

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“Life in Denial”
Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Introduction

- [Slide #1] On Saturday, August 17, 1889 an article appeared in the *New York Times* entitled “The Captain’s Story: A denial that the City of Rome was in danger of collision.” The story is about the near collision of two steamers off the coast of New York, one called the *City of Rome* and the other called the *Tropic*. Listen to how the story unfolds.
- “The officers of the *City of Rome* and the agents of the Anchor Line, to which that vessel belongs, were much astonished to read in some of the morning papers yesterday an account of a thrilling escape which their ship had had from collision and destruction on her way over. This account stated that on last Monday afternoon, when 150 miles off the Banks, while a thick fog hung over the ocean, another steamer appeared out of the clouds which surrounded the *Rome*, and had come toward her as if bent on cutting her in two. At this juncture the *Rome*’s engines, which had been slowed down previously, had been started up and enough progress made to barely escape the sharp prow of the approaching vessel. The shave was a very close one, it was claimed; so close that women fainted at the sight, strong men turned a sickly hue, and the most illiterate steerage passenger was able to read the name of the passing steamer as she hummed by under the stern of the *City of Rome*. It was the steamer *Tropic*.
- **Captain Hugh Young** of the *City of Rome*, when asked yesterday about this fearful adventure, smiled and said: ‘This is the first time I have heard that any one was frightened on board the City of Rome. If anyone fainted away no one informed me of it, and I was singularly ignorant of any such excitement as you speak of. The truth of the matter is this: On Monday afternoon at 3 o’clock, when 150 miles east of the Banks, I sighted the *Tropic*, 1,500 feet away on the starboard side. We were going at half speed on account of the fog. When our whistle was blown the officers of the *Tropic* apparently mistook the signal or the quartermaster at the wheel steered in the wrong direction. At any rate, she changed her course so as to approach our instead of going away from it. We did not change our course at all, and the *Tropic* came on and crossed our wake fully 400 feet astern. We were no time nearer than 400 feet, and it was with difficulty that we made out the name of the vessel, even by the aid of glasses. There was no excitement on board at all, and our passengers good-naturedly cheered the *Tropic* as she passed us.’” End quote.
- The article finishes by saying, “Several passengers, however, aver that the *Tropic* was within twenty feet of the *City of Rome*, and that it was only because the engines of that ship were put to their utmost speed that a collision was averted.”¹
- Two completely different pictures of reality. Women fainting, men turning a sickly hue, illiterate passengers reading the name of the ship as it passed by, and the confident denials of a Captain proclaiming all is well.

Transition

¹ © *The New York Times*, August 17, 1889.

For six chapters now the Teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes, has shown us the truth about life under the sun, life on this earth without God. And more often than not, the picture isn't pretty. Life on this blue orb without God is absurdly meaningless. We spin our wheels. Frustrations abound. All is not well. And what do we do? Instead of turning to God, we, like [Captain Hugh Young](#) of the *City of Rome*, confidently assert that all is well. You know what? All is not well. The Teacher's wisdom for us in Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14 is that...[[Slide #2](#)]

Proposition

- **Living in denial keeps us from seeing our need for God**
- Our condition is precarious. The experience of life on this earth is one near collision after another. Living life with God is challenging enough. But living life without him is the vanity of all vanities. The Teacher is trying to show us this reality.
- The natural tendency, for any of us, when shown the truth, especially when the truth is ugly, is to deny what we're hearing. The Teacher knows that. He knows his words are a bitter pill to swallow. And his words here are meant to help us to face our reality, to stop living in denial about the way things really are, and to turn to God, who makes all of life meaningful.

Transition

If you haven't yet turned in your bible please turn to Ecclesiastes 6:10. Starting here the Teacher describes...

Organizational Sentence

- **One reality of life we often deny that keeps us from seeing our need for God**

Transition

Look at [verses 10-12](#) of chapter 6. Before we get to chapter 7 Teacher has a few questions for us. [Verse 10](#). *Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he. 11 The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? 12 For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?*

Background/Setting

- The point of the Teacher asking these questions is set us up to receive the words of chapter 7, this string of loosely connected proverbs. Those proverbs of chapter 7 are meant to answer the questions posed here. [Verses 10-12](#), in particular, contrast the sovereignty of God and our finitude. The Teacher says *whatever exists has already been named*. To name something is to exercise authority over it. "The Teacher confesses that God rules over all things, and he points out that it would be foolish for mankind to dispute with God's sovereign ordering of the world; to do so would only produce more words and more vanity."² *No man is stronger than he. The more words the less meaning, and how does that profit anyone?*
- God is sovereign over all. We are finite. He is not. We see the world dimly, through blinders; we think all is well. But our perspective is jaded—limited. Or as the Teacher puts it in [verse 12](#), *for who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow?* Who knows? Not us. We think we know, we think

² ESV Study Bible note on Ecclesiastes 6:10

all is well. But in reality it's not. The reality is that life without God is absurd. In reality life without God is a mess. The ships are about to collide. There is meaninglessness everywhere. And those vanities are meant to drive us to God, to expose our need for him. To deny those realities is to play part in a massive cover up. To live in denial about our condition is like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. We'll never see our need for God.

Transition

This morning I want to focus primarily on [verses 1-6](#). There's a whole lot more that could be said about [verses 7-14](#) of chapter 7. Right now, I zero in on verses 1-6 and the [reality of life](#) we are best at denying. [Slide #3] It's the [reality of death](#).

Main Points

- Listen. *A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. 2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. 5 It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. 6 Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.*
- Of all the realities we face in this life the reality we are best at denying is our own death. There is nothing more uncomfortable than thinking about our own mortality. So what do we do, instead? We bury our head in the sand. We deny death exists. We dress ourselves decades younger than we really are. We color our hair. We smooth over the wrinkles with creams and oils; all in the hopes that somehow we can suppress this thing called age and forget the inevitability of this thing called death.
- The problem is our mortality is meant to drive us to God. You simply can't, you won't see your need for God until you choose to think about your own mortality. That's why the Teacher can say in [verse 1](#), *a good name is better than fine perfume, the day of death is better than the day of birth*. Or [verse 2](#), *it is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting*. It's not that the Teacher has a death wish. It's just that, given the choice between two things, *birth* or *death*, a *house of mourning* or a *house of feasting*; only the latter two realistically correspond to the reality of our situation. Only the latter two are able to expose our need for God. *For death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart*.
- Which again, is why the Teacher can say in [verse 4](#), *the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of the fools is in the house of pleasure*. The wise person has faced reality and taken this lesson to heart. The fool goes about his merry business in denial of reality as if this life is all there is.
- The *Associated Press* ran a story out of Chicago with a tag line that read like this. "Finally, the perfect answer for a team that has been killing its fans for 100 years: A place to put their remains."
- The story goes on to say, "A Chicago man and Bohemian National Cemetery on the city's North Side are joining forces to build for Cubs fans a final resting place that looks a lot like the spot where they saw their dreams of a pennant die year after year. Called 'Beyond the Vines,' the 24-foot long ivy-covered wall is designed to look like the one in dead center at

Wrigley Field. And when the wall does go up, [Dennis Mascari](#) the president of Fans Forever, Inc., says it will transform the cemetery experience, if not for the dead, at least for the living.”

- Listen to what this guy says. "When you come to a cemetery to visit a loved one it's usually a pretty sad, gloomy situation. But when you come here and visit...it's going to be a great feeling for people." There will be a stained-glass scoreboard. And at each of the 280 niches in the wall—called eternal skyboxes, there will be urns emblazoned with the Cubs logo. “Near each urn will be a bronze baseball card with a photograph of the deceased fan who, if the family should choose, can be dressed up in a Cubs hat, Cubs jersey or full Cubs uniform. It could also include the dead fan's 'statistics' such as date of birth, date of death, and maybe their favorite Cubs game and favorite Cub.”³ If this isn't the perfect example of our ability to smooth over and deny reality...
- Don't you see? To deny our mortality is foolishness. [Verse 6](#). *Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.* In other words, thorns under the cooking pot provide quick flames, no heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise.⁴ And you can look at this kind of fire and think all is well. All is not well. Your own impending death is a reality which is meant to drive you to God. It is not something to be made sport of. Don't let your ongoing denial of reality blind you from seeing who God is and what he's done for you.

Conclusion

- Skip ahead to [verse 13](#). The Teacher says *consider what God has done*. Stop living in a fantasy dream world void of reality. Stop living a life of denial. Live in reality. *Consider what God has done*. Be attentive to God's work in the world.⁵ Because if you pause long enough to look, to *consider what God has done*, you will find that He has answered death's challenge.
- As we zoom toward another Good Friday and another Easter I want to challenge you to something radical. This week I want you to make preparations for your own funeral on Friday. For those of you who have previously thought me crazy, now you have proof. I'm serious. Call a funeral home. Price caskets. Pick out flowers. Go through a box of tissues or two. Wear black all week.
- See, what we remember on Good Friday is not just the crucifixion of an innocent man. If that's all Good Friday is to you you've missed the point. Good Friday is about your death. Do you remember Paul words in Galatians 2:20? *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.* Good Friday is God's invitation to each and every one of us to die our death in the death of Christ so that through his resurrection we might also have life. If you take me up on this challenge you will have the most significant and meaningful Easter you've ever experienced.

Introduction to Communion

- This morning, as we turn our hearts to the Lord's Supper, we remember that Christ's death is also our death. As we partake of the elements, which symbolize the breaking of his body and

³ © Associated Press, 2008.

⁴ Longman, p. 185 quoting James Crenshaw, p. 135.

⁵ Longman, p. 191.

the spilling of his blood, we remember God's promise that *if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection.*⁶

⁶ Romans 6:6