

Life's Puzzling Questions

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 7. We begin at verse 15.! We continue on to verse 29.!

There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? 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. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

[1 : 31] Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been is far off and deep, very deep. Who can find it out? 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.

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. Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, 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. See, this alone I found.

[2 : 53] The God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for the privilege we have in this country to worship and to do so freely.

We thank you, Lord, for the opportunity that we have this morning to gather as a local church and to sit under the instruction of your word. Father, we pray in this moment that you would take your word and feed the souls of your people.

We ask, oh Lord, that you would grant us all illumination as we open your word this morning. Father, we ask that every heart will be good soil to receive your word.

And Lord, I especially ask for grace to proclaim your word faithfully to these who are gathered here. Lord, we ask that you would do these things and more.

In the name of Jesus Christ, your son, we pray. Amen. In this passage before us, the preacher again brings us face to face with the fact that we are broken people who live in a broken world.

[4 : 22] And here's the sobering truth that these verses help us to see. These verses help us to see that life as we know it is not as it was meant to be.

These verses help us to see something that I believe that we can already perceive about the world, that life as we know it is not as it was meant to be. To put it another way, the passage before us helps us to see that life in this world is broken and this world that we live in is crooked.

The reality is that things don't work the way they should work, the way we expect them to work, the way we are told they are supposed to work. And so they raise many questions that puzzle us.

In this passage before us, we come face to face with three puzzling questions. And for those of you who are taking notes, I have organized my thoughts under three headings.

And in our remaining time, I want to consider these three questions. First, the preacher helps us to see the reality of injustice. He does this in verses 15 through 18.

[5 : 45] The preacher begins by making this exaggerated statement in verse 15. It's what we call a hyperbole. A statement that's just exaggerated. It's not a lie, but it's just an exaggeration.

And what he says is, in my vain life, and we've seen already in Ecclesiastes that the word vain means a mist or a vapor, something that is fleeting, something that is very brief.

So he's saying, in my brief life, in my fleeting life, I have seen everything. He says, I've seen it all. And what's interesting is that the preacher begins to identify some of the puzzling things.

And if these things were not puzzling, he would not raise them. The preacher raises them because these are unusual things. These are things that we don't expect to be the way that they are.

He says, I've seen it all. Not speaking literally, but he was a man of vast experiences. I believe that God has divinely, when we consider the earlier parts of Ecclesiastes, there's this unique man who's had these unique experiences.

[6 : 58] He has wisdom. He has wealth. He has it all. And he explores life. And in a sense, he probably more than anyone else is able to say, I've seen it all.

And the first thing he tells us is that he has seen this occurrence where a righteous man perishes in his righteousness, and a wicked man lives a long life and continues to do evil.

And the preacher's not talking about some isolated incident that he saw. He's not talking about one aberration in the scheme of things. He's saying, I've seen this.

I've seen this occurrence of a righteous person perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man continuing to live on. He's talking about something that happens in our broken world, and it's something that I believe that we all would agree is true.

We've all seen good people die early while wicked people live long. And it stood out to the preacher, and it stands out to us.

[8 : 12] And we wonder why. And one of the reasons is that the Bible is filled with promises of long life to those who do what is right and warnings to those who do what is wrong that they would have a short life on the earth.

For example, in the fifth commandment we read, Honor your father and your mother, and your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. In other words, do this, and you will live a long life in the land.

And if you don't do this, your life in the land will be shortened. Psalm 37, verses 10 and 11, we read, In just a little while the wicked will be no more.

Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. For the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. And yet we have observed babies die, and we have observed adults who are openly in sin living long lives.

We have observed sometimes the meek being dispossessed, while the wicked are entrenched. And questions are raised.

[9 : 36] Now I want to say right at the outset that what the preacher observed, what he says he observed in verse 15, is not a contradiction to all these promises. Not a contradiction to all these promises that we have in scripture.

Instead, what the preacher observed is a reminder to us that these promises are not absolute laws. Instead, they are general rules, and for every general rule, there are exceptions.

So while it is true that those who live right and do right are promised long life, and those who do wrong and live wicked lives are threatened with short life, the reality is that it does not always turn out that way.

And again, scripture and our own experiences, we have this out. These exceptions remind us that this world in which we live in is crooked, and we aren't able to make it straight as we want.

And that's one of the perplexities that the preacher encountered in his explorations. He said that there are certain things that are crooked, and they can't be made straight. There are certain gaps that exist, and they can be filled in.

[10 : 58] Again, why is this? Why do these promises and principles have exceptions? Well, the reason is that ultimately, long life is not dependent on what a person does or does not do.

Instead, it is dependent on a sovereign God who brings everyone into this world and takes everyone out of this world in accordance with the timing of his sovereign will.

But when the righteous die, and they die early, and the wicked live long, it stands out to us because it's not supposed to be that way. And from a human point, it's injustice.

From a human point, it's unfair. From a human point, it's just not right. So here's what tends to happen when we observe that.

For some of us, some people are convinced that if a person lives righteously, he will live long. They're convinced of that, and so they fall into the trap of zealously pursuing living a righteous life to ensure that they will have a long life.

[12 : 15] Because they believe, if I do this, I will get that. And really, they are on an impossible, destructive path. They're doing what the preacher warns against in verse 16.

Look at what he warns against in verse 16. He says, Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

Here, the preacher is getting at a self-righteous person or someone who is engaged in works-based righteousness. He's addressing the person who is convinced that he observes righteous people dying and perhaps even saying, well, maybe they sinned in some way, the way Job's friend said to him.

They said to Job, Job, come on. Only the wicked suffer. If you're suffering, you're not a righteous man. You must have done something wrong. And so, like Job's friend, some people take the view that, you know what?

They must not have done something right. I'm going to do it right, and if I do it right, then I'm going to live a long life. And they pursue this impossible goal. And the preacher says to them, Be not overly righteous.

[13 : 25] Don't make yourself too wise. Why would you destroy yourself? In essence, what he's really saying is, you are on an impossible, destructive path.

You will lose your sanity. You will destroy yourself because that's an impossible road that you're on. The preacher's addressing self-righteousness.

He's addressing a works-based righteousness. Addressing that person who's convinced, I can live this righteous life. I will have a long life.

The preacher's point is, this world is crooked. It is broken. You just don't always get the same result every single time.

So while righteous living holds out a promise of long life, it does not guarantee long life. In our crooked and broken world, sometimes the righteous die early.

[14 : 28] But not only are the righteous tempted by this injustice of the righteous sometimes dying early while the wicked are living long, the wicked themselves face a temptation because of it.

When wicked people attend funerals, the funerals of babies and children, or perhaps they observe the death of loved ones who have served the Lord younger than them, and they are dying.

And there they are, continuing in their wickedness, and they're not dying. They can easily conclude, you know how a person lives really doesn't matter. After all, the righteous people perish in their righteousness while the wicked people continue to live on.

And so the wicked is easily tempted to believe that he can live however he wishes, and there's no consequence. And many do exactly that. But notice the warning of the preacher in verse 17.

He says to that person, Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? And here what the preacher is saying is, he seems to be pointing to the fact that the person who indulges in gross wickedness and foolishness is likely to experience the rule.

[15 : 45] The rule of early death. not the exception of long life in wickedness. And so the preacher is addressing both of these extremes and to the wicked person he's saying, Don't you, don't you misread the situation?

Don't you think because it seems like it really doesn't matter how you live, the righteous die and the wicked live, so I can live any way that I want and you go into your gross wickedness? He says, If you do that, you may experience the rule.

It's essentially what he is saying. The rule is, you may actually die. And he actually uses this term. He says, you may, why should you die before your time?

I'm sure you've heard this. I'm sure you may have even debated this before. This whole issue of can a person die before his or her time? Is the preacher saying that people have a certain number of years to live and it is possible to die earlier if you're a wicked person?

Is that what he's saying? And if that is what he's saying, then how do we explain when righteous people or good people, at least people from an outward appearance who are into gross sin, a child, a young child, for example, how do we explain when that young child dies?

[17 : 13] Now we need to think about this. The truth is that no human being who believes that God gives everyone a certain number of years to live can truly say that when a person dies, that person died before his or her time.

You can't say that. The only way you can say that is if you know everything. because you would not know even though a person may die young whether or not God allocated the exact number of years when they died.

So the child may die at 10. You can't say the child died before his or her time unless you know in the mind of God exactly what time God gave for that person to live.

The fact is nobody knows. So no one can say with absolute certainty or you died before your time. But here's the truth about the timing of death.

No one dies before his or her time. In the same way that we were born into this world at the time that God ordained that we should be born, we will all die at the time that God has ordained that we should die.

[18 : 34] And the reasons are all wrapped up in the mystery of his divine sovereign will. We can't know it. We don't know it. So when the preacher is talking about dying before your time, he is not speaking from a divine perspective.

He is speaking from a human perspective, from a human vantage point in terms of the general expectancy of life. He is speaking from a general rule that we tend to expect people to live until they are 70 or thereabout.

We expect people to have this normal, ordinary way of life that we all expect. You are born and you mature over time and then you die in old age.

So when a person dies young or younger, we humanly say, well, that person died before his or her time. But from God's vantage point, from the divine vantage point, there is no such thing as dying before your time.

All human beings die on time at the exact time that a sovereign God decides that their time on earth is finished. But now, let's not be distracted by that debate.

[19 : 55] That's not what the preacher is addressing. What the preacher is addressing is this ongoing reality of some righteous people dying early while wicked people live on.

So here's what the preacher says about this injustice. Look at what he says in verse 18. He says, 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.

the preacher calls us to lay a hold of the counsel that he gives in light of these two realities. Don't try to prolong your life by living a self-righteous life.

And don't indulge in wickedness just because you see the wicked sometimes living long. He says that we are to know that the one who fears God will come out from both of those erroneous views.

He is calling us, he says, really the solution to this injustice, the solution to this reality where the righteous die early in their righteousness and the wicked live on in their wickedness, the solution is that we are to fear God and trust him with our days whether they be many or few.

[21 : 15] That is what he calls us to do in light of this unjust reality in our broken world. we shouldn't be tormented and wondering and worrying about when I might die.

Will I die early? He says, no, instead what you are to do is you are to fear God. You will come out from both of those extremes, both of those torments on the extreme of that situation.

I want to ask you this morning, how do you process injustice, this injustice in particular of righteous people dying while the wicked live on in their wickedness?

Are you bothered by it? Perhaps even angered by it? Does the early death of righteous people cause you to double down and try to be more righteous than them based on the false notion that by living more righteously you will live longer?

On the case of some who may be present this morning and don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and personal Savior, does it embolden you to continue in sin because you see wicked people living on even as righteous people die?

[22 : 39] but when we consider the words of the preacher, his words are not just confined to this issue of early death for righteous people and long life for wicked people.

He's addressing the same injustice that happens when a deserving employee is overlooked for a promotion and a less deserving one receives it.

it's the same injustice when you stand on the line at road traffic to license your car and you observe people going in who came after you somehow getting served before you.

It's the same injustice when the students who are most suited to be prefects are overlooked as less suited ones are chosen.

children. It's the same injustice when a good parent is unrecognized or a manly child is uncelebrated while poor parents are recognized and rude children are celebrated.

[23 : 49] And it's all because our world is crooked. It's all because our world is broken. It's all because our world is such that things don't always work the way they were intended to work.

When the counsel of the preacher is rather than be guided by these results we are to see our world as a broken world and we are instead to fear God.

And to fear God means to serve him, to worship him, and to entrust our lives to him as we live in a broken and a crooked world. Second in this passage the preacher helps us to see the limits of wisdom.

the limits of wisdom. We see this observation in verses 19 through 24. Look again at what he says.

He says, Wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

[24 : 58] do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.

All this I have tested by wisdom. I said I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which has been is far off and deep, very deep.

Who can find it out? Here again, the preacher begins by underscoring the value and the importance of wisdom. He says, Wisdom gives strength to a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

In other words, wisdom is strength. And clearly what he is addressing is not just human wisdom, because those kings would have had that.

He is addressing divine wisdom. And he says, when divine wisdom comes to us, when we possess that, we are more powerful than the combined strength of ten rulers in a city.

[26 : 09] Here again, a very extreme statement, but he's making the point, wisdom is valuable. Wisdom is strength. The preacher then says something in verse 20 that seems unconnected to the previous verse.

He says, surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. So one minute he's talking about wisdom, next minute he's talking about righteousness and never sinning, and there's no one on the earth who's never done that.

But really the two are connected. connected. They're connected because the book of Ecclesiastes and in the wisdom books in particular of which Ecclesiastes is one, in the wisdom books wisdom and righteousness are connected.

And so it's a contradiction to talk about a wise sinner. There's no such thing. Or to talk about a righteous fool. There is no such thing. The wise person is a righteous person.

And the righteous person is a wise person. So here in verse 20, after extolling the values and virtues of wisdom, the preacher says that there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

[27 : 41] And the point clearly is that wisdom, though it is valuable and it should be attained and pursued, wisdom has its limits and cannot stop us from sinning and cannot make us perfectly righteous.

See, we can believe that. We can think, if it's only wise enough, but then I can just live righteously. But the preacher removes that notion out of our mind by saying to us that surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

sins. His point is even the most righteous man, who will be a wise man, sins. And here again is the reason that it is a waste of time trying to prolong one's life by committing oneself to righteous living because we'll always fall short to some degree or another.

So again, instead of trying to be perfectly righteous by our own efforts, which is impossible, we are to commit to loving and serving God and trusting him for grace and mercy and for length of days, whatever length he gives to us.

And to make the point, to help us to see how this statement in verse 20 is true, that there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

[29 : 15] the preacher gives almost this illustration of just a common sin that we're all guilty of. The sinning of speech, the sin of speech, the sin of our tongues.

It's the most commonly committed sin for all of us. And he tells us that we should not take to heart all the things that people say, lest, if we do, we will hear a servant, meaning someone who is subordinate to us, could even include our children, cursing us.

And I don't think he has in mind four-letter words, but just saying things of disgust and anger about us.

He says, the reason we shouldn't take it to heart is because we ourselves know many times that we have cursed others. And what the preacher is doing is the preacher is seeking to convince us, lest any of us would have the notion that maybe we're the exception to this rule in verse 20 and that we could be righteous.

He says, no, there's no one who's righteous. And he says, in a sense, take, for example, in the area of speech. And see, sin is such a part of the human condition that we can be assured that the common sins committed against us are sins committed by us, committed against other people.

[30 : 51] And so in verses 21 and 22, what we are reminded of is that since we are all sinners, we are to deal graciously with other sinners, and in particular, those who sin against us in the same way that we sin.

and he's using the sin of speech, whether it is gossip or backbiting or whatever it might be.

The preacher is giving us this example to show us how we are not without sin and his advice is wise and his advice is humble.

We're reminded that no one is perfectly righteous and further that wisdom has its limits, that wisdom can't keep us from sinning, wisdom can't make us righteous.

The preacher goes on, he tells us in verse 23 that he used wisdom to come to all of his conclusions. And he tells us that he was determined to be wise.

[32 : 02] In other words, he obviously was wise, but he says in a sense, I'm going to be more wise. And then he says, but he couldn't achieve it.

He said, I said I will be wise, but it was far from me. In other words, we will never come to complete wisdom. It is far from us.

Every time we move, we realize that there's more to know and to understand, and we never are able to fully grasp and fully attain perfect wisdom. And he describes it this way in verse 24.

As he thinks about things in the past, he says, that which has been, in other words, things in the past, things that have already happened, is far off.

I can't understand it. I don't have all the pieces. He's trying to understand it, but he doesn't have all the pieces. He says it's far off. It is deep, very deep. Now here's a wise man talking.

[33 : 06] Here's a man who was given wisdom for this experiment that he went through and evidently from a divine perspective that he went through for all of us so that we don't have to go down the road trying to figure it out to see what it could yield to us.

He says it's a dead end. You don't attain it. You don't understand it fully. He says he was never able to fully grasp it.

What is the preacher's point? His point again is that wisdom has its limits. It can only take us so far in understanding the scheme of human activity in the world.

I wonder as you consider the words of the preaching verse 20. I wonder if as you heard that read this morning whether somehow you were just hearing words or it touched you in a particular way to say that includes me as well.

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. This is an assessment of every single one of us in this room.

[34 : 30] How do you hear that? Does it cause you to be in despair? Does it cause you to rejoice because you know that you've been forgiven of your sins, that God has reconciled you to himself, even though this remains true about you, that you are among the company of people in this world who sin and who could never say, I have never sinned.

And how do you think about wisdom? Do you think if you're just wise enough you could stop sinning? No, wisdom has its limits.

It won't make us righteous. won't enable us to not sin. And won't enable us to discover everything that our mind wants to know.

And the reason is God has ordained it to be so. He's ordained it to be so. And so what is more important than seeking wisdom is seeking God.

the whole point of being exhausted and not being able to attain wisdom is to point us to the all wise one, to point us to the one who knows all things.

[36 : 03] He alone knows and understands what is far off and what is deep, very deep. And so we need to look to him. So wisdom has its limits.

And then third and finally in this passage, the preacher helps us to see the puzzle of sin. He describes for us the puzzle of sin in verses 25 through 29.

Again, let's consider what he says. He says, I turn 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.

And I find something more bitter than death. The woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are feathers. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.

[37 : 07] One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. see this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

This is the puzzle of sin. The preacher tells us in verse 25 that he was trying to understand the scheme of things.

He wanted to understand this world in terms of life in the world. He's not trying to understand astronomy and geography and ecosystems.

He's not interested in all of that. That's not what perplexes the preacher. The preacher wants to understand the scheme of things in terms of human activity on this earth.

It is a moral investigation that he is pursuing. He wants to understand the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

[38 : 18] And starting in verse 28, he tells us what he found as he explored the scheme of things in this fallen world.

He tells us that the first thing he found, something that he found, is what is more bitter than death. And here again, hyperbole.

He's using exaggerated language to make a point. He says, what I found more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters.

Now remember the preacher was in a very unusual world. the preacher had this opportunity where he had wisdom and wealth and opportunity and remember in Ecclesiastes 2, he laid out all the things he did, the building projects he encountered, the agricultural projects he encountered, how he heaped up entertainment and he had abundant food and one of the things that he mentioned he had abundance of was women.

He said he had many, many concubines. And so the preacher is definitely one who's had this wide ranging experience and one of those experiences obviously was with women and he says, I found something more bitter than death.

[39 : 49] The woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. Now it's clear that the preacher has to be speaking from personal experience.

there is no way for me to observe a woman just by observation, no involvement and say that that's what I really found. That the preacher experienced something.

The preacher experienced, I believe, some kind of treachery, some kind of harm, some kind of betrayal. thought