

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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Chapter 7 (continued)

Life Is Complicated: Live with Care

By **application**, the Preacher found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence (6:1–8:15).

A Person's Character in the Light of Revelation (7:15–29)

Two qualities of personal character dominate 7:15–29: **wisdom and righteousness**. Indeed, biblical wisdom displays a steady choice of right in accord with God's written Word. Thus, biblical wisdom finds expression in how a person lives his or her life. After a careful reading of Ecclesiastes, Charles Swindoll identifies those practical implications in his definition of wisdom: "*Wisdom is the God-given ability to see life with rare objectivity and to handle life with rare stability.*"¹

Balanced Living (vv. 15–18)

Wisdom and righteousness characterize the lives of those who "fear God." However, exhibiting those characteristics involves balance in how a person spends his or her life. Solomon comes to this conclusion through careful observation. **Verse 15** marks the eleventh time Solomon has used the phrase "**I have seen.**"² The recurrences of this phraseology remind the reader that Ecclesiastes records a thorough examination of life "under the sun." Indeed, the writer speaks of observations about his own life, a life he characterizes as "**my lifetime of futility**" (literally, "in the days of my futility" or "in my fleeting days"). The same combination of *hebel* and "days" occurs also in Job 7:16 ("my days are *but* a breath"), Psalm 78:33 ("So He brought their days to and end in futility"), Ecclesiastes 6:12 ("the few years [lit., days] of his futile life"), and 9:9 ("all the days of your fleeting life"). Although life has passed Solomon faster than he could imagine, he manages to make some observations related to its brevity. *First*, he notices that a righteous person's life might end while he is still living righteously. *Second*, he observes that a wicked person might experience an extended life in spite of his continual

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 220 (emphasis his).

² See 1:14; 2:24; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:4, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9, 10; 10:5, 7..

wickedness. In other words, **the length of a person's life does not depend upon his spirituality.**

Solomon's observations of real life appear to contradict the teaching of both biblical law (e.g., Deut 4:40; 5:16; 30:17–18; cp. 1 Kgs 3:14) and wisdom (e.g., Prov 10:27; 12:21). Law and wisdom announce principles and proclaim the ideal. While the law promises blessing for righteous, obedient living, **the wisdom of Proverbs builds on those principles, establishing general truths.** In fact, individual proverbs “present life in the form of *paradigms*, patterns, and stereotypical generalizations.”³ They were not intended to cover all circumstances. Instead, the “proverb is limited to the specific slice of reality that it portrays.”⁴

Righteous living, obedience to the Word of God, prolongs a person's life, while the opposite, disobedience and wicked living shorten an individual's life. This does not mean that the righteous will live longer than the average person's lifespan, or that the wicked will live a shorter time than the average. Only God knows what the lifespan is for each individual (Job 14:5; Eccl 3:1–2). On the one hand, God extends the lives of some righteous individuals for their godliness, but they might still die younger than some of the wicked people among whom they live. On the other hand, God shortens the lives of some wicked people by “the debilitating effects of their lifestyle and the judicial actions”⁵ which He will take against them. However, those same wicked persons might live longer than the righteous who live among them.

Does Solomon refer merely to physical life and death in his observation of these contrasting circumstances? Rather than referring to the concepts of physical life and death (i.e., clinical death), the text might speak of “abundant life in fellowship with God, a living relationship that is never envisioned as ending in clinical death in contrast to the wicked's eternal death.”⁶ Thus, Proverbs depicts the wicked spending their time in darkness (2:13; 4:19; 20:20) rather than in light. In Ecclesiastes Solomon repeats the description of the unrighteous and foolish living in darkness (2:14). Statements like Proverbs 12:28 cannot possibly mean that the righteous person will not die, so **the text might refer to an abundant life rather than a life governed by death and darkness.**

Few verses have stimulated more discussion and investigation than **7:16–18** with their seeming contradiction to biblical norms of behavior. Interpreters who have already placed Ecclesiastes in the Hellenistic era and associated the book with Greek philosophy, identify the “Golden Mean” with these verses.⁷ **Moderation alone, however, fails to do justice to the text.** Verses 16 and 17 seem to recommend a response to the observation recorded in verse 15. Since being righteous or being wicked does not guarantee a longer or shorter life in comparison with other individuals, it is wise not to go to extremes in

³ Ted A. Hildebrandt, “Proverb,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 235 (emphasis is Hildebrandt's).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵ Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001).

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1 – 15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 105.

⁷ E.g., Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 275–76. See response in Wayne A. Brindle, “Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15–18,” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 302.

either righteousness or wickedness. The former will not guarantee living longer than anyone else and the latter will not guarantee dying sooner than anyone else.

Kaiser rightly observes that people sometimes delude themselves, as well as family and friends,

through a multiplicity of pseudoreligious acts of sanctimoniousness; ostentatious showmanship in the act of worship; a spirit of hypercriticism against minor deviations from one's own cultural norms, which are equated with God's righteousness; and a disgusting conceit and supercilious, holier-than-thou attitude venerated over the whole mess.⁸

In 2:15 Solomon asked why he had been "extremely wise," since both the wise and the fool meet the same fate (death). Both that text and the present verses encounter the same issue. The real delusion occurs when someone thinks they can either forestall or hasten their own death by engaging in more extreme forms of religious or irreligious living.

They are not in control of their death, God is.

Back to an examination of what is good in life "under the sun," Solomon observes that **(1) it is a good thing to both enjoy life while one has it and (2) to pursue godliness (v. 18)**. The one who fears God (see 3:14 and 5:7) maintains both pursuits.⁹ Fearing God includes, in this context, a sense of dependence upon Him for one's security.¹⁰ God gives the good things in life and He controls the time of one's death.

Wisdom Rather Than Perfection (vv. 19–22)

Next, Solomon turns to an illustration in order to emphasize the great value of wisdom (v. 19). He compares an individual's benefits from wisdom to the benefits a city experiences by having ten rulers to take care of the needs of her citizens. Eaton concludes that the illustration teaches that "wisdom in the fear of God may be greater than the collective wisdom of a group of experienced leaders."¹¹ The thought fits the instruction found in Proverbs 24:5–6 and anticipates a more expanded illustration in Ecclesiastes 9:13–16.¹²

Verses 20–22 return to a thought brought up earlier in verse 7. **Even the wise and the righteous manifest the effects of a fallen nature**. No one can claim to be free of sin during his or her lifetime "under the sun." That flaw in the human character prevents anyone from being able to depend on their own wisdom or righteousness to provide them the enjoyment of God's good gifts. **Verse 20 sounds Pauline** (cp. Rom 3:9–20, esp. v. 10, the only potential New Testament quotation of Ecclesiastes). Interestingly, Paul chooses to cite passages from the Old Testament to prove the sinfulness of mankind. The doctrine of total depravity originates in the Old Testament. This very verse appears to be an expansion of a briefer statement made by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kgs 8:46, "When they sin against You (for there is no man who does not sin) . . .").

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 85–86.

⁹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 324.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 347.

¹¹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 115.

¹² Compare these illustrations with the historical example of a wise woman in 2 Sam 20:15–22.

The apostle Paul declares that “the wages of sin is death” in **Romans 6:23**. Although Solomon does not refer to wages in this way, he speaks of the labor of mankind and the fact that labor does not succeed in gaining an escape from death.¹³ Paul continues his proclamation with a contrast, “but the gift of God is eternal life.” Interestingly, Solomon expresses a similar thought by focusing on the gifts that one receives from God in this life and the fact that He has set “eternity in their heart” (3:11–13). When the reader connects Ecclesiastes 7:20 with 7:15–18, he learns that **no amount of righteous living can prevent the sin that so easily assails every person**. Both sin and death are certain—neither can be avoided completely. Thus, the question that remains involves how a person can be delivered from sin and death. **How can an individual experience life beyond the sun?** The answer has already been revealed with the imperative in 5:7 (“fear God”) and the advice in 7:18 (“the one who fears God comes forth with both of them”).

Someone might question Solomon’s assertion that everyone is an unrighteous sinner. Anticipating just such an objection, Solomon directs the reader to consider the tongue (see James 3:2–12). **Each individual fails in act or speech** (vv. 20–22). Everyone has spoken ill of another outside that person’s presence (see 10:20). Overly righteous (self-righteous) individuals might hold a grudge over what someone else has said about them behind their backs. Overly wicked persons respond in kind with cutting speech against those whom they believe have defamed them. **The individual acutely aware of his or her own sinfulness will more readily shrug off the foolish and unkind remarks of others**. Solomon knows that his major point involves demonstrating that everyone sins—something they must know before they can rightly prepare for life beyond the sun. However, he also takes the opportunity to offer instruction as to how a wise and righteous person ought to behave while yet “under the sun.”

The Search for an Explanation (vv. 23–29)

The final section of chapter 7 (vv. 23–29) continues the focus on wisdom. **Solomon confesses that he lacks the wisdom that has the capability of answering life’s tough questions—especially questions about the inequities of life and the inevitability of death**. The failure lies partly in the fact that he relies upon his own desire and will to be wise (**v. 23**). True wisdom comes only from God. How can Solomon make such a statement about the failure of his wisdom, when God had granted him an abundance of wisdom (1 Kgs 3:9–12)? According to the historical account, God gave Solomon wisdom primarily to discern and administer justice. As he writes Ecclesiastes, however, **Solomon realizes that his wisdom has limits. Only God is all-wise**. No human being possesses the capacity to fully understand God’s plan and program. Solomon’s search for that kind of wisdom brought him to the same questions and the same conclusion as those reached by Job (see Job 28:12–13, 23). The ultimate wisdom does not reside “in the land of the living” (Job 28:13), but God knows its place (Job 28:23). Yes, such wisdom “is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?” (**Ecc 7:24**). As for the answer to entering life beyond the sun, Job speaks of a Redeemer (Job 19:25–27; cp. 33:23–28). Does Solomon know about a Redeemer? To what conclusion will his observations lead him?

¹³ Note the use of the word (Hebrew *yithron*) translated variously as “gain,” “advantage,” and “profit” in 1:3; 2:11, 13; 3:9; 5:8, 15; 7:12; 10:10, 11.

Solomon himself set out to discover the ultimate wisdom. “I directed my mind” (literally, “I and my heart looked around,” v. 25) stresses Solomon’s determined purpose. The threefold description of the goal of his determination (“**to know, to investigate, and to seek**”) summarizes his previous testimony concerning his search for wisdom (1:13, 17; 2:3). “**Explanation**” translates a Hebrew word first occurring in 7:25 in *Ecclesiastes*. It will occur three times in verses 25–29 and a final time in 9:10. According to Estes, the writer “indicates that he endeavored to make an intellectual accounting of the events in the universe.”¹⁴ When Solomon added up all he had learned, what was the outcome? Before revealing the outcome, he reminds the reader that the scope of his search includes seeking knowledge of the wickedness and delusion of foolishness (v. 25; see 1:17; 2:3, 12).

His finding amounts to what he concludes as early as 3:11—“man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.” As recently as 7:14, Solomon makes a similar observation (“man will not discover anything *that will be* after him”). In **verse 24** he poses a rhetorical question, “**Who can discover it?**” **Obviously, no one can—not even someone with the wisdom of Solomon.**

However, the reader is in for a shock. Solomon not only repeats the impossibility of success in his search, **he associates his discovery with his relationship to a seductress (v. 26).** Commentators disagree on the identification of this woman and the significance of concluding the search in such a fashion. Garrett argues that the text teaches that “because of sin, married life will be a war instead of a joy.”¹⁵ He bases his interpretation on his understanding of Genesis 3:16. He claims that God grants a loving wife, rather than “a human trap” to a righteous man.¹⁶

A better interpretation, however, takes the woman to be **a figurative representation of folly** (compare Prov 9:1–6, 13–18).¹⁷ Wisdom and folly permeate the immediate context of verse 26, so this interpretation makes a good deal of sense. Even the figurative references to folly, both in Proverbs and here, provoke readers to remember Solomon’s many wives and concubines. Consider the type of women with whom Solomon had the closest acquaintance. One thousand harem-wives and concubines only turned the king’s heart away from God (1 Kgs 11:1–8). If any man knew what effect a seductress might have on a man, Solomon knew. He instructed his sons accordingly, warning them of the evil woman. Since he depicted wisdom as a woman (Prov 1:20–33) and spoke highly of a number of good women (Eccl 9:9; Prov 18:22; 31:10–31), **there is no justification for a reader to take the statement as a universal truth regarding all women.**

So, what does Solomon mean when he declares, “I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these” (v. 28)? He utilizes a hyperbole (“one among a thousand”)¹⁸ to express the uniqueness of one individual (cp. Job 33:23). Gender wars and an over-emphasis on political correctness encourage modern readers to

¹⁴ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 349.

¹⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, , 325.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 349; C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 272.

¹⁸ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 127.

accuse the author of chauvinism and sexism.¹⁹ Solomon did tend to marry pagan women of influence and of use to him politically. What godly woman would place herself willingly in the midst of the jealousies, ungodliness, and politics of Solomon's royal harem?²⁰ **Although Solomon had a thousand wives, there is no guarantee that this "thousand" refers only to them—certainly they may be included, at least some of them. It is just a large rounded figure to express the rarity of a wise person, be that person male or female.** Bartholomew summarizes the message of verse 26 with "Flee folly!"²¹ If one's folly involves love of money, flee! If one's folly is lust, flee!—whether the person representing that folly is male or female.

Verse 27 returns to the "explanation" (cf. v. 25) toward which he has systematically worked. He still seeks it (v. 28), because it has eluded his search. Among a thousand, Solomon has found one man, but not one woman. Remember the discussion above—Scripture characterizes Solomon's experience with women quantitatively, not qualitatively. No wonder he could not find a wise woman—those who dominated his life drew him into idolatry and a departure from God and His Law. **The writer interprets verse 28 with verse 29:** "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices." **God is not to blame for the absence of wisdom—mankind is.** From the Fall to the present, people have turned away from God and away from wisdom. They have all walked the path of folly. Isaiah penned the same truth by means of a different metaphor: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isa 53:6). Thus, the chapter concludes with the observation that people pervert the right way of God—they bend that which He had created straight. The irony of this leaps off the page, since no human being can "straighten what He has bent" (v. 13). The wording augments the enigma of mankind's existence and his pursuit of wisdom.

At the conclusion of his exposition of chapter 7, Swindoll asks **three questions that every believer ought to ponder after studying 7:15–29**. Each question concerns one of the products of God-given wisdom:

1. Regarding *balance*: Is wisdom guarding us from extremes?
2. Regarding *strength*: Is wisdom keeping us stable?
3. Regarding *insight*: Is wisdom clearing our minds?²²

Questions for study:

- What helps you to resolve the seeming contradictions between what you see in life and what the Word of God promises?
- How do enjoying life and pursuing godliness sometimes come into conflict?
- What is the connection between life "under the sun" and life beyond the sun?
- Why do some interpreters so readily accuse Solomon of chauvinism?

¹⁹ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 204.

²⁰ Esther 2:1–19 provides an account of the type of process involved in being chosen to join a royal harem in ancient near eastern cultures. Ahasuerus conducted a beauty pageant including sleep-overs so the candidates could demonstrate their qualifications to be his wife and queen.

²¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 267.

²² Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, 231 (emphasis his).