

The Hope of Wisdom in Depravity

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 | Pastor Brett Toney | November 30, 2025

The Need for Hope

It seems like all of the really terrible but illuminating psychology studies were done in the 1940s and 50s. One I heard about recently was completed by Curt Richter in the 50s. He conducted what has become known as “The Hope Experiment,” or more grimly, “The Drowning Rat Experiment.”¹ Richter dropped rats into jars of water and timed them to see how long before they drowned. For some, it wasn’t long. Others had more endurance. With a baseline established, Richter added a variable for Round Two. When this second set of rats were just about to go under, he picked each up out of the water. After a break, they were put back in the water. And the remarkable thing is that they didn’t die. Richter observed, “After elimination of the hopelessness the rats do not die ... the rats quickly learn that the situation is not actually hopeless.” Church, a little glimmer of hope has a profound impact in the darkness.

On this first Sunday of the church year, this first Sunday of Advent—we lament, and we hope. In the darkening days of Advent, we are not without a glimmer of hope. We have lit that solitary, first candle in the confidence that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” that Jesus is “the light of men. The light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5, 14). And so we have hope; we persevere. Such it is with Ecclesiastes 7. We continue on in the vapor, amidst the blindness and darkness of life under the sun. And yet, wisdom points us forward to endure in hope—hope that perhaps one day there might be “a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (v.20). I would summarize Solomon’s main point in our passage this morning as: the hope of wisdom in the presence of depravity. Don’t get me wrong; we’re still in Ecclesiastes. There is still *hebel*—futility and frustration. But there is a glint on the horizon that indicates there is something more to hope in.

Wisdom in Confusion (Ecclesiastes 7:15-18)

So, let's first look at what wisdom would teach us. Look at v.15-18 and wisdom in confusion. Here is our presenting problem this morning, a key display of *hebel*; v.15, "There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing." This should not be so. Proverbs 3:2 teaches, "My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you." If you obey and keep commandments, if you are righteous, you ought to have a long life. But this cursed world doesn't obey the wisdom of Proverbs always, does it? No, seemingly too often the righteous perish while the wicked prosper and live long. I think of sisters dear to many of us who perished: Jen Jacobs, Kayla Rigney, Gwen Heinen. With Solomon, we lament before the Lord, "Why them, God? Why so soon?"

We're perplexed as to why the wicked prosper when the righteous die—from our vantage point—far too soon. In this confusion, wisdom offers a glimmer of hope. Solomon warns against two wrong responses, v.16 and v.17, before showing a way forward in v.18. The first wrong response strikes us as odd, "Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise." Is that possible? Being *too* righteous or *too* wise? I think what Solomon is cautioning against is a Pharisaical righteousness—a righteousness and wisdom that is self-determined, self-attained, self-appointed for self-glory. It's the problem of adding *to* Christianity, going above and beyond the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Bible. It's like telling one of your kids, "No dessert until the dishes are done," but they tell the siblings, "Dad said no dessert until *all* of our chores are done." This path is not wisdom but, as Solomon's question at the end of v.16 shows, will result in destruction.

The second wrong response is v.17, “Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.” Is Solomon saying a *little* bit of wickedness is ok? No, but don’t take away *from* Christianity the demands of holiness. There is a way of folly that heals wounds lightly by saying, “Peace, Peace, when there is no peace,” Jeremiah 6:14. It’s the path of cheap grace that results in going headlong into sin that very well may cause you to “die before your time.” If you excuse away your alcohol abuse since you’re not getting plastered *every* weekend, and think, “There’s grace for a little tipsiness after a long day,” your liver and sin will find you out.

Wisdom offers a glimmer of hope between these two wrong responses, v.18. Solomon says to hold on to both responses to avoid getting pulled fully either direction as you fear God. “The one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” In the tensions of futility, when we’re perplexed as to why the wicked prosper when the righteous die, we go forward holding the two responses in tension. There is holiness to be pursued, and there is grace to be received. And the fear of God keeps us on track, hoping in him. We don’t pursue being “overly righteous” because we fear God. On this point, pastor-theologian Jim Hamilton keenly prods by asking, “Do people perceive that you love them, or do they mainly sense your disapproval that they are not righteous?”² And we don’t be “overly wicked,” neglecting any call to the holiness without which we will not see the Lord (cf. Hebrews 12:14).

Wisdom for the Wayward (Ecclesiastes 7:19-24)

So, there is wisdom in confusion, v.15-18. And the second lesson wisdom would teach us, offering hope, is in v.19-24: wisdom for the wayward. Here Solomon commends wisdom. It is better than ten rulers with all the wealth, power, and armies at their disposal, v.19. Why? Because v.20, man is wayward. “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and *never* sins.” Similarly, wisdom would say v.21, “Don’t take to heart all the things that people

say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.” Why? V.22, because you know how wayward *you* are with *your* words. *You* have cursed or spoken ill of others, so you know how people are. So, we see that rulers and servants, great and small, you and me, one and all ... are wicked. But the way forward is not to be *more* wise. Solomon tried that, v.23. He found that wisdom to navigate life as and among sinners “was far from me ... far off, and deep, very deep.” But the wickedness in us all reveals that wisdom itself is actually not enough. As we strive to walk wisely under the sun, we see that wise Solomon found it was *never* enough. Wisdom itself is not adequate to provide a way forward to escape our own depravity and the consequences of it. The wisdom for the wayward is to recognize that wisdom itself is not the way forward.

“Where’s the hope in that?” Being humbled and having your idols toppled is where hope begins. The lamenting and longing of Advent ought to wreck your self-reliance. You *don’t* got this, girl. You’re *not* enough. Maybe for you it’s street smarts or sheer grit. Follow Solomon’s example in seeing your perceived greatest strength is actually your greatest hindrance. The wisdom for the wayward is pointing you to the fact that you *are* wayward. Like bushwhacking a new trail in the wilderness with great energy but going the wrong direction. If you have any hope of getting to your destination, you need to first be humbled by your error. There are none who are righteous, who do good and never sin. You won’t get out from under the sun by yourself. You need another’s righteousness—you need the righteousness of One greater than Solomon, of Jesus himself, who does good and never sinned. The glimmer of hope in wisdom for the wayward is shining the light on your insufficiency.

Wisdom Frustrated by Depravity (Ecclesiastes 7:25-29)

The third lesson of wisdom to give a glimpse of hope expands on the second. What we see in v.25-29 is that wisdom is frustrated by depravity. As Solomon seeks to understand all of

these things, he has sussed them all out. And, v.26, the thing more bitter than death that he finds is: Lady Folly. As he does in Proverbs 9, Solomon describes folly as a woman who ensnares sinners. When the Bible talks about folly, it doesn't mean "silly" or "lacking sense." It means opposed to God and his ways. "The *fool* says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1, 53:1). Being taken by Lady Folly is worse than death. Being ensnared to sin is to be bound to die the death that never ends. And yet, there is a hopeful glimmer here. There is *a* means by which we might please God and avoid her seduction. How might we do that? Fear God. That is Solomon's summary for the faithful life in futility. Fear God. He told us in 3:14 and 5:7. And he will say it again in 8:12, "It will be well [—it will be pleasing—] with those who fear God, because they fear before him." Be humbled by your inability and please God by regarding him as holy.

If you need more reason to not look within, follow Solomon's gaze in v.28. As he tried to make sense of the world, he looks out upon humanity, a thousand men and a thousand women. There is but one that Solomon can find; only one who fears God uprightly. I don't think his point is that he could find one man but not even a single woman who was upright. Of two thousand men and women, only *one* fears God. How rare it is to find the righteous who are pleasing to God. Why? Why is righteousness so hard to come by? Because, v.29, "See, this alone [Solomon found] that God made humanity upright, but they have sought out many schemes." He is talking about the Fall in Genesis 3 and humanity ever since. Our depravity frustrates wisdom with our many sinful schemes. Schemes by which we seek to find pleasure apart from God. Schemes by which we attempt to supplant God with idols. Schemes by which we try to assert ourselves as God.

The hope of wisdom in the presence of depravity is to embrace the fact of your depravity. Kids, do any of you struggle to open up jars? The common one in our house is the

peanut butter jar. We keep it in the fridge, so pulling it out gets some condensation. And usually there is some peanut butter greasiness on the outside. And small hands can't open the gummed up lid. The hope of wisdom for you when you can't open a jar is not to just keep struggling. You can't open it. It will be futile and frustrating. And telling you that isn't doing away with hope. You've got to start there, so you know you need to go ask dad. Don't go on scheming but recognize your inability, and go to your father. That's what Solomon is driving at here.

Wise Hope for Advent

Solomon knew the rat race of life. And I think we have seen through his retrospective contemplation of life captured in this book that he was well acquainted with grief, with sorrow, with despair. Solomon lived in Advent. All of his life: the darkening days of December with only a glimmer of hope. He was not unaware of the promise of God to his father David of a son who would sit on the throne forever. And I think Solomon, at this point of his life in writing Ecclesiastes, was under no delusions that he was the fulfillment of that promise. I think we have reason to believe that Solomon looked to the hope of the Son greater than him.

We don't get a statement like Abraham's faith or Isaiah's suffering servant or Jeremiah's New Covenant. But we get a glimmer of hope that there would be One who would enter into the depravity, into the darkness—the Light, which was the light of men (John 1:4). So, Church, may Ecclesiastes serve your soul this Advent. May Ecclesiastes serve your *hope*, that you would join Solomon in seeing the world truly, with all of the perplexities in the futility. May you not throw up your hands in despair, but fall on your knees before Christ, who has come—Christ, the ruler of nations. As we continue to dwell on the words of Ecclesiastes this Advent and set our hope on the Word that became flesh, consider this hopeful word from Derek Kidner, “Since futility was not the first word about our world, it no longer has to be the last.”³

PRAY: Romans 3:9-12, 20-25 For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one ... For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

¹Read more on [Wikipedia](#) and [Psychology Today](#)

²Jim Hamilton, “[Fearing God and Finding Balance](#)” (sermon delivered July 7, 2024)

³Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (BST), 73.