

IX. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“The Vitality of Wisdom and the Vanity of Folly—Part 2”
Ecclesiastes 7
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In this study we will be in Ecclesiastes 7. There are some evangelicals that actually say that Ecclesiastes was written by Ezra as part of his ministry in the 6th century, after the restoration from Babylon and he writes it like a first person sermon. I have done that where I was preaching as if I was someone else and some think Ezra is presenting this book as if he was Solomon, not misleadingly but as a literary instrument of what we'd call a first person type presentation. While I see some of the arguments for this, early on in our series I tried to meet these arguments and make the position that this actually was written by Solomon as it fits in his trilogy of Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes which is his repentance of his walking away from the wisdom God had given him from above to the wisdom of the world and into the vanity of his life, to a return back to Proverbs and the wisdom that was based on the fear of the Lord.

The Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs, not only points us to the bride, groom and the church as His bride, His covenant people but also the love that God gives by His wisdom into a true marriage. So we see his trilogy working together in that form. One of the chapters in the book of Ecclesiastes that convinced me that this is Solomon writing and a persuading moment is chapter 7. Ecclesiastes 7:1–13 which we have already covered in the last study is a collection of proverbs. To me it doesn't sound like someone presenting something Solomon would have said but it sounds much more Solomonic in nature and it fits within the Proverbs. You can trace those 13 verses back to Proverbs as a collection of proverbs.

Now we come to the second half of Ecclesiastes 7 and this also becomes for me an argument of the authorship of Solomon, himself as the writer of the book. I am not going to tell you why until we get to the end of it but when we get to the end, again I believe he is bringing our trajectory back to the book of Proverbs which he first wrote in terms of wisdom. I think Ecclesiastes 7 is very crucial to see as a Solomonic document inspired by the Holy Spirit. As we walk through this I will give you a series of observations that have titles for each one of them.

Solomon is giving us a Divinely ordained perspective and Divinely ordained directive. It is a God-given directive and perspective living in a fallen world in the context of bringing us to the wisdom of God. He won't wait until Ecclesiastes 12 to give us the solution to vanity and emptiness of living life under the sun but he constantly bleeds the answer throughout. Here in Ecclesiastes 7 is another place he can't help himself. Let's start now to look in Ecclesiastes 7.

Ecclesiastes 7:14–18 says *[14] 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.*

[15] 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 evildoing. [16] Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? [17] Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? [18] 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.

So he starts off in Ecclesiastes 7:14 by giving us a perspective which is this; if God is bringing you through a season of life where things are just working together it's absolutely amazing so rejoice that in His providence that season of life has been granted to you. Don't think that because things are working together that the hammer is about to fall on you for that is a superstitious view of this. This is a season of blessing that God has given to you so rejoice in it. Don't worship it or embrace it as if it is the answer to life. While you don't want that to become your confidence just do have joy in those times God has given to you.

What about the day of adversity? Notice that he doesn't say 'if in the day of adversity' because you will get both – prosperity and adversity. This is a broken world so there will be days of adversity where things seem not to work out. Things will tend to 'fall apart' even when we think it should work out. In the day of adversity he says to stop and think and then he gives this two fold directive. Stop, for the propensity is to fall into self-pity but don't, and think. God is intentionally bringing into your life as a sovereign blessings both prosperity for you to rejoice and adversity for you to realize your experiences and interpretations in life will never be able to plumb the depths of eternity – what comes after you.

I am made in the image of life and I want to know where things are going. I actually think you can know where things are going but you don't know where things are going from the philosophical analysis of a man's rational abilities interpreting prosperity and adversity. You can only know where things are going from Divine revelation. God reveals it to us. Not only does God give us seasons of prosperity for rejoicing but He gives seasons of adversity for remembering. This world can't make sense to me without God revealing His wisdom to me. I am dependent on Divine revelation.

I'm not going to be able to read the 'tea leaves' of events in life. We do this all the time. Things begin to happen, like adversity, and we say 'God is closing doors.' Maybe God is telling you to pray a little longer. We are always looking at events and with our insight trying to gain what is next into eternity. God says 'no, for you are people of the Book. Your wisdom comes from Me by the Holy Spirit through My Word.' So when God brings blessing in life stop and give praise to God and enjoy that season. When He brings adversity He is sending you back to the Book, back to His wisdom. He is intentionally putting in your life something that doesn't seem to make sense. So I am not going to go into self-pity nor am I in arrogance going to think you can read the 'tea leaves' in life and come up with this yourself, but you go back to the Book of Divine revelation. What is God saying to me? How is He leading me life?

Now let's look at the next part that starts in Ecclesiastes 7:17. Here when he says 'vain life' he is referring to our life under the sun where we live unto ourselves and for ourselves and he saw everything and it confounded him. Then he says 'a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness.' Are you aware of those who are seemingly walking upright before God and in the midst of doing this they perish? Sure, go read Fox's Book of Martyrs, the states that were filled with Godly men and women during the Reformation or the missionaries who have lost their lives. They have the positional righteousness of Christ and are pursuing righteousness but in the sovereign hand of God He has allowed them not only suffering but many unto death.

Then he brings in the wicked man and it's almost an echo of his father, David here. Why do the wicked prosper? We see these people doing wicked things and they prosper. We could debate whether they are prospering or not because the amassing of power, possessions and influence of money which we would say is prosperity actually maybe piling up greater judgment for them where it actually isn't prosperity but as Jesus said they are getting their reward of what they want here on earth. Then they will get what they always wanted when they get there. They

wanted that here instead of Him so when they get into eternity they don't get Him. That is called hell, the judgment of God. We are aware of this as well, maybe not in our own life but certainly throughout history.

So his verdict for the righteous who perish and the wicked who prolong their life is in Ecclesiastes 7:16–18 which says *[16] Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? [17] Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? [18] 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.*

Why would he say be not overly righteous or too wise if the Bible also says be ye holy as I am holy and to pray for wisdom? This seems to be contradictory but the answer is back in the vain life. He is speaking of someone who is not living under God with the fear of God but someone who is living as if they're God. The righteousness he is referring to here is not the kind that comes from a desire to praise God through obedience but it is the self-righteousness of the Pharisee. Don't pursue deliverance through your righteousness. The answer to prosperity and adversity is not found in our perfections, our righteousness. My pursuit of righteousness is certainly valid with all of my heart and life in thanksgiving to God whom I love, adore and is my Savior, but it becomes idolatry when my pursuit of righteousness is as if I am my own savior and I decide to overcome the brokenness of this world with my righteousness.

The same thing is true of wisdom. The answer is not the wisdom that man gets under the sun. The answer is to surrender to the wisdom from God. Who is God? He is the One who is perfectly holy and righteous. He is the One who is omniscient. Solomon is telling us here not to be the one who plays as if they are god, where they have a perfect righteousness that will deliver them and all wisdom. You don't have all wisdom and even as a believer I realize that the righteousness I have in Christ will deliver me and my pursuit of righteousness will never be a instrument of deliverance. Even the wisdom from above that I obtain from this life will always be insufficient for it will always be with measure because I don't have omniscience. I don't know the end from the beginning. I don't know except what God reveals to me about the beginning and the end. That is completely where I rest. When we think we have all the wisdom in self-righteousness to deliver ourselves we actually destroy ourselves.

In the context here he is telling us that it's not your pursuit of wickedness nor your pursuit of righteousness that will deliver you. The only One who can deliver is the One alone whom you should fear and that is God Himself. If your life is one of dissipation it will destroy you. Self-righteousness, the sense that you know everything and you have all the wisdom you need in your discovery of life will also destroy you. Now bleeds in the answer that he will answer in Ecclesiastes 12 and that is fear God. What does it mean to fear God?

There are four things to consider as you see a person who fears God. I believe there are four marks in a person's relationship who fears God. The negative is they are not self-righteous and they don't put confidence in their own wisdom. They don't boast in their own wisdom or their own righteousness and they don't boast in their sin. Christians don't use their sin as an adjective to their Christianity. I may have sin dwelling in me but it's not my identity in life. If your battle is food but you don't exist as a fat Christian. Now you may have to deal with the propensity to think that you live to eat instead of eat to live for Christ but that's not your life. It is something you're dealing with. I am a Christian that has to deal with those inbred temptations that are constantly confronting me, but those are not my identity or define me.

Today our society is dealing with the LGBTQ agenda. You may have all kinds of sexual disorders and dysphoria in your life but those are not your life. If you are a Christian, Christ is

your life. There may be issues I have to deal with and kill every day in the pursuit to new obedience to Christ but they are not my life. So my life is not my wickedness, my self-righteousness or my omniscience but my life is the Lord's and therefore I will fear the Lord. Here are the four things that mark out a person who fears the Lord.

One, it is reverence before the Lord. It is here that I pastorally struggle that I don't fear the Lord as often as I ought to. God's people don't fear the Lord as they ought to. They don't have a reverence for Him. Probably the place our real view of God shows up more than any place else is in gathered worship. When God's people get together for worship you get to really see what they believe about God. First of all, if the call to worship by God through His elders in the local church meets with dismal that is not the elders that are being irreverenced that's the Lord. He just doesn't fit into our schedule, nor His praise.

It can sometimes show up in the way we show up to worship where the worship service is really all about me, my preferences and my inclinations and not about giving praise to God in spirit and in truth. Therefore worship is transformed into an entertainment moment where it's all about the attendant instead of all about the audience and the audience for worship is one – it is the Lord Himself. Is He pleased? Reverence reflects our fear of the Lord and you can see the barometer of reverence in gathered worship.

Secondly, there is a trust in the Lord. I grew up with both the expectation and an increasing blessing of having a reverence for my parents and grandparents. One of the ways it showed up was if they were nearby I was trusting. My dad had a propensity to buy inexpensive automobiles and we got one. When we traveled as a family we always traveled at night because there was less traffic and kids would sleep. This was the first time we'd taken this car on the road and the gas gauge wasn't working. It read three quarters of a tank as it actually ran out of gas. We were on a two lane road, with no lights, out in the middle of nowhere in the lower hill country of South Carolina.

My dad gets out of the car and tries to wave people down. There aren't that many people out but no one will stop. Then my dad said to me 'Son, get out of the car, if they see a kid then maybe they will stop and not think I'm somebody going to way lay them.' I thought that was pretty smart but then as I stood there I thought 'who would be out in the middle of the night?' It would probably be people who were up to no good. If they stop then we may be no good from then on. Then I said to my dad 'Dad, is this safe?' He said 'don't worry son' and the coat he was wearing he put around me and I did not worry at all because I knew he would take care of me. My trust was there. If that's true of an earthly father who is a sinner how much more true should that be of our trust in reverence to our heavenly Father?

God is able. I reverence Him. God is able to deliver me in the day of prosperity and in the day of adversity. My grandfather did the same thing. When he was up visiting us one time Hurricane Hazel came through. I had actually gotten caught outside and my grandfather came running out. Have you ever gotten caught up in wind that was so powerful as a kid that you couldn't breathe for it was actually taken your breath? My grandfather took his raincoat and put it around me and said 'you will be okay.' I knew I would be. When you reverence someone it's also a statement of 'I trust you.'

A third thing that is revealed by the reverence of the Lord is in our rejoicing in Lord. Certainly, I can rejoice in a season of blessing but even then I'm not simply rejoicing in the blessing but the Lord who is blessing me in that season. This is why in the day of adversity which is also from the Lord but doesn't give me a call me to put a plastic smile on my face, I can still rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4). This is what Paul is referring to in I

Thessalonians 5:18 which says *[18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* It's not in the 'everything' where your joy is found but it's in the Lord who is using everything in your life, both adversity and prosperity.

Fourthly, it shows up with the priority of participatory gathered worship. When you worship the Lord there will be a priority of participatory worship. Fear God in a broken world so you know how to deal with adversity and how to respond to God in a broken world to prosperity. Now the writer of Ecclesiastes moves from the perspective and the directive to his principle analysis about what you are to avoid, then to this glorious call to fear God to some pious advice that begins in Ecclesiastes 7:19. Here he begins to set us in another direction.

Ecclesiastes 7:19–20 says *[19] Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. [20] Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.* What is he saying? A wise man is someone who doesn't trust in his wisdom. A wise man wants revealed wisdom from God for God's wisdom is better than ten wisdom counselors, ten kings. The foolish man is the one who trusts in his wisdom. In the emptiness and vanity under the sun you fear God and when you fear God it is His wisdom that gives you strength, rather than the ten rulers who are in the city, that is the ten people you would go to as wise men in the city.

Then we see that not only your self-righteousness will not deliver you but there is no one righteous on earth who can deliver you. What is this the anticipation of? Who is wisdom from above? Who is the righteous One who can save us? Christ is our wisdom and the One who can save us for there is no righteous man born of Adam, but praise God for a Second Adam who is our righteousness. Here Solomon's trajectory is taking us from the fear of God to the grace of God that is found in Christ, who is our wisdom. We boast in the wisdom and righteousness of Christ. Here is an illustration from the Old Testament.

When God comes to Abraham it is called a Christophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, along with two angels. God tells him what He is about to do in Sodom and Gomorrah. He is going to destroy them. Abraham knows that his nephew Lot is there. The Bible tells us Lot pitched his tent near Sodom and then in Sodom and Abraham has heard he has a house in Sodom and is sitting at the gates in Sodom. Here, Lot is a believer that got over-assimilated into the world and Abraham is concerned for him. Abraham comes to the Christophany and we see this in Genesis 18:23–24, 26 which says, *[23] Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? [24] Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [26] And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."*

Abraham goes from 50 to 45 to 40 to 30 to 20 to 10 and then stops. He no longer is haggling with the Lord about this. Why did he stop? He stopped for two reasons. One is he has established a principle that leads to your salvation, that if he can find a righteous one he can substitute himself for the unrighteous. Here are the mountains of God's justice and He has found a way through the mountain – a righteous One for the unrighteous, but he stops after establishing the principle of the righteous for the unrighteous. Two, he stops because there is none righteous, no not one, but praise God Abraham has to stop but God doesn't stop. God sends His Son for He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God (II Corinthians 5:21). Let's look further in the text as he throws in some wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 7:21–22 says *[21] Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. [22] Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed*

others. Let me put it this way. You can buy a computer that is hooked up to all the computers of all of your friends and you can listen to everything they are saying. If I could offer you an instrument where you could eaves drop on all of your friends, forget your enemies right now, would you buy it? If you do you have just said ‘sign me up for a paranoid life.’ Husbands, you don’t even want to know what your wife is saying about you out of ear shot and I know she loves you. She may not say it to someone else but she may say it while she is vacuuming. People speak out of frustration, maliciousness and out of everything.

Here is one of those great moments where ignorance is a blessing of the Lord. I have a good idea of what people might be saying about me but I don’t want to know because if I do know it will affect me and I’d rather simply not know and believe the best about them, instead of getting information I don’t need and believing not the worst about them but the worst about me. You get your clue for who you are in life not from your wisdom nor the evaluations of others upon you, but from the Lord. I’m not saying there is not a place for constructive criticism and feedback in our life but your life is not built upon what people say about you, either friends or enemies.

Your life is who God says you are. By creation, He made you in His image. By redemption you’re his. You are a joint heir with Christ. By providence He will keep you and nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ and by His providence all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). You know who you are from the Righteous One and His wisdom, not from what other people say about you. Sometimes when you say things out of frustration aren’t you glad they didn’t hear you? So you don’t need to hear them.

Ecclesiastes 7:23–24 says [23] *All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. [24] That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?* My self-sufficient approach to wisdom always ended in a disaster. The answer to life is not found in the philosophers, it’s found in the Book. We are not people of philosophical pursuit of truth. We are the people of God by Divinely revealed truth. We are utterly dependent on who God says He is and who God says we are by virtue of creation and redemption.

Ecclesiastes 7:25–29 says [25] *I turned 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. [26] 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. [27] Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— [28] 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. [29] See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*

Solomon is the author of this book. Does this have application that you can be caught by the wiles of the adulteress and the prostitute? Yes, but I believe he is referring back to Proverbs 1 through 9 which sets up the lady of folly and the lady of wisdom. The lady of folly is like the adulteress that ensnares you to death. The lady of wisdom is the one who sets you free to fear God which is the beginning of wisdom. I believe he is echoing what he has already written in Proverbs where he contrasts the lady of wisdom and the lady of folly using the virtuous woman concepts. We want the lady of wisdom which is God’s wisdom from above. We don’t want the lady of folly which is the self-righteous pursuit of our own wisdom under the sun which brings nothing but defeat in our life. Our sin and folly will bring us to destruction. We never find it in

the lady of folly yet she offers us satisfaction. The pursuit of wisdom and self-righteousness will not bring blessing.

Solomon has found out that everything that is offered under the sun is vanity. It never brings the wisdom and my righteousness is not enough. I can never get the answer to adversity and prosperity. In fact, I really end up grateful for adversity and prosperity because in those times God is revealing to me where my heart is. Is my heart with God, fearing God or is it with myself? God brings adversity and prosperity in my life as a lesson to direct my heart away from taking the cues in life from myself, my wisdom and my righteousness. God is directing my heart to Him. God even uses adversity and prosperity to convict me of my sins of self-absorption, self-redemption and self-reliance. God is giving me insight, calling me away from my confidence in prosperity, my discouragement in adversity, from my deliverance in my sins as if it's found in my righteousness and wisdom. God is calling me away from myself to Him to fear the Lord.

Thomas Boston wrote a sermon on this titled *The Crook in the Lot*. Lot refers to your life and we keep finding a crook, don't we? It's just not straight. There's a crook, there's a crook, there's a crook. What is the crook of the lot in Ecclesiastes 7? God is sovereign. God is over adversity and prosperity. The crook in the lot is the adversity, the difficulty that breaks into the prosperity that seemingly wipes away the joys of the prosperity. The crook in the lot is actually the grace of God that has been deployed in your life by the wisdom of God to focus your life to rest in the sovereignty of God. It's instructing you. It's not prosperity or adversity but it's the Lord who is sovereign over prosperity and adversity, who alone is righteous, gives us wisdom. The crook in the lot says 'now is not your hope for the Lord is your hope.' Don't get at home in a broken world. The Lord is your life and He is at home in you.

What is the greatest crook in the lot that you know of? It's the cross. Is there any time that we are confronted with something that is baffling? It is where men have God where they can put their hands on Him and they crucify Him. He just told us that the problem with man is the problem of man. In Ecclesiastes 7:29 it says that God made man in Adam upright but we brought the crook in the lot with our sin. Now a sovereign God is bringing us the blessing of grace even through the adversity, the evil and the prosperity, the good. He is sovereignly at work in our life and the greatest example is His Son which should not be on that cross but it why He says "Why have You forsaken Me?" It is because Jesus became me and you and the crook in the lot at the cross is the Shepherd's crook to bring us to life as the Lamb of God who was slain for our everlasting life. If God is able to do that with His Son, what is He able to do by His Son in you and me? Fear the Lord. Trust Him. Revere Him. Adore Him. Worship Him. Obey Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the time spent in Your Word. Holy Spirit speak to our hearts in these few moments of silence. What is the Holy Spirit shouting or whispering to you? Praise God for a life that comes from Christ, His wisdom and His righteousness. Praise God for a life view that's above the sun. Praise God for a lifestyle that manifests the majesty of a sovereign God in whom we rest even in a broken world and whom we never seek to replace with our own righteousness and wisdom, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Father, Amen.