

ECCLESIASTES 7:11-22 WHERE IS THE BALANCE? The Wise Person Realizes God Offers Wisdom To The Imperfect.

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We live on a fine line. If we think too lowly of ourselves, we see ourselves as being so broken we are not salvageable. If we think too highly of ourselves, we see no need for God or His forgiveness. We need to find balance to being broken by sin and yet still created in the image of God. Fortunately, God has not left us on our own to navigate our time “under the sun.” The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect which gives us balance in this life and hope for the future.

Why is acknowledging our sinfulness important for having a proper understanding of ourselves and our limits in this life?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 7:1–8:17

In Ecclesiastes 6:12, the Teacher asked: “For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow?” He set out to answer this question in 7:1–8:17. He began in chapter 7 using proverbs. The person who is wise is able to evaluate what the better things in life are. For example, Solomon observed that the death of a person with a good reputation is far more valuable than the expensive perfumes used in burial preparations, and the death of one who lived for God is better than fleeting moments of merriment.

When faced with mortality, one may take stock in how life should be lived, whereas amusements serve as temporary diversions at best. The person who is wise will contemplate how to live in light of his or her mortality. Hence, the birth of a child is wonderful, but a life lived for God is even better (7:1-4).

The wisdom that comes from God is the key to living a balanced life. It is wise to recognize one’s utter helplessness and look to God. Having the wisdom of God provides strength and a way of escape from sin. It is recognizing that only God can make one upright (7:11-29). God’s wisdom enables people to conduct themselves properly before governmental authority, realizing while one may be powerless before a king, every king is powerless before God (8:1-8). Additionally, it is God’s wisdom that gives people patience to wait on God’s judgment of the wicked and vindication of those who fear Him (8:9-13). In contrast, trusting in one’s own wisdom leads to futility, because the Lord has deliberately made life incomprehensible apart from Him (8:16-17).

As you read Ecclesiastes 7:11-22, consider the contrast presented. How does God's wisdom produce the balance called for by Solomon?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ACCEPT IT (ECCL. 7:11-14)

V. 11 Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. V. 12 Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it. V. 13 Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? V. 14 When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.

VERSES 11-12

Verses 11-12 consist of an observation followed by an explanation. The first clause of verse 12 explains the first clause of verse 11, and the second clause of verse 12 expounds upon the second clause of verse 11. The main purpose of both verses is to espouse the high value and desirability of wisdom. The first part of verse 11 states that gaining **wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing**. They are similar in that both wisdom and an inheritance are passed on from one generation to another. Additionally, both have value. That which one inherits may have sentimental value or monetary value. In either case, an inheritance is meant to be a blessing to the one who receives it. Likewise, the one who receives wisdom is greatly blessed.

The first clause of verse 12 provides the Teacher's reasoning for saying wisdom is as good as an inheritance. It is because both wisdom and financial wealth provide **a shelter**. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Solomon had a significant monetary inheritance in mind in verse 11. The phrase **wisdom is a shelter** literally is "the shade of wisdom" in Hebrew. The idea of protection derives from the picture of one's being protected from the intensity of the sun's rays in the heat of the day. We understand how financial wealth provides protection in a financial crisis, but how does wisdom offer protection? The wisdom that others pass down provides a tried and true way of maneuvering through life. The Book of Proverbs is an example of this. Moreover, when thinking about the wisdom that those who fear the Lord inherit from Him, the security of this wisdom is even greater because it not only provides security in this life but also in the life to come.

The second clause in verse 11 states that wisdom is an advantage to **those who see the sun**. Most scholars understand this phrase to be synonymous with those "under the sun," meaning every living person. In this case, it means wisdom is good for everyone, which is true. However, when understanding the phrase who see the sun in light of the following clause in verse 12, "wisdom is a shelter," it may be addressing extremely difficult times, when, metaphorically

speaking, the sun blinds one's eyes and its intense heat is unbearable. This is supported by the last part of verse 12 that states the lasting benefit of wisdom is that it **preserves those who have it**. The idea is that it not only preserves life but is also the source of life. Therefore, no matter how uncomfortably and intensely hot life can get, the one who possesses wisdom is secure. The wisdom that comes from God also leads to God, and the New Testament reveals that Jesus Christ is "the wisdom of God" unto salvation (**1 Cor. 1:24**). Those who trust in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ are given the gift of eternal life and are eternally secure (**1 John 5:10-13**).

VERSE 13

In verse 13, the Teacher asked a rhetorical question expecting the emphatic answer: "Nobody can." Having wisdom involves recognizing God created everything and does all things according to His own purposes. What is more, He is in control of everything. Therefore, it is wise to submit to God as He works out His will because nobody can change what God has done, is doing, or will do. God always knows what is right and does what is right at the right time, in the right way, and to the right extent. In light of this truth, why should anyone want to change what God does? Nobody can, and nobody who is truly wise would want to.

VERSE 14

Expounding on verse 13, the Teacher anticipated and answered the question his readers must have been asking: "If we are powerless to change the way God has made things and what He does, then what can we do?" Solomon's answer contains two imperatives given in two circumstances. In the first instance, when you are experiencing good times, rejoice and enjoy God's blessings. However, when you experience seasons **when times are bad**, then you must **consider**. This echoes the beginning of verse 13, "Consider what God has done." What work of God should one consider in times of adversity? We must remember that like the good times, the difficult times are also from the hand of God. (See **Lam. 3:38**.) As limited creatures we can never fully comprehend God or His ways. God deliberately demonstrates this truth to remind us we are incapable of ruling our own lives and thus need to trust Him (3:14; 7:14).

Why might people find it so difficult at times to trust that God's ways are always best?

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible concordance to compare how a word is used.

In Ecclesiastes 7:14,24,26-29, Solomon repeatedly used the words "find" and "discover." Look up the Hebrew word *matsa'* in a Bible concordance that includes Hebrew words and examine Old Testament passages that use the word. How does the use of this word in other passages help you gain a clearer understanding of why Solomon would have used the word in this passage?

FIND BALANCE (ECCL. 7:15-18)

V. 15 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. V. 16 Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself? V. 17 Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time? V. 18 It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.

VERSE 15

The Teacher observed how the pervasiveness of sin and its effects in a fallen world have sullied every aspect of human virtue. In this verse, he pointed out a phenomenon that totally confounded the teaching of traditional wisdom: a righteous person can die young while a wicked person may live a long life. In Solomon's day, **the righteous** were people who by faith in God lived in accordance to God's law. It was understood that keeping the law would prolong one's life. (See **Deut. 4:40; 5:33; 8:1; 30:20; Prov. 3:1-3.**)

However, when Moses spoke of life that springs from obedience to God's law, it was set in contrast to the death that would come as a result of God's judgment for disobedience. The emphasis was on avoiding their lives from being cut short because of God's judgment. It was never meant to be a guarantee of an individual living a long life. As for the Book of Proverbs, one must remember it is a message of how the world works in general. It is like saying if people work hard they will have a job, but we have all witnessed hard-working people lose their jobs because of extenuating circumstances and no fault of their own. This reality does not keep parents from teaching their children that they will be rewarded for their hard work. Furthermore, there are numerous godly people in the Bible whose lives were cut off before old age, almost all of them on account of their righteousness. (See **Heb. 11:36-40.**) Remember Jesus was thirty-three years old when He was crucified. Life in a fallen world that is marred by sin is chaotic and unpredictable.

VERSES 16-18

The Teacher addressed a false philosophy that seeks the good life through strict religious commitments. Obviously, there is a difference between being **overrighteous** and righteous, and being **overwise** and wise. The overrighteous and overwise have given themselves to legalism (seeking righteousness by keeping the law or doing good works) and asceticism (self-denial in order to attain a spiritual ideal). The basic notion is that if you obey all the rules (and perhaps even make up some new ones), then you will be righteous and have a wonderful life. Job's friends held to this philosophy and were proven wrong. It is a philosophy that is self-focused (what can I do?), arrogant (this is what I can do), and miserable (enjoying the simple pleasures of life is something I cannot do). Trusting in your own righteousness and wisdom is self-destructive.

Solomon was not saying in verse 17 that sinning in moderation is acceptable. Instead, while recognizing everyone sins (see 7:20), he was stating that the person who embraces wickedness as a way of life is heading for destruction. In addition to verse 16 that teaches not to think of oneself as being overly wise, here he instructed that one should not be foolish by ignoring God's wisdom.

People should avoid the path of self-righteousness and an inflated perception of how wise they are, while at the same time rejecting wickedness as a way of life. Religious legalism, asceticism, and licentiousness are each paths to destruction. True righteousness and wisdom coupled with the ability to enjoy life's blessings comes to **whoever fears God** in loving awe and devotion.

What is the difference between being a religious fanatic and being completely devoted to God?

KEY DOCTRINE: Man

By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race (Rom. 1:21-23).

ACKNOWLEDGE SIN (ECCL. 7:19-22)

V. 19 Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. V. 20 Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins. V. 21 Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you— V. 22 for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

VERSE 19

Following the thought of verse 18, the Teacher surmised that wisdom found in the fear of God makes one stronger than the collective wise counsel of **ten rulers**. This is significant given the great value the biblical sages gave to having many counselors (**Prov. 11:14**). Our fear of God and our faith in Him and what He has done in the person and work of His Son saves us. Rulers attempt to curb sin, but only the wisdom of God through Christ can cleanse us of our sin.

How does being honest about our own sin open the door for us to gain perspective when dealing with other people?

VERSES 20-22

Recognizing we are all sinners (v. 20) should impact how we understand ourselves and others. We must learn to deal with people as they are—as sinners like us. In verses 21-22, the Teacher provided an example of what this looks like. He advised that we should not take too seriously everything people say because we are probably going to hear someone say something insulting about us. We ourselves have said unkind things about others too. Taking issue with those who speak wrongly of us serves to justly accuse us of our own culpability in relationship to others.

It is interesting that this example is of a **servant** doing the insulting. A person is much more likely to rebuke a subordinate than a superior. Nevertheless, it is wise to let it go. Just as we are sinners who have spoken unfair criticisms of others and are in need of God's grace, so is everyone else. Since the perfect, holy, sinless God who is our Superior has shown mercy and grace to us who have willfully rebelled against Him and offended Him, then how can we refuse to show mercy and grace to others?

How does recognizing the tremendous mercy, grace, and forgiveness God has shown us empower us to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving to others?

APPLY THE TEXT

Believers can be sure that God's plans for them are the best.

Believers are to live reasonable and balanced lives.

All people are sinners and therefore are in need of God's grace and wisdom.

List areas in which you struggle to accept God's plans. What steps can you take to more fully trust Him in each area listed?

Ask God to reveal things in your life that are out of balance. What actions do you need to take to get these things aligned with God's purposes and plans? What does it mean to live a reasonable and balanced Christian life?

Discuss as a group why it is wise and good to always remember that all people, including ourselves, are sinners. How does doing so bring honesty and perspective to the group as a whole? As a group, hold one another accountable for memorizing Ecclesiastes 7:20 this week.

[LifeWay Adults (2020). (p. 108). Explore the Bible: Adult Personal Study Guide - NIV - Summer 2021. LifeWay Press. Retrieved from <https://read.lifeway.com>]

ADDITIONAL VERSES

1 Corinthians 1:24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

1 John 5:10-13 He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. 11 And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. 13 These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

Lamentations 3:38 Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?

Deuteronomy 4:40 Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, for ever.

Deuteronomy 5:33 Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess.

Deuteronomy 8:1 All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers.

Deuteronomy 30:20 That thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Proverbs 3:1-3 My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: 2 For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. 3 Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart:

Hebrews 11:36-40 And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: 37 They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; 38 (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in

mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. 39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: 40 God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Romans 1:21-23 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, 23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

Proverbs 11:14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.