

Ecclesiastes 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes chapter 7. 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. In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep. Who can find it out? I turn my heart to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom, and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. As Tremper Longman remarks, the opening verse of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 wouldn't sound out of place in the book of Proverbs. Indeed, there are verses like it within that book, perhaps most notably Proverbs chapter 22 verse 1. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. However, the second half of the proverb here perhaps suggests a connection with what precedes it in chapter 6. Daniel Fredericks maintains that this verse needs to be understood as the response to the question of chapter 6 verse 12.

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? In the end we all die, but a good name might outlive us. Interpretations of the second half of the proverb vary in part according to commentator's sense of how pessimistic and or cynical the preacher's vision is. There are occasions when death might be preferred to life. We might think about Job's description of his experience, for instance. The preacher has also spoken of situations of extreme suffering, with no relief from toil. Perhaps the verse ought to be read in light of that.

[4 : 23] Alternatively, we might consider the way in which the day of death can be the seal of a good reputation, to which the person yet to be born has yet to attain. It seems to me that in the light of the first half of the proverb, there is a good case for this interpretation. It has been said that Christian faith is practice in the art of dying well. The preacher is convinced that the house of mourning, where we consider the day of a person's death and our own lives in terms of our own coming death, is a site where we will best learn wisdom. We might think of the statement in the Psalm of Moses, in Psalm 90 verse 12, so teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. In fact, perhaps paradoxically, the hearts of people who mourn will be made better. Unlike several translations, it might be best to translate this as made better rather than made glad. The heart that gives itself to the activity of mourning can be deepened and matured in wisdom. By contrast, fools are drawn to feasting and levity. They adopt a hedonistic disregard for the death that awaits them, and thereby miss out on the opportunity to learn wisdom. On paper, the eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die attitude of the mindless hedonist may sound similar to the counsel of the preacher in places like chapter 2 verse 24. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. However, when we look closer, there are marked differences. The preacher's approach is not one of a determined thoughtlessness with respect to the approach of death, but of grateful enjoyment of life in the vapour, while being mindful of its transitory character and of the importance of measuring our lives by something greater than the distracting pleasures of the moment. Death is the end of life, but in forcing us to consider the end or terminus of our lives, it also encourages us to think of the end or tell us of our lives, what our lives are ultimately about.

Such lessons are well sought in a wise man's funeral, as we look back with others upon a life well lived. The preacher focuses upon a further aspect of this in verses 5 to 6, drawing attention to the company that we will find in these different places and activities. The wise may give painful rebukes and correction. However, such rebukes, in contrast to the smooth words of the flatterer or the seductress, will encourage our long-term good. The company of fools is found in a place of shallow song and levity, which, like thorns burning under a pot, are of little use or value and will only last for a short time. The connection of verse 7 with what surrounds it is difficult to ascertain, and some commentators believe that some part of the text might have been lost in transmission.

However, the actual textual arguments for this are relatively weak. Perhaps the point of the text is to underline the fact that the wise should never be complacent in their imagined wisdom, as wisdom can easily be corrupted when not kept burning through good company. Much as the fools congregate together like thorns under the pot, so the wise need to be like clusters of burning coals, keeping each other glowing hot through rebuke and correction and encouragement in wisdom. Wisdom, if we are not careful, can be subverted or compromised, not least through temptations to exercise oppression and the allure of a bribe. Verse 8 recalls verse 1's claim about the day of a person's death being better than the day of their birth. The proverb of verse 8 has two mutually interpreting halves, like many such proverbs. The end of a thing is connected with the patient in spirit, who bides his time and sees a matter through to its proper conclusion, while the beginning of a thing is connected with the proud in spirit, who boasts greatly before having accomplished anything.

We might think of the proverb uttered by Ahab in 1 Kings chapter 20 verse 11, Let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off. The patient in spirit is a person who has mastered his spirit, while the proud in spirit is mastered by his pride. The picture is filled out in verse 9, which shows the connection between pride and anger, which makes a person rash, hot-headed and reactive, quite ill-suited for prudent, circumspect and effective action. The wise man masters his own heart, first of all, and consequently is able to act in the proper manner at the proper time, rather than precipitously and incautiously. The warning against romanticising the olden days in verse 10 should probably be read in connection with verse 8, with its claim that the end of a thing is better than its beginning. The person who asks such a question may by implication be driven by pride, impatience and an unruly spirit. There are plenty of occasions where present things are unfavourably compared to past things in scripture, for instance the Laodiceans being called to return to their former works, so this verse should be interpreted with some care. Like most such verses, we need to consider it in light of other things that we know, and especially in the light of the surrounding context, to arrive at a good understanding of what is being said and what is not.

Here are a few suggestions. First, we ought to consider the way that excessive nostalgia for the past can serve to distract us from present responsibilities and possible joys. Our responsibility is to live in and learn to find some joy in our own times, not to render ourselves fruitless and joyless by yearning for some other time that God has not given us. Second, such an attitude can arrest necessary movement towards maturity. The wise do consider the past. They assess their own times, both favourably and unfavourably, in terms of what they learn from it. However, their posture is forward-looking and creative, determined to leave something for the future, not just to long for a vanished past. Third, in terms of the broader themes of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun.

[10:14] A romanticised past is a greatly airbrushed past. While there are indeed many respects in which our own times may compare poorly to the past, a general preference for the past almost invariably comes with a blindness to the evils of the past, which may have taken a different form to our own, but were no less real. It might be a temptation to read this statement as a support for a progressive vision over a conservative one, but we ought to consider that the preacher's perspective is no less dismissive of the progressive's equally unrealistic and airbrushed future of lots of new things under the sun that will fundamentally change humanity's situation. The progressive's future is no less illusory than the conservative's past. Verses 11 and 12 explore the relationship between wisdom and wealth.

Solomon was blessed with both, his wealth largely proceeding from his wisdom in ruling his kingdom. Having both wisdom and wealth is a blessing indeed. Indeed, wisdom and wealth are alike in their protection of their possessor. However, if one is to be preferred, it must be wisdom.

Nevertheless, as we might have come to expect from the preacher, this positive statement about wisdom and wealth, the sort of statement that we might encounter in the book of Proverbs, is counterbalanced by a reminder of the vaporous character of life. While wisdom and wealth are powerful, we are not ultimately the masters of our fate, not even when we have great wealth and great wisdom. God is.

Life is transitory and opaque, and the lives of righteous persons may be cut short, while those of wicked persons are often prolonged. There are several perplexing verses in Ecclesiastes chapter 7, and verses 16 to 18 are definitely some of them. What does the preacher mean by saying that we shouldn't be overly righteous and not be too wise? This seems a very strange thing for scripture to say.

It is in such statements that many are led to believe that the words of Ecclesiastes are not really canonically authorised. These are words, perhaps, of a cynical sage that are within the canon, but are not held as authorised by the canon. Rather, the canon includes this voice in order to deny it. Popular as this position may be with many commentators and pastors, I don't find it persuasive in the slightest. However, if we dismiss this position, we still face the problem of trying to interpret these verses. What does it mean to be overly righteous or overly wise? Or on the other hand, is he saying that moderate wickedness is okay in verse 17? On closer reflection, it should be apparent that there are several ways in which these statements could be taken as wise biblical teaching. We might, for instance, think about Martin Luther's startling counsel.

[12 : 50] Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world. As long as we are in this world, we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness, but as Peter says, we look for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Luther's counsel here is valuable for those who might struggle with what people have called scrupulosity, with an overly sensitive conscience, whose demand for perfection is preventing them from actually living. Righteousness becomes a sort of spiritual obsessive compulsive disorder, a constant attempt to avoid incurring the slightest guilt. However, we are sinful human beings. We live in sinful societies and perverse orders. Such an obsessive righteousness fails to acknowledge our flawed human nature, our inescapable embeddedness in sinful structures, and other such things. Rather, we should recognize our fallenness, our frailty, and our limitations.

We should abandon any of our messianic conceptions of ourselves, any excessive obsessions with personal moral purity that prevent us from actually living and serving God and our neighbour. We should also abandon our hubristic attempts to pursue some angelic purity as weak and sinful human beings.

Much as there are dangers in an obsessive quest for righteousness, there are dangers in an obsessive quest for wisdom. We might consider, for instance, the fact that life goes on, irrespective of the fact that our tasks of reflection and deliberation are less than perfectly accomplished. At some point, we have to turn from our reflections and deliberations to the tasks of living well. This will very often feel premature, as we must satisfy ourselves with a limited and imperfect attainment of wisdom in any particular matter. However, if we were obsessed with making perfect choices, always exercising the optimal degree of wisdom, we might never conclude our deliberations in actual decisions and actions.

We would always be second-guessing ourselves or be paralysed in indecision. Once again, appreciating our human limitations and moderating our quest for wisdom as our quest for righteousness is important.

Sin and folly are to be expected, and perfection is a futile quest. We must acknowledge the fact that we are sinners and foolish in many respects. We must curb our sin and our folly as much as we can, and throw ourselves upon God's mercy and gracious protection for the rest. This is the difference between a healthy pursuit of righteousness as self-confessed sinners, and a futile and self-destructive quest for angelic perfection in a manner that will actually prevent us from the positive business of righteous life. Fear of the Lord is the answer to our own human deficit of righteousness and wisdom.

[15 : 38] Human wisdom is limited, but nonetheless it's powerful. The preacher compares it to rulers in a city, which can coordinate and order the people. Wisdom is like this to the wise man, enabling him to master and direct his own spirit, and also to help others around him. To ground his warning against a preoccupation with pursuing a level of righteousness that unhealthily chafes at human limitation, the preacher reminds us that no one will or can escape the reality of human fallenness and depravity.

All of us are corrupted by sin. None of our acts are free of it. Yet this account need not be understood in an incredibly negative sense. Much of the preacher's point here is to give us a better measure of ourselves, not to drive us to despair. As Fredericks notes, moral realism is central to the preacher's counsel in these verses. Verses 21 to 22 continue the theme. Which of us has never said something carelessly in the heat of the moment, due to peer pressure, or otherwise through weakness and general human sinfulness and folly. Recognising our own imperfections, we should be a lot more merciful in our assessments of others, putting more charitable constructions on their actions, and thereby also saving ourselves from the sting of cruel statements that we might otherwise needlessly take to heart.

There are many times, for instance, when someone will say something bitterly cruel in the heat of an argument, and then long to take it back. The person who recognises their own imperfection will not hold others to their statements in such situations, but will give them an easy way to climb down from their statements as they can, not making them lose face. A number of commentators observe the way that the concluding verses of this chapter return us to the preacher's opening statement concerning his quest in chapter 1. There are several parallels between the statements of the two passages that substantiate these connections. In returning to his initial statement, the preacher is presenting us with some of his findings in the matters that he had aimed to seek out. Wisdom is a lot less scrutable and much harder to be grasped than many might suppose. This itself is an important lesson. Wisdom, the reason beneath things, is deeper and less accessible than people might suppose. It typically eludes us. One of the great findings of true wisdom is the extent of wisdom's limits. Prominent in the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs is the figure of the adulterous woman and the woman folly, who seduces simple young men away from the path of wisdom. We can even see such women ensnaring the wise like Solomon, whose heart was led astray by his many wives. The woman is powerful because the heart of the young man goes after her, and if she is not a wise woman, she can lead him to his doom. She is a snare or a trap from which

God protects those who cling to him. However, sinners readily get entangled by her. Verses 27 and 28 are verses that unsettle many, as at first blush they seem to be quite misogynistic. Indeed, a number of commentators read them in such a manner. Some, like Tremper Longman, argue that verse 26 is also making a more general comment about the perverse moral character of women, albeit from the perspective of a confused sage, rather than as the authorised teaching of the book itself, comparing such a statement to those of Job's friends in the book of Job, present in the canon, but not canonically authorised voices. He is talking about something that he has failed to find to this point, although he has searched for it. We are not, however, as R. N. Wybray and others point out, told what exactly he was searching for. Given the surrounding context, there are a few possible hints in how to understand his statement concerning his failure to find a woman, in contrast to his discovery of one man in a thousand. Humanity's lack of moral uprightness is the theme of much that surrounds this section, particularly underlined in the final verse of the chapter. The woman who leads astray is the subject of the immediately preceding verse. As a matter of possible historical background, we might consider that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, exactly 1,000 women in his harem. He proved unsuccessful and unwise in his seeking out of women as they led him astray. They proved unreliable and sinful, and they exposed his own fickleness and corruption. He might not be claiming that no remarkable and outstanding morally upright woman can be found, just that he has failed to find one, and he has only chanced upon finding one such man in a thousand.

This is hardly an empirical basis upon which to prefer one sex to the other. Perhaps against such a reading, we might consider the description of the valiant wife in Proverbs chapter 31 verse 10, an excellent wife who can find she is far more precious than jewels. Although, if the preacher is Solomon referring to the men he has chosen for his officials, and the women he chose for his harem, his statement may be much more limited in its scope, merely referring to his own failures in finding such outstanding persons to this point. He praises the excellent wife, but has, in 1,000 attempts, failed to find the perfect woman himself. The immediately preceding verse is focusing on a particular type of woman, the seductress. Fredericks, for instance, suggests that the preacher is especially referring to this class of woman, rather than women in general. Others, Roland Murphy among them, suggest that, in fact, what the preacher has not found is the truth of the supposed discrimination between men and women in this matter, that one man in 1,000 could indeed be found, rather than one woman.

[21 : 08] Rather, what he has discovered is his statement of verse 29, that all have gone astray. That supposed one man in 1,000 proves to be illusory. Duane Garrett suggests that the preacher is contrasting the companionship and kinship of mind that a man can find in one special male friend, which he is less likely to discover in a woman.

We might perhaps think of the friendship that David describes between himself and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1, verse 26, for instance. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant have you been to me.

Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women. Jeffrey Myers pays more attention to the term found. What does it mean? Not so much that the preacher is trying to identify a particular class of item or person from a larger set, but that he is trying to figure or fathom out things and persons.

Yet human persons, twisted by sin, prove largely inscrutable to wisdom. While one man in 1,000 may be someone he could figure out, the preacher has yet to find a single woman that he really believes he has figured out.

Whatever the actual meaning of his statement, there is no reason why it need be assumed to be misogynistic, and several interpretations would fit in the context. Perhaps Myers' interpretation has the strength of more strongly connecting with the concluding statement of the chapter.

[22 : 29] Sinful human beings are inscrutable. The one thing that wisdom can clearly recognize about human beings is our universal corruption and sinfulness. God created us upright.

It's not God who created sin within us, but rather human beings fell and have pursued sin themselves. A question to consider.

The moral realism of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 might be arresting at several points. What are some of the areas where we might face the danger of being overly righteous?