

How to act in a confusing world

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Date: 29 September 2024

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[0 : 0 0] fairly quickly. We're coming to Ecclesiastes 7. I think we finished at verse 14 last time, and where it says God made the good times and he made the bad times. He made both of those, and how do we cope during those times? That's what we considered last time.

Now from verse 15 on to the end of the chapter, it's probably the most difficult portion of Ecclesiastes. Most of the commentators are so different on this. They just cannot get their head around what the main theme is here. It's a messy one. I remember saying to myself, could do without preaching this tonight, but we'll try and make some kind of sense of what the preacher wants us to know, of what the Lord wants us to know. So let's read from verse 15 of chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes. In this meaningless life of mine, I have seen both of these, the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness. Do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise. Why destroy yourself? Do not be over-wicked, and do not be a fool. Why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. Wisdom makes one person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right, and never sins. Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, for you know that in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I tested by wisdom, and I said, I am determined to be wise, but this was beyond me. Whatever exists is far off and most profound. Who can discover it? So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate, and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things, and to understand the stupidity of wickedness, and the madness of folly. I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

Look, says the teacher, this is what I have discovered, adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things. While I was still searching, but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only I have found. God created mankind upright, but they have gone and in search of many schemes. And then into chapter 8, just the first verse. Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance. This is the Word of God, and we'll try and make some sort of sense from that reading this evening. Let's come before God, and say, you're living me from day to day. That's what we need on a daily basis. That is what we need, the mind of Christ to dwell in us day by day. We very much need that. Let's just ask for the mind of Christ now, as we come to his Word. Let's pray together. Our loving Father, we come now to your Word. Lord, we've been praising you, singing praise to your name. Lord, drawing close to you in our hearts, but Lord, we thank you for this point in our service where you speak to us now from your Word.

[4 : 0 1] We pray, Lord, that what we hear tonight will indeed be the Word of God and not the thinkings of a man. So, Father, just lead us and guide us, Lord. May that which is of you, truly of you, really find good soil in our hearts and in our minds. That which is of man, Lord, may it be forgotten and quickly ignored. So, Father, teach us from your Word. Help us to make some sort of sense of this. Lord, you know the world in which we live. Lord, we're often contaminated by its thinking, by its ideals, by its philosophies, and we want, Lord, now not to think the way the world thinks, though although we want to understand it. Lord, we want to think your thoughts. So, Father, be with us now as we turn to your Word. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Turn back with me, please, to Ecclesiastes chapter 7 and the second half of the passage that we read. We live in a very confusing world. The world that we live in is indeed very confusing.

When people are born, they spend half their life just trying to navigate through life, following, in many ways, the ways that others follow. There's not many folk who are unique. They just look around them, pick up their views, their ideals. Well, that's what they believe. Most folk believe this, so I probably believe that as well. They behave in this way, so I'll behave in that way as well, right down almost to the clothes we wear, the cars we buy, the houses we live in, and just a belief system. But if you're a Christian here this evening, you know God has come into your life. He's given you a new heart and a new mind to love different things, to understand different things. And in the passage we're reading, we're looking at how to make sense of a confused world. Solomon, if you've followed us up until now, if it is Solomon, if he is the writer of Ecclesiastes, he's looking at life, as you know, from two standpoints. One without God, that excludes God, try to make sense of life as if there is no God. Many people do this. They think there is no God. What we see is all there is, and they try to make the best of what they have just now. They make rules and regulations for getting on in life. But also from another perspective, because throughout Pepper, through this, he encourages us to look to God. There is a God. Fear God. Trust in God. When we do this, then life begins to make some sort of sense. And you know he's tried many things. He's applied wisdom. Let's try this. The things that the world try, he has tried them all with bells on. He had money, women, wine, all these things. He's tried the things that the world try, and he's come to the conclusion that what is the point? It's never satisfied him or given him peace. Then we looked at various other things. The problem in the world, does God see? Does God really care? We've looked at various things. We've looked at money in great depth, that money can disappoint. It can hurt us as we're trying to. It makes us fragile. It's there. It's not there. It can frustrate us. It never really satisfies. But God is a God who gives us good things. Last time, in the first half, of chapter 7, we looked at how to handle adversity, you remember, during the difficult times. God sends good times. He sends bad times. Times that are difficult, both of them come from the hand of God.

[7 : 39] He's not asleep when these things happen. He's sovereign. He is in control. And we looked at six things about death. It's real. There's no point of masking it with singing and song and trying to pretend it's not there. Death is the ultimate reality. And that's why the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. Causes us to consider our mortality. Sorrow, the difficult times, cause us to appreciate what we have and cause us to turn to God. Criticism. Don't despise the words of the wise person directed towards you. Dissatisfaction. When you don't like the present, you'd rather have the past. We are encouraged to look to the future and not looking to the past. Money is like wisdom and then our reputation. Remember that perfume. A good name is better than fine perfume. Perfume is the picture that we want to communicate to others. We smell nice. We're really nice folk. When character is what's important. Keep it real. Keep it real. Look after your character and your reputation.

We'll look after itself. So that's where we are just now. We're coming now to chapter seven. And as all the commentators say, this is probably the most difficult portion in an already difficult book. Not the kind of stuff you want to read on a Monday morning. You think, thanks for that.

Yep, we're going to be here for a while trying to make some sort of sense of this. I have a lot of commentaries. Probably, I would almost say of all the books of the Bible, I probably have more commentaries in Ecclesiastes than any other book. And when I'm coming to look at this, I cannot possibly look at them all. There's just too many. I need to ditch them, but some of them are very good.

So trying to wade through this and I'm looking at them and I'm comparing them all, there's not two of them the same in this passage. It's great when you get them all dividing up the same, because then you know you're in sure ground. I'm going to divide it up. That seems fairly clear to me. Everybody's all over the place where this passage is trying to make sense. There is no main theme, but if there was one main theme, it would be wisdom. Wisdom crops up a few times in this. So we'll look at this and we'll try and make some kind of sense to this. Verse 23 of chapter 7, all this I tested by wisdom, and I said, I am determined to be wise. So that's what I have done. I've linked some of the topics that he's mentioned to wisdom. So I'm going to go through these points fairly quickly this evening as we try and make some sort of sense of this. So he's looking at the world. He's very honest and blunt in the things that he notices. He's not mincing his words. He's not sugarcoating things. He's looking at life in the raw and just going, this is messy. And he comes up with various observations. So first of all then, wisdom and righteousness, I've called this. This is from verse 15, if

you're taking notes.

He's committed to telling us the truth about life, warts and all. He's basically telling us that life can seem very unfair. And he paints this picture, meaningless life of mine. I have seen both of these things. The righteous perishing and the right long in their wickedness. In many ways, it's the exact opposite of what you would expect. If you're righteous and you're living a good life and there's a sovereign God, that God will look after you because you're whereas the wicked God would be against and would seek to discourage them in what they're doing to be the opposite way. You expect surely if you're righteous, you will live to a good old age and the wicked will leave or whatever. But I'll go on to 85 because I'm a Christian. I'm a righteous person. But the preach, the righteous often perish in their righteousness, but the wicked seem to live long. And it's made worse when you know the Bible. And the Bible almost contradicts that by saying, and if you don't do good, you will suffer. You will be cursed in that way. And it seems very pastors are sometimes martyred for their faith while their enemies live on to persecute another church.

[12:03] Servants appear to die before their time. Lord, why then? Why did you take them now? I've known people in churches who were great servants in churches, had a great work. The church was so dependent on them suddenly. And you think, Lord, why is this? And that is life. And you know this. You've been to funerals and they seem to have gone before. The righteous has perished in their righteousness. And yet the people down the road, they just seem to keep going on. They're 95 and they're still up to all sorts of mischief. It does what the preacher notices. The righteous perish in their righteousness. The wicked live long. And it seems unfair. 16 is designed in many ways to shock us. So he says this, do not be over-righteous, destroy yourself. I don't think you've ever heard from this pulpit. The preacher or anybody saying, don't be over. Don't be too godly because you're just going to pop your clogs before your time. It's just not something you... Don't be over-righteous. But that is his comment. Some commentators say he's just being sinless. Well, you are living a good life.

What is the point if your life is snatched away? Why do? But if he is saying that, then some of the commentators say that he must be looking at life, oh, life beyond the grave, then what's the point of being righteous in the first place? If you're just going to be, then what's the point of being righteous or wicked? If the wicked live longer, you might as well just be wicked. Commentators here are talking about self-righteousness. It's this desire to heap up righteous good life, and I'm going to do this, that, and the other, because righteousness is important. Jesus said that it's needed for salvation. Righteousness, a holy life without sin in our life, without sin in our life. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will no wise enter. We know these things are important, and the preacher here is looking at life under the sun. The other side of the coin is wickedness, he says. So, he's not saying he's not wicked. He's basically saying, don't be over wicked either. And some commentators say he's taking some middle ground or two. We'll see that the Bible makes clear the importance of righteousness. That's why he says in verse, not let hold of the other. In other words, keep a good hold of righteousness and wickedness. No wonder the commentators struggle to try and make sense, a wee bit clearer. But in many ways, he's saying this, if there's no God, there is no benefit if we end up dying before our time. There is no privilege claimed. There are many people who say, well, I'm going to try and live a good life, and hopefully that that will be enough. The simple, we cannot establish enough righteousness to gain entrance into heaven.

We read this in verse 20, and you know the book of Romans, don't you? Direct quote, there is no one on earth who is righteous to have our sins. That, in many ways, balances what he said. In some ways, he's saying, don't go striving after us to succeed. You will never succeed in gaining enough righteousness to get into heaven. I believed that before. I'd say about the year leading up to, I became a Christian. My mom became a Christian. I left the house. I thought, forget it. These folk are religious nutters. I'm out here. And I had a place in Suckey Hall Street in Glasgow. But I could see the change in them and the joy, and I kept thinking, there must be something in this. And then you lived this life, and you just died. That was it. There was nothing else. I would love to know that. I'd love to know if there is a heaven, and there is a God. Lord, show me that. God, you may as well be righteous.

They're unrighteous. Makes no difference, except for the people that you're with. But if there was a God, and seeking after him. And I thought, I must confess, I really thought that I'd make me to go to church. Some of you are here on a Sunday night. I don't know if you've been nagged to come.

Anyway, my mom used to say, why don't you get yourself up here or something? So I would go along, and then I would go into Glasgow to a nightclub usually in Glasgow with my mates. But I'm quite righteous. These people, these people are pagans. They have just drank. The Lord would say to them, I never knew you. But he'd say to me, hi, John. How you doing? You were at church. But yeah, I'm not perfect, but I'm better than these guys, because I'm a wee bit more righteous than them. I've been such today. And somehow, deep down, I thought, maybe I'm not a bad guy. I've been to church more than these. I don't think they think about the Lord. Never spoken to them about religious things.

[17 : 00] They're pagan. I'm not quite as pagan as them. If I died, God would look on me with compassion. Knew nothing of the gospel. Knew nothing of verse 20, even one. And that is scary. So in that sense, he's saying, if there's no God, what does it matter? If there's a God, righteousness is crucial.

No one can enter heaven within it. So he tells them in verse 18 to fear God. Whoever fear God will avoid all its ultra-wickedness in that sense. So we'll recognize that we need righteousness from God.

We need, he will talk. See the second half of Ecclesiastes. One of the great themes now becomes the fear of God. He will mention the Ecclesiastes in chapter 12 near the end, fear God and keep his commandments. That's how he sums up the Ecclesiastes. That's the duty of everyone, not to eat, drink, and be merry. Fear God. There is a God who is holy, who has told us how we can be right before him, and we need to know this. So life is short. It can seem unfair. The righteous do perish, and the wicked live on. The solution to this is to realize that we cannot establish our own righteousness, but we need to trust in the righteousness that God provides through trusting in his Son. The minute we trust in him, his righteousness now becomes our righteousness.

He fulfills the law where we failed. So that's the first thing, wisdom and righteousness. Grab out of that what you can. Secondly, wisdom and sin. He now moves on, and I've touched on this in verse 19 through to 22. There is no one righteous. There is not a single person. So in many ways you could see why strive after it? Because you will never achieve it. He's basically saying this. There is no one, no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins. Romans 3.10, as it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one. Isaiah 64.6 says, all of us have become like one who is unclean. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags, a menstrual cloth. It's actually worse than filthy rags. It's just this unpleasant thing. We are all shriveled up like a leaf and like the wind. Our sins sweep us away. All our righteousness, not our bad deeds, not our wickedness, our good deeds are still tainted by sin. They are like filthy rags before God. And we cannot change this. Our best efforts cannot change us. No one, as it says in Romans 3.20, not 3.10, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by works of the law. Rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin. So in that way we do not strive after righteousness, because if we try and obey the law, the law of God, every command in the Bible, no one will be pronounced righteous, because we will fail, and we've already failed. There is no one righteous. So why bother? Well, as Paul says there, the law shows us our sin. When we try and be righteous and we fail, we realize that we need to be cleansed afresh. Even in my search for God and wondering if there's a God and trying to live a holy life, I don't know how many times I've said, God, it's me again. If you're there, I've blown it. Forgive me again. Constantly coming, hoping that just by saying sorry it was enough. I was yet to discover that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. I thought I could clear away my sins by trying to do more righteousness, and I never really knew that verse. There is no one righteous, not even one. And we cannot do two righteous deeds to cancel out one unrighteous deeds. It doesn't work.

[21 : 03] God's standard is 100% perfection. That's what we need. So here the preacher, he's talking about there's no one righteous. And then he gives an illustration of slander. And I quite like this illustration in verse 21. He talks about paying attention to what every word people say. You may hear your servant cursing you. In other words, if there was gossip, if you were coming through that corridor and you heard, yeah, that's the trouble with John. You're better to go, I'm not going there.

I don't know if I want to hear what's coming next. You'd rather not hear it, because it would annoy you. It would wind you up. You say, what are they going to say about me? How dare they? Who do they think they are? I'm better than that. And, but he says, for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. In other words, stop being worried about others, the sins of others.

You have sins of your own. That's what needs to worry you. Don't worry about what they have said about you. Worry about what you have said about others. And sometimes we do this. Lord, look at them. They are bad people. I am not that bad when the writer here is saying, you know in your heart many times you have cursed others. That's just one sin. It could have mentioned other words.

So, don't just think of the sins of others. Think of your own sin, wisdom and sin. Thirdly, wisdom and reality. This is what the preacher in verse 23 and 24 wants. He wants to be wise. And, but he comes to the conclusion that in his spiritual quest, you remember, right at the very beginning, he sets out to be wise, to understand life. And he doesn't really get there. But he knows it's powerful. Verse 19, wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers. And that's been his main quest. I've applied my mind to wisdom. Verse 13 of chapter 1, to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. And he has these very serious attempts.

But he has to admit that he's never quite got there. He's never quite made sense of everything. How are all pieces together? Derek Kidner calls this the epitaph of every philosopher. You could write that in every philosopher's grave. I tried and I failed. I tried to make sense of life under the sun and I failed, no matter how great and how clever they are. I must confess, when, only when I became a Christian and you study some kind of philosophy, we did it at Bible college, you study modern thinking, various things. And it all sounds very clever, but it's the blind leading the blind. And you think, yeah, it sounds great, but when you have a higher knowledge and that you know God, there is a heaven, there's an earth, you know how the Bible's put together, you know righteousness and justification, sanctification, redemption, all these great doctrines, it begins to make sense. Many people try to make sense of the world and it always eludes them. But there is a wisdom that we need to hear, the world needs to hear.

[24 : 18] It's the wisdom of the gospel. And we read this in 1 Corinthians 1 21, for since in the wisdom of God, in other words, this is something that God thought was wise, the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. I used to think Christians were probably some of the weakest people you could meet. They went to church. It was a crutch. That was how I viewed Christians. I thought, well, some folk like drinking and partying. You're not really that type of person, are you? You like singing old hymns and having tea and buns and watercress sandwiches. That's okay if you like that. That's not for me. I'm a party animal. And I never got it at all until I became a Christian. And suddenly, the mates that I used to like, I thought they were dumplings. But these guys in the YF at church that I thought were wet blankets that would play chubby bunnies and Saturday night stuffing marshmallows and shaving balloons and doing all these wacky games thinking, wow, is that what you get up to on a

Saturday night? I'm going to a nightclub in Glasgow. I'm not doing this. But suddenly, they were my brothers and sisters. They knew. I could talk to them about, you get this, don't you? You get the whole heaven, earth thing, forgiveness, righteousness. And suddenly, my mates, I thought, they were great, dead cool. They weren't so cool. They were just living for the minute, trying their best, whereas these guys had discovered something. And that is the gospel. It says here in 1 Corinthians 1.30, it is because of him that you are in Christ, who has become for us wisdom from God. You want to know what the wise thing to do is, or what wisdom is? Consider Jesus. Jesus is a wisdom from God. Jesus is, the plan of salvation is great. None of us can be saved. We are foolish. We cannot please God. We cannot obey God perfectly. There has to be a better plan. And a better plan is not God whipping us, telling us to try harder and harder. God knows we cannot do this. Our heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

We wander towards things that are wrong, gossip, criticism, whatever, envy, greed, and so forth, many, many sins. But God has come up with a better plan, where he has come, and he has died for our sins. He has taken our sins upon himself. And all we have to do is come like those who have the big issue. They just come with their hands stretched out and say, give me that. Free salvation. Free forgiveness. Free eternal life. All because of Jesus. It's all found in Jesus. To know Jesus is to no life. Eternal life. Eternal life. We're looking at this on Sunday mornings. But to reject Jesus is to reject life. To reject the wisdom of God. So, that is the world in which we live in. The wisdom is seen in the gospel. Lastly, I'm with this. I'll close. Wisdom and observations. He makes various observations just at the end. Verse 25 through to 29. I turn my mind to understand, to investigate, to search out wisdom, and the scheme of things, and to understand. And then he discovers a few things. And basically, his problem is this. The depravity of the human heart. That's what he

discovers. And he gives an example of this. And the example he gives is one of a woman. He uses a woman. There is one kind of woman. He basically says it's wise to avoid. Verse 26. I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains. If Solomon is the writer of this, there is—he can write from experience. Solomon loved many women. And the woman led his heart away from God. And

Nehemiah says this. Was it not because of the marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned? Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was loved by his God. God made him king over all Israel. But even he was led into sin by foreign women. And the writer's not saying that all women are like this. You need to be careful here, John. He's not saying that all women are like this.

The Bible is very clear on this. There are many godly women. But it appears that for Solomon, he didn't seem to know any in this account. He's looked. Can I find any? These women are leading my heart astray. He's probably tarred them all with a one brush. Found one guy, but I never found any women.

[29 : 19] And it's very easy to just see him as some sort of sexist here. But the simple truth is this. The Bible speaks more about the sins of men than the sins of women by far. But before we accuse him of being sexist, he says in verse 20, there is no one righteous, no one on earth. Even the one man that he found, even he wasn't righteous. And he, it's, it really grabs us all together. One of the commentators is this wee phrase, iniquity is an equal opportunity employer. Doesn't matter if you're male or female, sin will grab male and female. There is no one more righteous than the other. As it says in the Bible mentions very many godly men and godly women as well. So his conclusion is this. Look at verse 29.

God created mankind upright, perfect, but they have gone in search of many schemes. Is that not the heart of man tonight? That God created us in the garden, we are descendant of Adam, and yet we go out our way to seek things for ourself, unrighteousness, the things that we do.

So here then is a difficult chapter. Difficult chapter, preachers trying to show us how to act in a confused world. Wisdom, righteousness can seem unfair. However, we know that there is a righteousness that we need for heaven, and God offers that in the gospel. Same with sin. Because of sin, because there is no one righteous, we need God's righteousness. We need him to cleanse us from all our sin and fill us with his Holy Spirit. We need the gospel. Without the gospel, there is no hope for mankind. Without Jesus, without coming to him at some point in your life and saying, Lord, forgive me.

It took me 20 years of my life before I suddenly realized this. Lord, I'm a sinner. I've been worried about them. My mates. It's me. I am. If I stood before you tonight, I deserve to be cast into hell. But I am not righteous. I've just heard the preacher tell me this. I need Jesus as my Savior. You, many of us tonight, know the reality of wisdom and how to deal with sin, bringing it before the Lord, confessing it. And then this reality, wisdom is found in Jesus and in Jesus alone. And then this last observation, we all seek out sin, every one of us. Mankind was created upright, but we have gone in various schemes. And he finishes in verse 1 of chapter 8, who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance. Can you remember the joy when you first became a Christian? Mine was a Monday night. I went Monday night in May in Kelvin Hall in Glasgow. It wasn't a particularly good night. I went in just as miserable as everybody else, but I come out full of the joys. Not just because my sins were forgiven, because I knew that night there is a God. He is true. And my life had purpose and hope from that very day. I couldn't wait to go into work and tell my mates. I didn't get the response I expected, but I remember just,

[32 : 46] I became a Christian last night. They just, I'll give you two weeks, they said. Two weeks, 40-odd years ago. But that's what makes a difference. God is real. He walks with you day by day once you've been reconciled to him through the blood of his Son. He is the only one who can give us hope and purpose and meaning in life. Apart from him, life is meaningless. Let's stand and we'll sing our closing songs. It's an old one, chosen on