

Ecclesiastes 7:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

Analysis

Sorrow is better than laughter—the Hebrew *ka'as* (קָאָס, sorrow/vexation/grief) contrasts with *sechoq* (שָׁחֹק, laughter/mirth). This continues chapter 7's counterintuitive "better than" comparisons. The verse doesn't condemn joy but recognizes sorrow's refining capacity. *Tov* (טוֹב, better) indicates superior value—not that sorrow feels better, but that it produces better outcomes.

For by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better—*be-ro'a phanim* (בְּרָע פָּנִים, by sadness/badness of face) refers to the grave, serious expression that accompanies grief. Yet this external sorrow works internal transformation: *yitav lev* (לְבָבְךָ טוֹב, the heart is made good/better). Grief refines character, deepens wisdom, and produces spiritual maturity that frivolous pleasure cannot. This anticipates Paul's teaching: "Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation... but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Jesus declared: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Suffering, rightly received, sanctifies.

Historical Context

Ancient wisdom literature rarely elevated sorrow over joy—most cultures pursued happiness and pleasure. Ecclesiastes' realism stands out: life "under the sun" includes suffering, and wisdom learns from it rather than merely avoiding it. Israel's history validated this—exile's grief produced deeper covenant faithfulness (Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah). The Psalms model lamenting before God (Psalms

6, 13, 22, 88), demonstrating that sorrow can be spiritually productive. Jesus wept (John 11:35), legitimizing grief. The early church experienced persecution producing refined faith (1 Peter 1:6-7). Puritan devotion emphasized "profitable afflictions." Modern therapeutic culture often pathologizes sadness, yet Scripture recognizes grief's sanctifying potential when directed toward God.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How have seasons of sorrow and grief refined your character in ways that prosperity and pleasure could not?
2. In what ways does modern culture's pursuit of constant happiness and avoidance of sadness conflict with biblical wisdom about sorrow's benefits?

Interlinear Text

בְּרֵעַ מִשְׁחָה וְלֹא כְּעֵס טְבַע פָּנִים
for by the sadness of the countenance

is better Sorrow than laughter H3588 H7455 H6440

H2896 H3708 H7814

לִבְבָּשׁ ! יְטַב
the heart is made better

H3820 H3190

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 119:71 (Parallel theme): It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

Psalms 119:67 (Parallel theme): Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

2 Corinthians 4:17 (Parallel theme): For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;

Luke 6:21 (Parallel theme): Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

Luke 6:25 (Parallel theme): Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.

Daniel 10:19 (Parallel theme): And said, O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me.