

# Crookedness

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**What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
And what is lacking cannot be numbered. —Ecclesiastes 1:15**

Perhaps it is the same for all nations and cultures, but the modern-day descendants of Israel seem to exhibit an especially high degree of idealism and perfectionism. These are not inherently bad traits, because God indeed requires us to strive to be perfect and to live according to His ideals. Sometimes, though, we can create stress for ourselves when we have expectations of perfection because, as Solomon teaches, our world is not perfect: "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered" (Ecclesiastes 1:15).

God has blessed the nations of Israel tremendously, and with those blessings comes the ability to overcome many obstacles. Yet there are aspects of our surroundings that are simply broken—words cannot be unsaid, deeds cannot be undone, and crookedness that cannot be straightened.

This axiom in Ecclesiastes 1:15 is connected to the previous verse, which speaks of "all the works that are done under the sun," giving verse 15 its context. All the works of man—everything in this cosmos, this world apart from God—include a crookedness that cannot be rectified. The number of things lacking in all of man's works is so great as to be uncountable.

By way of definition, the Hebrew word translated as "crooked," *avath* (Strong's #5791), is used less than a dozen times in the rest of the Old Testament. The basic meaning of the word is "to wrest," which is "to forcibly pull something from a person's grasp" or "to obtain by wrenching with violent, twisting movements." In essence, it is the assertion of one person's will against another's, and the result is damage that can never truly be repaired. In other places, this word is linked with the perversion of justice (Job 8:3; 34:12). It can mean wronging someone or dealing perversely with someone (Psalm 119:78). It indicates turning things upside down or upsetting the natural order of things (Job 19:6; Psalm 146:9). Finally, it can refer to subverting someone in his cause and falsifying the scales (Lamentations 3:36; Amos 8:5).

Solomon is saying that, once the natural order of things has been upset by this willfulness, it is essentially impossible to make those things right again. The order of things cannot be equalized (which is what the word translated as "straight" means), even though there may be a salve that can be applied. When something has been wrested from another—when one person's will has been asserted at the expense of someone else's will—it sets things into motion that cannot be equalized. A measure of crookedness will always remain in man's works.

Thus, because of human nature and human willfulness, anywhere we find human actions, we also find disorder and incompleteness. We see irregularity and deficiency. Not only that, but we also discover mankind's utter inability to truly fix them or fill in what is lacking.

**Crookedness and Sin**

When Solomon speaks of crookedness, he is not specifically speaking about sin. In fact, as we will see, some crookedness is actually good! But in general, sin and crookedness overlap in many ways because, when one person is wrenching something from another, whether physically or metaphorically, sin is almost always involved. It is the “way of get”; it is an act of self-centeredness.

On a human level, the crookedness in the world began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam upset the order of things by heeding the voice of Eve rather than the voice of God. He made a choice, and that choice introduced crookedness into the relationship between God and man. What Adam made crooked could not be made straight by any subsequent human action.

In fact, the more people there were, the more crooked the world became until finally God intervened by, not only drowning most of mankind, but also by shortening the human lifespan. In doing so, He dramatically reduced the amount of time during which any single person could make things crooked. Yet, even with only his allotted three-score and ten or perhaps four-score, each man has plenty of time to make things crooked in his and others’ lives.

Crookedness began on a human level with Adam, yet it goes back even farther, to another being who was in the Garden. The crookedness in God’s creation began with a created being, Satan, whose heart was lifted up, who thought of himself more highly than he should. After his own heart and will became crooked, he began wresting the wills of other angels, then those of mankind. He is the source of this cosmos, as well as human nature, and thus wherever those are found, we can also expect to find some crookedness.

What this means is that, even though God has redeemed us, any place in our lives that the world still holds sway, or any area where we allow human nature to get the upper hand, something will be made crooked. Our will will assert itself and be manifested in a perversion of justice, in wronging someone, in turning a matter upside down, in dealing deceitfully, or in upsetting the relationship with God by overlooking His will for us.

## **Crookedness and God**

A few chapters later, in Ecclesiastes 7:13, another aspect of crookedness appears: “Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?” This is why not all crookedness is sin. God also makes things crooked, but with Him, it is always done out of love and genuine concern for His creation. Thus, it is not sin.

He, too, wrests things out of our hands and twists our paths in a different direction, and we certainly cannot undo what He has done. He exercises His sovereign authority, and it turns things upside down. He upsets the natural order of the cosmos, and the normal course of events for mankind in general and for individuals. He subverts the cause of anyone He chooses, according to His goodness and what He knows is best.

Many people have a hard time with this aspect of God, often preferring to shy away from it. Yet He says Himself that He creates calamity (Isaiah 45:7). What is calamity if not crookedness on a monumental scale? He caused the Flood that destroyed all of mankind save eight. He removed a hedge around Job, which resulted in a tremendous trial. He decimated the nation of Egypt. When His

people were obedient, He annihilated the armies of those who came against them, but when His people were rebellious, He fought against them and spoiled their efforts. He sent Israel into captivity, scattering them so thoroughly that most of them do not even know who they are.

Closer to home, He scattered His own church because He judged that our course needed to be upset—because it was not good. The normal course needed to be wrenched in a different direction in order for each child of His to examine his own ways to see what crookedness needs to be straightened out. And as Solomon rhetorically asks, who can undo what the Creator has willed to occur? Only He can—and only when and how He ordains.

If it seems like our every endeavor turns sour, or similar events are conspiring against us, it is not necessarily because we are being punished for being the worst of sinners. Perhaps we are—but we have to remember that even if we have the very best spiritual walk, perfectly resembling Jesus Christ, we will always encounter things that are crooked because the world is crooked, because Satan is continuing to make things crooked, and because God, too, is making things crooked (at least according to human reckoning). The reality is that His actions are always good and will always produce good fruit in the end, but that does not change the fact that they may also turn our world upside down in a most uncomfortable way. And that is all before we add in the crookedness that we cause ourselves!

Even so, we should not despair. God makes things crooked, but He also makes things straight. He supplies what is lacking when we cannot. Recall the crooked hands and legs that He made straight during His earthly ministry and the healing He performs for us. Consider the resurrections that He performed and the crookedness that He straightened out in them. Ponder the food that He provided and the truth that He supplied when they were lacking. He came to a crooked world and began setting things straight.

He did not do it all at once, though He is nevertheless continuing to make straight the crookedness introduced into His creation some 6,000 years ago. The Father and the Son are always working (John 5:17), and they are working for our spiritual benefit. Part of Their work is making things straight for the firstfruits, intervening to bring us to a vastly different conclusion from the end we would reach on our own.

God, at times, grants His children favor in the eyes of others when the normal course would be for them to be despised. He gives peace, which can include straightening out an interpersonal conflict. He takes things that are out of kilter and wrests them to bring them into alignment. “Power belongs to God,” the psalmist says, and so it should be common sense to seek favor with Him, because then He is willing to upset the order of things in a way that will help us toward the Kingdom.

He does not make everything perfect all at once, but as we continue to walk with Him, He straightens out sections of our road that we cannot straighten. He does not take away all of the consequences of our crookedness, nor does He undo all of the world’s crookedness that impinges on us. Nevertheless, He straightens enough so that we can continue making spiritual progress and even receive unexpected blessings along the way.

### **“Crooked Places . . . Made Straight”**

It may seem like everything in this process is out of our hands, but there is still something for us to do. Notice this Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-4:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth.”

Verse 3 mentions “preparing the way,” one that God will be traveling: “make . . . a highway for our God.” This refers to the common practice of monarchs, who, before traveling into a new place, would send a party ahead of them to make sure that the road—the way—was easily passable. This crew would open up difficult passages, level out the road, make sure that it was as straight as possible, and remove any impediments to smooth travel. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily) gives an account of the marches of Semiramis into Media and Persia that illustrates this practice:

In her march to Ecbatana she came to the Zarcean mountain, which, extending many furlongs, and being full of craggy precipices and deep hollows, could not be passed without taking a great compass about. Being therefore desirous of leaving an everlasting memorial of herself, as well as of shortening the way, she ordered the precipices to be dugged down, and the hollows to be filled up; and at a great expense she made a shorter and more expeditious road, which to this day is called from her the road of Semiramis. Afterward she went into Persia, and all the other countries of Asia subject to her dominion; and wherever she went, she ordered the mountains and precipices to be leveled, raised causeways in the plain country, and at a great expense made the ways passable.

In the gospels, Isaiah 40:3-4 is quoted in reference to John the Baptist, because this was his calling: He was to prepare the way for the uncrowned Monarch, and he did that by preaching a message of repentance. He told the people how to straighten out their lives to be prepared when the King arrived. He told the multitudes to bear fruits that indicated true repentance and advised them to be willing to share their goods with their neighbors. He warned tax collectors to stop being crooked and not to collect any more than was legally required. He instructed soldiers to stop being crooked through intimidating people, falsely accusing, and being discontent. While John did not actually use the word “crooked,” his message, in essence, was to equalize the areas of their lives that were askew (Luke 3:4-18).

We, too, are looking forward to the arrival of the King, and so we are also called to “prepare the way” within our own lives—though not, like Semiramis, to leave an everlasting memorial to ourselves. Isaiah 40:4 describes the preparation as bringing every valley up and every mountain down to the level of the road. The crooked places have to be made straight, and the rough places smoothed.

However, this prophecy does not say that the King will not arrive until we are ready. Rather, the King will arrive at the appointed time, and whether or not we have straightened our crookedness will determine if we face His wrath or His reward when He does.

We cannot straighten the crookedness of the world, but through God’s power, we can straighten our own paths. God has given us the gift of His Word, which will help us to evaluate properly whether something in our lives will make the path crooked or straight. He has given us the example and teachings of the Messiah. He has given us inspired letters. He has given us laws, statutes, judgments, reflections, proverbs, praise, prophecy, and history. He has given us specifics and principles, all of which can be used to help us consider our ways: to consider whether a word or action is sin; to

consider whether we are asserting our will against another; to consider whether something will make our path to the Kingdom more difficult; and to consider whether our attitudes, approaches, or activities will make someone else's path crooked.

Another thing that God has given us in His Word is hope—because we can read about the future. We know that when God's plan is complete, nothing will be crooked. God will wipe away every tear; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for—to paraphrase Revelation 21:4—the former crookedness will have been straightened out. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. There will be new spiritual bodies, and most importantly, new hearts.

God tells us, and shows us, how to be a part of that future. Right now, our responsibility is to make our paths as straight as possible—not just for our sakes, but also for the effect it has on others.