

## Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

### Life Lessons, Part 2

Our section of Scripture this morning is one of the passages that give preachers headaches. We walk back and forth in our offices talking to ourselves and asking “What does this mean? How do I preach this? How does the New Testament shed light on these Old Testament verses?”

I have a number of commentaries on Ecclesiastes and honestly some of them suggest that the preacher just skip over this section and chapter 8! But I firmly believe that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> And that “...whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”<sup>2</sup> So, let's dig in.

I have seen everything in my days of vanity:  
There is a just *man* who perishes in his righteousness,  
And there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:15)

This doesn't seem fair does it? The righteous people ought to prosper and the wicked should suffer. In fact God promised long life to those who obey Him. In the Ten Commandments re read, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.”<sup>3</sup> And in Deuteronomy it says,

You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and *that it may be well with you*, and *that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess*.  
(Deuteronomy 5:33)

Although those promises were often fulfilled, sometimes they were not. For example, righteous Able was killed by his older brother Cain who lived to a ripe old age.<sup>4</sup> David's beloved friend Jonathon was killed in battle. In the early

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>2</sup> Romans 15:4

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:12

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 4:16

church a young man named Stephen was killed because of his witness for Christ.<sup>5</sup> Even today young believers die in car crashes and from diseases. And terrorists slaughter those who have faith in Christ. It is impossible to fully understand the reasons for these things. Sometimes people feel like giving up on their faith. In Psalm 73 Asaph cried out,

Behold, these are the ungodly,  
Who are always at ease;  
They increase *in* riches.  
<sup>13</sup> Surely I have cleansed my heart *in* vain,  
And washed my hands in innocence.  
<sup>14</sup> For all day long I have been plagued,  
And chastened every morning.  
(Psalm 73:12-14)

At other times when believers go through suffering they think God is punishing them and so they try to be even more righteous. Well, here is Solomon's advice and at first it sounds a little unbiblical.

Do not be overly righteous,  
Nor be overly wise:  
Why should you destroy yourself?  
<sup>17</sup> Do not be overly wicked,  
Nor be foolish:  
(Ecclesiastes 7:16, 17)

At first this sounds the opposite of what Jesus Christ taught when he said "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."<sup>6</sup> Or, when he said, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."<sup>7</sup> In the light of what Jesus taught Solomon sounds cynical.

But from the original Hebrew, what I believe Solomon is saying is don't chase after self-righteousness. In other words, don't act like a Pharisee and think that your actions now demand that God owes you the good life. On the other hand don't give up and choose to be wicked. Don't sin deliberately thinking it will get you what you want. Proverbs 16:18 tells us that "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:54-60

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:6

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:48

*It is good that you grasp this,  
And also not remove your hand from the other;  
For he who fears God will escape them all.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:18)*

The point here is this: take hold of the fact that it is wrong to be self-righteous. And also grasp that to be wicked is to be a fool. The way to live in a world where sometimes the "good" die young and the wicked prosper is to fear God. The reason why we should fear God is because justice will be given. Remember, I quoted Psalm 73 earlier when Asaph cried that he had cleansed his heart in vain. Well he changed his mind. Let's see what changed his mind.

*Behold, these are the ungodly,  
Who are always at ease;  
They increase in riches.  
13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,  
And washed my hands in innocence.  
14 For all day long I have been plagued,  
And chastened every morning.*

*15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.  
16 When I thought how to understand this,  
It was too painful for me—  
17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
Then I understood their end.*

*18 Surely You set them in slippery places;  
You cast them down to destruction.  
19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!  
They are utterly consumed with terrors.  
20 As a dream when one awakes,  
So, Lord, when You awake,  
You shall despise their image.*

*21 Thus my heart was grieved,  
And I was vexed in my mind.  
22 I was so foolish and ignorant;  
I was like a beast before You.  
23 Nevertheless I am continually with You;  
You hold me by my right hand.*

24 You will guide me with Your counsel,  
And afterward receive me to glory.  
(Psalm 73:12-14)

It was when Asaph went into the sanctuary. Hearing the Word of God from the Scriptures helped put life into perspective for him. One day, at the Day of Judgment the wicked who think they have it made will perish in swift destruction and they will be no more, forever. But God's people will receive everlasting life and glory.

Wisdom strengthens the wise  
More than ten rulers of the city.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:19)

Based on the practice of the Greek city states many ancient cities had ten council members to give advice and to protect and support the town. Wisdom strengthens you and protects you better than ten smart council members. That's quite a statement! But Solomon is not thinking about worldly wisdom gained by experience.

He will tell us later even that eluded him and didn't give him the answers he was looking for. He's talking about biblical wisdom—the God-given ability to see life biblically so that you have stability and confidence even when life doesn't seem to make sense. Another reason why we know Solomon is referring to God-given wisdom rather than worldly wisdom is the word “For” in the next verse.

For *there* is not a just man on earth who does good  
And does not sin.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:20)

Worldly wisdom will always be flawed somewhere, because it will be tainted by sin.

You know, sometimes we ask why bad things happen to good people. Here is the answer—no one is really good on their own. A certain ruler greeted Jesus calling him “Good teacher.” Jesus responded saying, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is God.”<sup>8</sup> The apostle Paul may have been thinking about this verse from Ecclesiastes when he wrote in Romans 3, “There is none righteous, no not one. There is none who does good, no not one.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 18:18, 19

<sup>9</sup> Romans 3:10, 12

All of us sin. All of us fall short of the glory of God. Any action that we think is good and righteous can never compare to the goodness and righteousness of God. Jesus said “Be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect” but we cannot! On our own we cannot really love God with all our heart and we really can’t love our neighbor as ourselves.

So instead of asking “Why do bad things happen to good people?” we should ask “Why do good things happen to bad people?” in other words to us. The only answer is God’s mercy, grace and love. If we are righteous at all it is only because of what God has done for us in Christ. Again, Romans 3 states we are, “justified [made righteous] freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> Now, Solomon continues to show the universality of sin by giving us an example.

Also do not take to heart everything people say,  
Lest you hear your servant cursing you.  
<sup>22</sup> For many times, also, your own heart has known  
That even you have cursed others.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:21, 22)

People say mean or untrue things about you because they are sinners. And you’ve said things about other people too, because you are a sinner. Remember the time on the highway when someone cut you off? Remember the time you felt hurt and lashed out? Remember the time you called someone an idiot? In the New Testament, Titus 3:2 tells us “to speak evil of no one” but we do—sigh, the mirror can sometimes be a terrible thing. The next verses bring us back to the subject of wisdom.

All this I have proved by wisdom.  
I said, “I will be wise”;  
But it was far from me.  
<sup>24</sup> As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep,  
Who can find it out?  
(Ecclesiastes 7:23, 24)

Solomon is referring to worldly wisdom here. To gain such wisdom is good, but it has its limitations. There are perplexities in life that sometimes just can’t be figured out even if you have a Ph.D. or graduated from the school of hard knocks. Solomon wanted to make sense of the whole of life. But on his own he couldn’t do it. It was far from him.

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 3:24

I applied my heart to know,  
To search and seek out wisdom and the reason of *things*,  
To know the wickedness of folly,  
Even of foolishness *and* madness.  
<sup>26</sup> And I find more bitter than death  
The woman whose heart *is* snares and nets,  
Whose hands *are* fetters.  
He who pleases God shall escape from her,  
But the sinner shall be trapped by her.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:25, 26)

What needs to be said up-front about these verses is that Solomon was not writing about all women. There are verses in the Book of Proverbs where he wrote about godly women. There is nothing so beautiful as a woman's heart when guided by God's grace and love. But there are women like the one mentioned in verse 26. If you want a Biblical example think of Delilah who seduced Samson and robbed him of his godliness and strength.

I believe Solomon's view here is related to his personal search for wisdom. This description and his experience of deep emotional pain is confined to the walls of his own harem. According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines who turned his heart away from God. It is of course equally true that there are men who set out to entrap and enslave women. There is nothing so bitter as a relationship that promises you personal fulfillment, but instead turns your heart away from God. The way to be safe from this sin is to live a life that pleases God. And according to Hebrews 11, we please God when we believe that he is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.<sup>11</sup>

Here is what I have found," says the Preacher,  
"Adding one thing to the other to find out the reason,  
<sup>28</sup> Which my soul still seeks but I cannot find:  
One man among a thousand I have found,  
But a woman among all these I have not found.  
(Ecclesiastes 7:27, 28)

Like an accountant Solomon added one experience and life lesson to another to try and figure out life. Why do the righteous sometimes perish? Why do the wicked prosper at times? Why are people seduced and lured into evil? All that Solomon found was that there is no one who is truly righteous and does not sin. Using hyperbole, exaggeration, he said he found one righteous man out of a thousand and not one woman.

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<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 11:6

Ladies, don't get upset about this. It is chauvinistic, but it is also cultural and a figure of speech. And Solomon has already said in verse 20 there is not a just man on earth. So why is life all mixed up? Why is there pain and suffering and death? The answer is in the last verse.

Truly, this only I have found:  
That God made man upright,  
But they have sought out many schemes."  
(Ecclesiastes 7:29)

This is the most important verse in the whole chapter and perhaps of the whole book. How is it that we see so much evil and suffering in the world? God made man and man unmade himself. God is without fault.

When God made Adam and Eve there was perfect truth in their minds, perfect purity in their hearts and perfect holiness in their actions. The origin of evil was in Satan's rebellious heart. Human responsibility was that we consented to that rebellion. Adam's sin set off a chain reaction of generations after generations of people devising their own schemes on how to live life.

We devised alternate gods or we claim there is no god. We fashion alternative life-styles. We plot devious ways to get power, sex, money and on and on. The problem with life is not out there somewhere. It is here in our hearts. The prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"<sup>12</sup> Solomon said, "I can't figure life out even with all my wisdom. I don't even know my own heart."

How does all of this change? It changes by the grace of God to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only truly righteous man who died while living righteously. He died and was raised up from the dead to conquer our sins. In the words of Scripture, God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ has now become

for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—<sup>31</sup> that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."  
(1 Corinthians 1:30)

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 17:9

<sup>13</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

Scripture declares "...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>14</sup> True life and true wisdom are given to us in Jesus Christ. Glory be to God for His love and mercy.

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 6:23