

Limitations of Righteousness and Wisdom

📖 Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

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Last time we were studying Ecclesiastes 7:1-14 and we found some very interesting verses about adversity and prosperity and why many times adversity is better than prosperity. The key to these verses is verse 14, where Solomon says "In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other So that man will not discover anything that will be after him." The truth is that God has a plan for our lives that involves times of prosperity and times of adversity. And when we have times of prosperity we should be happy, but when we have times of adversity we should think. Both times in life come from God and we can't discover what He has planned next for our lives, so the key is to accept both as from Him and respond accordingly.

In verses 1-6 there are a series of adversities that are better than prosperities. Verse 1, "A good name is better than good ointment, and likewise, the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth." A good name is a good reputation and it is better than good ointment, the oil a mother would put on a newborn child. The reason a good reputation is better is because on the day of one's death a good reputation will continue to influence people, whereas good ointment on the day of one's birth only holds promise for the future. In verse 2 "it is better to go to a funeral than it is to go to a party, because that is the end of every man, And the living takes it to heart." Going to a funeral makes us think about the brevity of life. It forces us to take stock of our lives. So it is better than going to a party where we will not reflect on our lives. In verse 3, "Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy." Sorrow is better than laughter because sorrow can do something for our heart that laughter cannot do. In verse 4 a similar truth is taught, "The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure." Mourning can do something for our mind that pleasure simply cannot do. In verse 5, "It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man Than for one to listen to the song of fools." A wise man's rebuke is more constructive than flattery from fools. Verse 6 shows the uselessness of a fool's flattery. "For as the crackling of kindling under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool; And this is useless." So in many cases vv 1-6 show that adversity is better than prosperity.

In vv 7-10 Solomon warns that a man who is on the right track in life, trusting the Lord through adversity and developing wisdom, can be tempted to get off that track. In verse 7, "Oppression makes a wise man mad, And a

bribe corrupts the heart." Oppression and bribery are one way to seemingly solve a problem. But they destroy wisdom, so they should be avoided. In verse 8, "The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit." Because the end of a matter is better than its beginning, a temptation is to use arrogance rather than patience to get there. This should be avoided. In verse 9, "Do not be eager in your heart to be angry. For anger resides in the bosom of fools." Anger seems like a way to solve some problems, but it is a foolish way. It is much better to be patient. In verse 10, "Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this." The old days were not better than the present days. To act like they are is foolish. So in vv 7-10 there are many opportunities for a wise man to turn away from wisdom, but he should not.

Then, in vv 11-12 Solomon shows that prosperity in wisdom is better than other prosperities. In verse 11, "Wisdom along with an inheritance is good," should be translated "wisdom is better than an inheritance, And an advantage to those who see the sun." Wisdom is supreme over an inheritance because it allows one to manage an inheritance. Verse 12, "Wisdom is protection just as money is protection." A parallel is being drawn to show what wisdom can do. It protects you like money protects you. But, Solomon says, "the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors."

Now consider in verse 13, "the work of God." "For who is able to straighten what He has bent?" Life is not a straight easy path, but an arduous journey. The one who bent it is God, and who is able to straighten it? You can't straighten what God has bent. All you can do is respond to it. So verse 14, respond in this way, "In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider-." Those are your two basic responses to everyday circumstances. Prosperity, enjoy it, be happy; adversity, consider, be thoughtful. "God has made the one day as well as the other." And you're not going to figure out what is coming next in your life. You can't. God won't let you, and the reason is He wants you to respond to Him by faith. Trust Him, not in your mental ability to foresee the future. You just have to trust Him. So just be ready; adversity, prosperity, back and forth, back and forth, and respond to Him. And when you do you gain a good reputation, a good name, and that will continue to influence people's lives even when you're gone.

Today we come to Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 and these verses are very enigmatic and difficult. The argument is very difficult to follow. So if you're looking for something to bother you immensely, try to unwind these verses. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to interpret verses 15-29 in the context of verse 14 and as a continuation of verse 14. The end of verse 14 says that man can't discover anything that will come after him. That means we can't figure out the future of our lives. We don't know what is going to happen next. Is it going to be some prosperity? Is it going to be some adversity? That's not what we want. Adversity is emphatically not what we want. That's what we want to avoid. So what people do is they try to live their lives a certain way in order to manipulate God into giving them little presents down here, giving them a good life. Solomon saw people trying to do this. There's nothing new under the sun. That's what verse 15 is about. **I have seen everything during my**

lifetime of futility. The word **everything** in the Hebrew is *kol* and should be translated in this context as “both,” not “everything.” He has seen both things that follow in the verse; on one hand, he saw **a righteous man who perishes** and on the other, a **wicked man who prolongs his life**. Now this doesn’t seem right to most folks. But that is what Solomon said he saw. Let’s look at what he saw in detail.

Observation one was **a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness**. The sense of **in his righteousness** is “in spite of his righteousness.” Glenn said, “The word “in” in the phrases **in his righteousness** and **in his wickedness** can here mean “in spite of.”¹ In other words, despite the man living a righteous lifestyle, he died young. This doesn’t seem right. In fact, it seems to contradict the OT teaching that a righteous lifestyle would lead to a long and blessed life. But it’s what Solomon observed. So how do we reconcile this observation with the OT teaching? By showing that the OT teaching was never meant to be understood as an absolute, but as a generalization. Blessing in life for living a righteous life was only a general rule of thumb, not an absolute. So it was not to be understood in such a rigid way that no exceptions were permitted. The fact is, there are exceptions.

Observation two was the opposite, **a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness**. The sense of **in his wickedness**, again, is “in spite of his wickedness.” In other words, even though he lived a wicked life, he lived a long life. This also seemed to contradict the OT teaching that a wicked lifestyle would lead to premature death. But that is what Solomon observed. And the observation shows that the doctrine was never meant to be interpreted in an absolute sense, without any room for exceptions. In practical day to day life, there were people in OT Israel who lived righteous lives and died young and there were people who lived wicked lives and lived long. This confirms the conclusion of verse 14, that man cannot predict what will happen in his future and therefore cannot manipulate the plan of God. Living a righteous lifestyle will not guarantee an easy, trouble free life and living wickedly will not guarantee a difficult, trouble-filled life. There are exceptions to the rule so you can’t figure out what is coming next in your life and that forces you have to learn how to live in faithful dependence upon God.

Now it’s interesting how natural it is for Christians and non-Christians to think that they can manipulate the future by living a certain way in the present. They think, for example, that if they live their lives carefully it will guarantee, or should guarantee, easy passage. But this doesn’t seem to work out because all the while there are other people living carelessly and their lives are relatively trouble free. The mere observation vexes people and can lead to them throwing in the towel. I mean, what is the point of trying to live carefully? If I can’t guarantee a certain quality of life by living carefully, I might as well live carelessly. But the bottom line is we can’t manipulate the plan of God. He has a plan for our lives and we are going to go through that plan and it’s how we respond to Him that matters. But there is nothing we can do to change that plan.

In verse 16 Solomon makes the application. **Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?** Now here the person is trying very hard to manipulate the plan of God for their lives.

Certainly if I am **excessively righteous** and **overly wise** then God will not be able to overlook it and will give me an easy life. Now, the life of Job should show you that will not work. In that event, "The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." Job was a man who was **excessively righteous** and **overly wise**, a man who offered sacrifice for his children, just in case they might have sinned, and yet that did not mean that Job somehow merited a safe passage through life. You see, that is not the way it works. Our lives are not ordered according to merit. That's what all the major religions of the world say, that the life you get is based on merit. That's true for Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, it's true for every religion in the world, but it's not true. What I am trying to get you to do is look beyond what you do and some meritorious system to the plan of God. The human obsession is with what we do and we have to break out of that kind of thinking. We want to think that God will respond to us in the way that we respond to good behavior, by rewarding it. That is incorrect. God is going to do what God is going to do and what you do is not going to change that. So to try to manipulate God by being **excessively righteous and overly wise** is a waste of time.

The question he concludes with is this, **Why should you ruin yourself?** But this is translated incorrectly. The Hebrew *tissomem* in the hitpoel never means "cause ruin" to yourself, in the sense of destroy yourself. Instead it has the nuance of "being appalled, dumbfounded, or astonished." We might translate it, "Why should you be dumbfounded?" In other words, why should you be dumbfounded if you live an excessively righteous or overly wise life and then die young? There are exceptions to the rule and to ignore the exceptions is to your own folly. Glenn said, "This fits in nicely with Solomon's argument here. He urged his readers **not to be overrighteous or overwise** "lest they be confounded or astonished." He meant they should not depend on their righteousness or wisdom to guarantee God's blessing because *they* might be confounded, dismayed, or disappointed like the righteous people whom Solomon had seen perishing in spite of their righteousness (Ecc. 7:15)."² So the rule of thumb is there will always be exceptions to the rule that a righteous life will lead to the blessing of God and a wicked life will lead to difficulty. Because of that, you should not be astonished when things seem awry.

At the same time, verse 17, **Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time?** In other words, because there are exceptions, don't throw caution to the wind. Generally, if you live an **excessively wicked** lifestyle you will **die** prematurely. Exceptions to the norm do not give a license to sin, even though there can be exceptions.

The conclusion is verse 18. **It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.** What this means **grasp one thing and also not let go of the other**, is to grasp the significance of each warning. One warning is verse 16; do not to trust in excessive righteousness or being overly wise to receive the blessing of God. If you do that you may be surprised it doesn't work out. At the same time, take heed to warning two in verse 17; do not live an excessively wicked life because generally you'll die prematurely. Keep both of those warnings in mind, that is what **the one who fears God**

does, and this is the way to live before God, knowing these things. Live in the **fear** of God. You can't manipulate Him to giving you a prosperous blessing filled life and you can't get away with living a wicked life. So the only alternative is to heed both of those warnings and **fear God**. Wallace said, "the proper fear of God will prevent a person from trusting in righteousness and wisdom alone for his security, and it will also prevent indulgence in wickedness and folly."³

In verse 19, Solomon is addressing the fact that since righteousness cannot manipulate God into blessing us and keeping us from adversity, maybe adding wisdom can. He hinted that it could not in verse 16, but he wants to devote some time to discussing the value of wisdom as well as its limitations. Put another way, maybe a righteous lifestyle alone cannot convince God to protect me from adversity, but if I add wisdom, will that have a cumulative effect and assure me safe passage through life? The short answer is that wisdom has great value, but it can't do that. Verse 19, **Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city**. The idea is that **wisdom** is very valuable. **Wisdom** gives more **strength** to **a wise man** than **ten** kings do to **a city**.

And indeed, of course, it is necessary, because verse 20, **there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins**. There may be some who are relatively righteous, and the Bible attests to people like Enoch, Noah, Job, Joseph and others who were relatively righteous, but there is no one who is absolutely righteous. And so, since **righteousness** alone is not a sufficient protection from adversity, wisdom is needed to serve as an additional protection.

That no one is absolutely righteous is illustrated in vv 21-22. In v 21, you should **not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you**. And on the other hand, verse 22, **you too have realized that you...have many times cursed others**. In other words, it is quite apparent that no one is perfectly righteous because servants **curse** their masters and masters **curse** their servants. It is simply evidence that righteousness is not a sufficient protection against adversity in life, because no one is absolutely righteous.

So then, **wisdom** must be added as another layer of protection. And the proposed thought of Solomon is that if I add wisdom to my relative righteousness, will that be enough to protect me from adversity from God? So verse 23, **I tested all this with wisdom and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?** In other words, Solomon pressed into **wisdom**, to gain skill in living, but it is too great an endeavor for a finite individual. He wanted with wisdom to perceive into the very counsels of God and understand why God is giving adversity to some and prosperity to others. But there is no way one can peer into the counsels of God. You simply cannot see beyond the veil that separates the Creator from the creature. It is too **far from me**, he says. It is **remote and exceedingly mysterious** because it is hidden in God. **Who can discover it?** No one can discover it. Wisdom, therefore, is not sufficient. It is good and it is a very good means of protection, but it does have limitations, and it should not be thought that you can just add wisdom to relative righteousness and you will be assured of a safe, easy and prosperous life. The two together

cannot provide that because that is not how it works. God has a plan and that plan includes adversity and prosperity, and He has a purpose for both in our lives, and so the only proper response is to fear Him.

In verse 25 Solomon set out to know what the role of wisdom was, seeing that it had limitations and could not provide any ultimate answer. So he made a diligent search. **I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation.** The three descriptions of **directing my mind to know, to investigate and to seek** all emphasize the diligent search Solomon made. The expression **wisdom and an explanation** are not two things in the Hebrew, but should be translated, "the role of wisdom in providing an explanation." Solomon wanted to know what the role of wisdom was in providing some kind of explanation for why things are the way they are and why what happens happens. He also wanted **to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness.** In other words, he just really wanted to understand why wickedness and folly were stupid, seeing that there is not much advantage of wisdom over folly.

But what wisdom showed him, was verse 26, **I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape her, but the sinner will be captured by her.** Solomon is employing the figure of **the woman** from Proverbs 1-9, where folly is personified as a woman. He is not talking about a literal woman, but about folly. Folly is **more bitter than death** because it enslaves you. But **one who is pleasing to God will escape** these chains, whereas **the sinner will be captured** by them. So he discovered that wisdom is superior to folly because folly enslaves.

Now while he was still trying to figure out what he could figure out by wisdom he said he also discovered this, in verse 27, **"Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation."** He's still trying to figure out why what happens happens, what the plan of God is and how that can be deciphered, and he says in verse 28, **which I am still seeking but have not found.** So he could never figure out the plan of God. Wisdom could not reveal it. But what he did find he tells us next, **I have found one man among a thousand but I have not found a woman among all these.** Now that could easily be misunderstood if someone thought this was contrasting **man** and **woman**. But it's not, because the first word for **man** is general for mankind, and stands in Hebrew parallelism to the word **woman**. In other words, it's talking about people in general, all people. Constable said, "The idea definitely is not that one out of 1,000 males pleases God, but no females at all do. This is a good example of Hebrew parallelism that, if unobserved, can lead to a bizarre interpretation."⁴ The meaning is this, "no one really pleases God completely. If Solomon were to paraphrase this out of poetic form he would say, "I have found very few people who please God, no one at all really."⁵ This fits nicely with verse 20 where he said, "there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and never sins." All wisdom could show was this fact; there is no one righteous, no not one.

The evidence for this discovery is verse 29, **Behold, I have found this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.** The word translated **devices** is the same word in verse 25 translated "explanation," and it should be translated "explanations" here. The point is that **God** created men **upright,**

meaning good and proper, **but** due to our sin in Adam, we have **sought out many explanations**. Explanations of what? “In the context Solomon was talking about God’s plan. Failing to understand fully God’s scheme of things, people have turned aside to their own explanations of these things.”⁶ In other words, why do some people face adversity and some prosperity? People don’t listen to what God has to say about this, which is essentially, you can’t know why, but being discontent with this answer, men come up their own answers. This is the same thing Job’s friends did for 35 chapters of the book. They speculated and came up with reasons why Job was suffering. The bottom line is they were wrong. Of course, we have the full book of Job and are given eyes to see that the reason related to God working out something in the angelic conflict. But we do not know why we suffer adversity or enjoy prosperity. And in vv 15-18 we are told that we can’t manipulate God into blessing us by being good people. That is not the way it works. In vv 19-24 we are told that we can try to add wisdom to righteous living hoping that cumulatively this will appease God and get His blessing and an easy life. But that won’t work either, because there is no one who is absolutely righteous and wisdom can’t penetrate into the plan of God. It’s all too great for us. So in vv 25-29 Solomon asked what wisdom could penetrate into. The only thing he could find was that it is superior to folly and that it showed that God made man upright and proper, but man is not content not knowing the plan of God and why things happen, so they come up with their own alternative explanations. This happened in your life because you did this or that happened because of this. This is all meaningless talk. It means nothing and you don’t know. And you can’t know. And all you can do is look at your circumstances today and respond to God with fear. You know that He has a plan and He is working it together for good. All you can do is respond with that mentality. And to think you can do anything else is just stupid. So, as depressing as it may sound, that is all there is to it.

¹ Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 993.

² Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 994.

³ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 7:25.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 7:25.

⁶ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 7:25.