

October 20, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ecclesiastes
Community Baptist Church
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THE CROOK IN THE LOT Ecclesiastes 7:13-18

Chapter six in this study ended by asking two questions: “*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?*” (Ecclesiastes 6:12) The preacher answered the first question, “Who knows what is good for man?” in the first twelve verses of chapter seven. The short version is that coming face to face with our vulnerability, being forced into somber contemplation about the end of life, and being rebuked is, in the long run, good for us. We know from experience that the pain we endure at such times makes us better people.

Now, in the verses of our text, the preacher will answer the second question: “Who knows what comes next?” The answer is, “God who puts the crookedness in our paths of life knows.” And more than that, He knows why He brings adverse circumstances into our lives. He knows what He plans to accomplish in our lives by dragging us into the trial.

That is the opening argument of James’s letter. He wrote, *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (James 1:2-5).*

The key to facing our trials effectively is wisdom. The preacher in our text is likely Solomon who explained the first source of the wisdom we need in order to navigate the “crooks” of life. He penned,

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10).

Life is full of crooks and turns, ups and downs, and always unexpected circumstances. How do we keep our equilibrium while walking such a treacherous path? We must know God so well that we rest solidly in the truth of His sufficient word to sustain us.

Consider God’s Work (vv.13-14).

Our text begins with the challenge for us to learn as we observe God’s work. *Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? (v.13).* The Hebrew word translated “consider” is a key word in this text. Of course, we see it here in verse thirteen, *Consider the work of God.* It shows up again in verse fourteen, *In the day of adversity consider (v.14).* We find it again in verse fifteen, *In my vain life I have seen everything (v.15).* The word (*ra-aw*) means to regard, perceive, feel, understand, learn, enjoy.

As we face the tests and trials of life, we should not respond with frustration or fear. Nor should we adopt an attitude of fatalism concluding that we are just victims of circumstances. There are very good reasons why we are in the trials we are in. Think about it, learn, perceive, and come to understand why these things happen.

The object of our consideration is the work of God. What does that look like? Stop to consider this: Who had greater, more inexplicable trials than Job? Job had no idea that God had granted Satan permission to crush him. In light of his efforts to be righteous, to please God, Job was dumbfounded at his pain and suffering. While Job was in that state of suffering, one of his friends, Elihu, challenged him, “*Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God*” (Job 37:14). That is what Solomon challenges us to do in this text.

In a similar way God challenged Job, “*Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me*” (Job 38:3). God making truth known to Job has the same result as him considering God’s work. God was forcing Job to consider, to think about, to perceive, to understand. In that considering process, God graciously revealed Himself to Job, which forced Job to see clearly the hand of God behind all his trouble. Job concluded, “*I had heard*

of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). After considering God’s work, Job could finally see clearly that he never saw clearly!

God challenges us to do the same thing. We have difficulty understanding why we or our loved ones suffer chronic illness. “How could what appeared to be the perfect marriage end in divorce?” we wonder. Why would a child who was reared in a thoroughly Christian environment choose to live in sin – and attempt to justify it? Or we wonder, “Where was God when I lost my job after sacrificing a lifetime of service to the company?” Are these accidents or just unexpected, unplanned circumstances? Or are these actually the works of God?

An honest conclusion of our considering is that God makes things crooked. So the preacher asked, *Who can make straight what he has made crooked? (v.13b)*. This is the second time in the preacher’s experiment that he thought about crooked things. Earlier he stated, *What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (Ecclesiastes 1:15)*. In a similar way as he expressed in our text, the preacher realized that along life’s road there are crooks and turns.

The road of life is never simple, straight, and clear. We wish that life looked like Interstate 70 that is boringly straight through Kansas. But in reality, our lives look more like old Route 19 winding through the hills of West Virginia. However, there is a big difference between Solomon’s conclusion in 1:15 and his conclusion in our text. In 1:15 Solomon simply stated the fact of life that the road is crooked. In our text, he taught that the road of life is crooked **because of** God’s sovereign control over all things.

That is the point in “consider.” Thinking about, perceiving, understanding God’s works leads us to the conclusion that God makes the road crooked. This is the point where some Christians get a bit uncomfortable. Could it be true that God Himself actually allows our lives to be difficult? That’s not very positive! Stop to consider, “Whose road was more crooked than Job’s?” But who made the road crooked? Read the beginning of his story. *And the LORD said to Job: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.” Then Job answered the LORD and said: “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my*

hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further” (Job 40:1-5).

In the same way we could ask, “Why did Joseph’s road have such painful, awful crooks and turns in it?” After years of suffering and then years of incredibly important service, Joseph learned that God allowed, yeah authored, his brothers’ anger, his being beaten, thrown into a pit and sold to Midianites. It was God who had Potipher buy Joseph. God allowed Potipher’s wife to falsely accuse Joseph and have him thrown in prison. God had the butler forget about Joseph. But it was also God who exalted Joseph. And Joseph concluded, “*And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5).*

God does His work and no one can change God’s work. The essential work of sinful, rebellious humanity is to attempt to change God’s work. Typically, this amounts to merely renaming God’s work so that what He calls good, rebels call evil, and what God calls evil, rebels call good. But there is also danger for God’s children to grow weary in the road God sets us on so that we respond by trying to straighten the crooked spots. We will wear ourselves out trying to conform God’s will to ours. The far better response is for us to acknowledge God’s power, majesty, wisdom, and love for us, and to rest in it.

That will look like stability and confidence according to verse fourteen. On one hand, because God is doing His work, we should rejoice in the good times. *In the day of prosperity be joyful (v.14a)*. It is good and proper to rejoice in the day of prosperity. But as we rejoice, we should not rejoice in favorable circumstances because they will change. We don’t want to rejoice in stuff because it is passing away. Don’t rejoice in relationships because they, too, can change over night. Don’t rejoice in your good feelings because your heart is deceitful and won’t feel the same next week. Rather, we are to rejoice in our knowledge of and relationship with God.

On the other hand, it is also good and proper to contemplate in bad times, or as Solomon put it, *In the day of adversity consider (v.14a)*. We can rest assured that there will be times of adversity in every Christian’s life. They are the “crooks in the lot” as Thomas Boston called them. In those dark and difficult times, think, try to perceive, try to understand.

The result of our considering must bring us to complete trust in God (v.14b). We must conclude that *God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him (v.14b)*. God makes good times and bad times. We naturally believe that God makes the good times, and the devil, or our neighbor, or our co-worker, or our spouse make the bad times.

It is true that all trouble, sickness, pain, and loss is the result of the sin principle. Everything began to die, to wind down, to deteriorate when Adam brought sin in to Eden. Since that time, humanity has not ceased to experience the pain of sin. But remember who authored the curse of sin. Satan is the original sinner, the father of lies, a murderer, the supernatural troublemaker. But Satan works within boundaries God establishes. That truth is demonstrated by the permission God gave to Satan regarding Job. In fact, God brought up Job to Satan. *And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job . . ."* (Job 1:8)? We need to learn that God's work involves putting crooks in our roadway.

Having learned who God is and the work He does, we must rest in God's will and work. We need to be content *that man may not find out anything that will be after him (v.14b)*. No one can thoroughly find out God's plan. Instead of fretting about what will be in life, our considering of God's work leads us to fully lean on Him in faith. The lesson here is that faith is the critical aspect of wisdom. Absolute faith in God's control of all matters of life leads us to conclude with Job in the midst of deep and dark valleys: *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD"* (Job 1:21). Job also came to the extreme conclusion, *"Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face"* (Job 13:15).

Consider Life's Experiences (v.15).

We consider not only God's works, but Solomon also challenged us to observe life and learn. He confessed, *In my vain life I have **seen** everything (v.15a)*. To see, as the preacher used the word, means the same thing as "consider" in verse thirteen. It is another use of the Hebrew word for "consider." Throughout life, the preacher has been observant, learning, trying to understand. We realize that no one

but God sees everything. But all of us observe and consider all of the **various kinds** of things.

In that process, we see plenty of evidence of "crooks" (not thieves, but twists and turns in life's road). And when you see these kinds of things, how do you explain bad things happening to good people? Or how do you explain good things happening to bad people? There is plenty of evidence that God is accomplishing His works for His glory in the lives of real people. Most of our peers prefer to ignore the evidence and fill their lives with the loud noise and bright lights of vanity fair. Many people choose to become unrealistic and attempt to interpret all things in life positively. The "power of positive thinking" does not come to grips with the apparent "unfairness" of life.

The fact is that sometimes life doesn't seem fair. We have a grandson who just turned three. Several times this past week we heard him say, "Hey, that's not fair." Apparently, an adult in the family church commented on how a boy so young would be able to understand a concept so deep. Our son explained to the adult that Magnus has no idea what he is saying. "He is just repeating what he heard the older kids say." Nor do we seldom have any idea what God is doing when we conclude that life is not fair.

It does not seem fair to us when the righteous man perishes. The preacher observed that *there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness (v.15b)*. That was certainly the case for Job, wasn't it? How do we explain a young Christian family losing loved ones in a car accident? Or how does the person limited to human knowledge explain the crucifixion of the most righteous person who ever lived? In our finite human wisdom, none of those things should happen to good people.

Worse might be the reality that good things happen to the wicked people. Solomon observed that the righteous person sometimes has trouble, but at the same time, *there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing (v.15b)*. "How is that fair?" we wonder. In Mark Twain's *The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn't Come to Grief*, we read about an irresponsible boy named Jim. In typical Twain fashion, we hear how he climbed Farmer Acorn's apple tree to swipe apples. But the branch didn't break, the farmer's dog didn't come after him, and the boy got away with his crime. Later we

learn that he went fishing on Sunday and didn't fall in the water and drown. Another time, he got caught in a storm while fishing on Sunday and didn't get struck by lightning. In fact, all through life, the bad little boy got away with all kinds of mischief. Twain concludes the story about the boy by writing how Jim, "got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalist, wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature." (Mark Twain, *The Best Short Stories of Mark Twain*, Modern Library Classics, New York: Random House, 2004, 10-13.)

We ask why God allows people like Hugh Hefner and Jeffrey Epstein to die wealthy and apparently having lived the good life? Is it not totally unfair for God to allow mass murderers to commit suicide rather than face justice and bring closure to their victims' families? The reality is that life is not fair. Fair, what is justifiable, is for God to send every single person to eternal punishment the moment we are born. But instead of the punishment we deserve, because of God's grace and mercy, He offers the blood of Christ as the means to cover our offenses against Him. At the same time, because of God's grace and mercy, He allows His choicest servants to endure hardships in order that they might become like Jesus our Savior.

The One Who Fears God Benefits (vv.16-18).

In the final verses of our text, Solomon taught us that true wisdom is balanced (vv.16-17). We quickly realize we need wisdom when we read that we should be careful not to become overly righteous. That seems a bit strange. *Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? (v.16).* More exactly, the warning is for us not to become self-righteous. At first blush we are tempted to ask, "Does not God commend righteousness?" The idea here is trying to be *overly righteous*. That ends up being a case of a person pretending to have a lot of righteousness. The overly righteous person tries to persuade God by their self-righteousness. Conversely, true righteousness is the gift of God that makes us like Christ.

Nor should we through our own efforts make ourselves truly wise. That warning might apply to human wisdom. Human wisdom is the gathering of knowledge about passing things, and then the ability to put that knowledge to work is wisdom (1 Corinthians 1). However, true wisdom does not flow from within the fallen nature.

True wisdom is founded on the right attitude about God. Again, Solomon wrote in the Proverbs, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10)*. The fear of the Lord comes from knowing Him. The fear of the Lord understands that God is awesomely fearful, able to destroy us with a mere thought. And the fear of the Lord understands that God loves us to the point of paying for our sins with His own blood.

True wisdom rests in that knowledge about God. True wisdom is confident in a relationship with God. Therefore, true wisdom does not have to figure out the mysteries of life. True wisdom is not the amassing of enough facts to explain difficult situations. True wisdom is not even completely the right application of Bible truth (though that is much the case for wisdom). True wisdom simply rests in God's sovereign control of all things. To be overly-wise is to try to explain everything about your "crook."

In contrast, wickedness really does lead to a shortened life in most cases. The warning is, *Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? (v.17)*. Again God's rule is not that a little wickedness is okay. Common sense is sufficient to conclude that drug lords, mafia, gang members, thieves, and pimps do not generally live long lives. Whoever heard of retirement programs for people like that? They don't need them.

The person who fears God gets this. People who have learned to fear the Lord grasp the truth about God's control of all things. The preacher concluded, *It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand (v.18a)*. In all your considering, learn that God is in control of both the good and the bad. Faith grasps this paradox firmly, while human reason cannot accept it.

Actually, fear of God keeps us balanced. So Solomon told us, *For the one who fears God shall come out from both of them (v.18b)*. Again, to fear of God is to know Him, respect Him, and trust Him completely. That attitude keeps us from becoming self-righteous.

That attitude prevents us from thinking we have come up with the answer to life's dilemmas. It keeps us from yielding to the evil desires of the flesh, finding the easy way out, making our own rose garden instead of walking through the crooks in our lot.

Scottish Puritan Thomas Boston was a faithful pastor who labored among the same congregation for twenty-five years. He was often given to discouragement and depression. A quick review of his life might explain why. He was often in poor health and his wife suffered from a chronic illness. He and his wife had ten children – six of whom died. Boston had named one of the sons that had died Ebenezer, “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

Philip Ryken wrote about Boston in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, “When his wife gave birth to another son, Boston considered naming the boy Ebenezer as well. Yet the minister hesitated. Naming the boy Ebenezer would be a testimony of hope in the faithfulness of God. But what if this child died too, and the family had to bury another Ebenezer? That would be a loss too bitter to bear. By faith Boston decided to name his son Ebenezer. Yet the child was sickly, and despite the urgent prayers of his parents, he never recovered. As the grieving father wrote in his *Memoirs*, “It pleased the Lord that he also was removed from me.” (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Publishers, 2010, 161-162).

This is the man who wrote the classic work, *The Crook in the Lot: The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Afflictions of Men Displayed*. He divided the book into three propositions that speak to our crooked roads. Proposition I: “Whatever crook there is in our lot, it is of God's making.” Proposition II, “What God sees suitable to mar, we shall not be able to mend in our lot. What crook God makes in our lot, we shall not be able to even.” Proposition III: “The considering the crook in the lot as the work of God is a proper means to bring one to behave rightly under it.”

To behave rightly under God's sovereign control is to maintain a right relationship with God, a right view of God, a right understanding of God. That right consideration is the essence of true faith, fully leaning on God in good times and in bad times.