perspective on death from terrifying end to glorious beginning?

Interlinear Text

טוֹב	שֵׁם	מֶשֶׁךְ מָן	טוֹב	מִיּוֹם	הַמָּוֶת	מִיּוֹם
is better	A good name	ointment	is better	and the day	of death	and the day
H2896	H8034	H8081	H2896	H3117	H4194	H3117
הוֹלָדוֹ:						
of one's birth						
H3205						

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 14:13 (Parallel theme): And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.

Proverbs 22:1 (Good): A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.

Ecclesiastes 4:2 (Parallel theme): Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.

2 Corinthians 5:8 (Parallel theme): We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:1 (Parallel theme): For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Proverbs 27:9 (Parallel theme): Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 (Parallel theme): Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour.

Song of Solomon 1:3: Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee.