

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Eleven): Paradox, Continued

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:15, “There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness.” This verse presents a Christian with a paradox about Christian living. A paradox is a circumstance, statement, activity, or conduct that is contrary to expectation. It is an inconsistency, a sharp irregularity, that often produces a conundrum, which is a riddle or puzzle. In Solomon’s paradox, the righteous person may ask, “Why should such a situation exist? Where are the blessings God has promised? Where is God in this picture? Has He not promised prosperity and long life if we obey Him?” Yes, indeed He has.

In the previous article, we saw the potential for one of two possible problems arising from this experience, both of which involve misjudgments made by the righteous. The first is to misjudge God and accuse Him of being unjust, assuming we know a better way than He does. Not much humility is shown in coming to this conclusion! We need to spend no more time on this one.

The second problem arises when one misjudges, not only God, but also the self, the circumstance, and the possible “solution.” This combination can lead to making the paradox truly destructive to one’s spiritual health.

A Quick Warning of Danger

From the vivid description in Psalm 73, we learned of the spiritual and emotional agony of a converted man experiencing a situation similar to what Solomon describes. The author survived it because he responded in the correct way. God intervened to ensure his rescue, or he might have slid “right out of the church,” as we might say today. The author never slid into the “righteous over much” mode, as the King James Version phrases it in Ecclesiastes 7:16, or into “super-righteousness,” as some modern commentators call it. Solomon warns us that this reaction is destructive.

In Ecclesiastes 7:16-17, Solomon gives a warning right on the heels of his mention of the paradox, making a clear connection between the paradox and the possible reaction of a righteous person. He does it with a strong admonition: “Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time?” A stern caution indeed. Super-righteousness is a misguided response that seems to arise from our judgment that we are having all this trouble because we are being punished.

Is Punishment Really the Cause?

Psalm 73:12-14 shows the anguished complaint of the righteous man:

Look at these men of arrogance; they never have to lift a finger—theirs is a life of ease; and all the time their riches multiply. Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? All I get out of it is trouble and woe—every day and all day long. (*The Living Bible*)

The author's distress is evident. At this point, he was clearly puzzled too. How quickly he seemed to have forgotten earlier outpourings of God's benefits. Did he allow his anguish to lead him into believing that he was being picked on unfairly? In this state of mind, a person can easily come to a wrong judgment about how he should respond.

Why would a righteous person believe God was punishing him? In one sense, it is easy to reach such a conclusion because in our calling we are educated to see sin in ourselves. Why? If we do not first see our sins, how can we repent of them? And, if we are not overcoming our sins, how can God be glorified in us?

In addition, at the same time we are also being educated about the holiness of God. Together, the two of them serve to emphasize how wide the contrast is between Him and us, sharpening our awareness of our sinfulness. How can we possibly live up to that standard? We conclude, then, that we are being punished. Seemingly confirming our conclusion is the apostle Paul's statement in Romans 7:24 about his own sinfulness, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

However, this is not the end of the story on making this judgment, for it is indisputably unbalanced. We must emphasize and believe another characteristic of God's nature more profoundly. Exodus 34:4-9 records an episode following the Israelites' rebellion after receiving the law at Mount Sinai. Moses returned to the mountain and asked to see God, that is, literally see Him in person with his own eyes. God granted His request, permitting him to see His back. When God passed by, He proclaimed:

The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

God emphasizes His mercy, patience, goodness, truth, and forgiveness. Why do we not think first of His grace and run to Him, rather than fear His justice, accuse Him, and run from Him? He is our help. He gives us salvation. He provides us with a Savior. He called us and gives us His Holy Spirit, empowering us to learn and grow. He is creating us in His image.

The author of Psalm 73 used this positive insight to come to a better solution. He went to the sanctuary and prayed, and God gave him a balanced, quiet, faithful spirit. The accusations stopped and praise for God began because he could now understand the entire picture in a more sound-minded, less self-centered way.

A Bridge to Clearer Understanding

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14:

Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find nothing that will happen after him.

These verses are akin to a bridge: They provide a conclusion to the teaching that precedes them, and at the same time, they lay a foundation to understand the teaching that follows. In both cases, they essentially say, “Whatever you choose to do, for the best understanding do not leave a correct understanding of God out of the picture.”

The Living Bible translates them in a picturesque way, adding considerably to our understanding of the paradox’s lesson by bringing God clearly into the picture before we even see the inconsistency:

See the way God does things and fall into line. Don’t fight the facts of nature. Enjoy prosperity whenever you can, and when hard times strike, realize that God gives one as well as the other so that everyone will realize that nothing is certain in this life.

This translation clearly reflects on the subject of Ecclesiastes 3—“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven”—then proceeds to show God’s involvement in all that is happening. Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 is saying that God *is* involved, therefore we should accept the circumstance we find ourselves in, exercise faith, and learn to roll with the punches life is dealing us! The “punches” include paradoxical situations.

Thus, when faced with a situation that on the surface seems unfair, the first element in reaching a proper conclusion is to avoid bringing God into a negative judgment. God is aware; He is involved. He loves us; He is not cruel. He is always fair in His dealings. This sets us on the path to a righteous solution.

This approach is reinforced by Solomon’s description of the situation as “what He has made crooked” (verse 13). This verifies God’s involvement. Certainly, the paradox is a crooked situation. We consider things “straight” when events are clear and going well. “Crooked” happens when things are going contrary to our expectations.

God’s governance of His creation contains absolutely no complacency. He creates circumstances for our benefit both to test us and to strengthen our faith. We need to exercise our faith, and He needs to know where we stand. We must understand that, as the apostle Paul states in I Corinthians 13:12, we sometimes “see in a mirror dimly.” So the question facing us is, “Do we trust that He is faithfully carrying out His creative actions even when we fail to see the entire picture?”

It Can Happen To Any of Us

Psalms 73:1-17 shows that the righteous man severely misjudged the reality of his situation for a time until God revealed the truth. This trap can catch any of us. The wicked appear to prosper only if we consider merely what appears on the surface. What God reveals to the psalmist is that the people he envies may appear to gain the whole world, but in reality, they are lacking something of immeasurably greater value. Through prayer and meditation, the psalmist is able to grasp this, and through God’s revelation, he returns to a better emotional and spiritual state.

However, while in that anguished state, he sincerely assumed God was plaguing and punishing him every morning (verse 14). There are times when that may indeed be the case, and we might need a firm spanking because we may have repeatedly committed a sin and need to be brought up short. But we must not allow this to be our only conclusion, as the Bible frequently shows that, in the case of God's children, most trials are *not* given as punishment.

As a trial continues, a Christian tends to reason that, if he were not sinning, he would not be going through this experience. He therefore has a strong tendency to recall scriptures that say something similar to, "Therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Verses of this sort become our guide to correct the stressful condition. It is at this point that, all too often, we make a significant mistake, assuming that we are being punished.

However, we need to understand a critical element that will make Ecclesiastes 7:15 a bit clearer. The Hebrew word translated as "perishes" (*'bad*; *Strong's* #6) creates a mis-understanding. In its strongest sense, if the context calls for it, it can indeed indicate death. Its first definition, though, is simply "to wander." It can also suggest merely slipping away or declining, not necessarily death. Solomon is indeed warning that danger is present, but it is not an emergency situation. He, then, is saying in verse 15 that the just man is declining in his righteousness. He is not saying that he is perishing because he is an evil sinner ignoring a character flaw.

The reality is that he is declining despite being righteous, which makes all the difference in the world. He is not perishing because he is not righteous enough; he simply is not handling a trial well. Punishment from God is not the issue here, just as it was not the issue with the psalmist, Job, Paul, or for that matter, Christ, in the midst of their deep trials. However, it is indeed a warning because danger is present.

Job, a righteous man, went through a great trial but not because he was a terrible sinner. Job 1:1 clearly states, "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was *blameless and upright*, and one who *feared God and shunned evil*." He was clearly not an evil sinner. However, his friends thought he was hypocritically hiding the fact that he was a sinner. Job did not judge himself as such, so he defended himself—vigorously. Job was correct. When he repented, it was of his lack of understanding, and God accepted it.

As he served God and the church, was Paul being punished through his trials (II Corinthians 11:22-33)? Did Jesus go through the horrible torture of the crucifixion and death because He was not righteous enough? He certainly did receive tremendously unjustified and painful punishment, but it was not for His sins but ours. Punishment from God is not the issue in this paradoxical circumstance either. It rarely is the issue with His children, and there are reasons why.

Testing, Salvation, and Works

When we are called into God's Family and the church, our lives change radically because God's creative activities intensify. He must prepare us for our change. He has allowed Himself enough time, but He will most certainly not waste any of it. Consider that God used Jesus, Job, and Paul, among others, for specific purposes in His great creative program. Their parts included difficult trials that were public enough to witness for God before the world and for us too. This factor will also be active in our lives.

Assuming the psalmist of Psalm 73 was a converted man, what would have happened to him if he had not done the right thing and appealed to God, or if, despite appealing to Him, God did not respond as quickly as he anticipated? The trial would surely have continued. One thing is certain: His envious attitude was of absolutely no help. It did not help to make the trial go away.

How often have we witnessed converted people go through seemingly never-ending trials? Have we had to endure such things because of our faith? Hebrews 11 witnesses to us of such trials, reporting events that may have ended only with the death of the saints.

In other words, paradoxes are not unusual for us. The stakes are high in our calling. We *must* be tested.

When a person is involved in such a scenario, in reality only three alternatives exist: First, with much prayer and steadfast submission to God's will, he can continue faithfully enduring. Second, he can give up in despair and slide right out of the church. Third, he can strive all the harder to impress God by becoming super-righteous so that He will take notice and bless him for his righteousness, relieving the stress.

It is the third alternative that Solomon addresses in Ecclesiastes 7:15-22, a "solution" that contains an element of danger. We may have lived through such a circumstance and been delivered, totally unaware of the peril. Super-righteousness is peculiar and dangerous because it is really a deceptive form of evil.

How does super-righteousness arise within a converted person? On the surface, it actually seems like a natural outcome unless the situation is controlled to prevent it. Though a form of self-righteousness, it is different from the self-righteousness we are more familiar with. It can develop from a resolve to obey God better, but those efforts are allowed to get out of control.

Two major abnormalities motivate super-righteousness: First, the misguided attitude is caused by a belief that one is being punished. Second, it tends to produce a subtle but spiritually cancerous fruit, making it spiritually dangerous.

We will examine the misguided motivation first: The natural solution, we think, is to pursue righteousness with even greater vigor to produce the prosperity, long life, security, and hope that God promises. We are tempted to become super-righteous to achieve these promises based on *our own works*, and there lies the dangers. Having a strong resolve to overcome is good, but it must be balanced by understanding and wisdom.

Super-righteousness all by itself is not the solution! Why? No matter how righteous we are through our works, we can *never* use them to force God to prolong our lives or prosper us. God knows what is in our heart of hearts. In reality, the goal of perfect righteousness has been beyond us ever since we first sinned. With that single transgression, that goal was forever destroyed. It will never be reached. An impossible goal is trouble.

Pride Must Be Stopped in its Tracks

The apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that, no matter how intense they are, our works will never attain salvation for us. Notice what he writes in Ephesians 2:8-10 (*The Amplified Bible*):

For it is by free grace (God's unmerited favor) that you are saved (delivered from judgment and made partakers of Christ's salvation) through [your] faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [of your own doing, it came not through your own striving], but it is the gift of God; not because of works [not the fulfillment of the Law's demands], lest any man should boast. [It is not the result of what anyone can possibly do, so no one can pride himself in it or take glory to himself.] For we are God's [own] handiwork (His workmanship), recreated in Christ Jesus, [born anew] that we may do those good works which God predestined (planned beforehand) for us [taking paths which He prepared ahead of time], that we should walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live].

This passage clarifies that God has willed the overall status of our relationship with Him because it is good for His purpose and for our character. Salvation is entirely a gift of God. Not one iota of it results from our having earned it because *He owes us nothing*. This truth impinges on this issue of super-righteousness because it is the gift of God's Spirit that enables us to do the works He requires for growth and overcoming. God created us as humans. God calls us and brings us to repentance. God gives His Spirit and educates us so that we have knowledge of what is required of us. Our relationship with Him is entirely one of *dependence*.

Prior to baptism, as we learn the legal aspects of our relationship to Him before making the New Covenant, we are cautioned about our position before Him. A covenant is an agreement, and our agreement is with God. The agreement is essentially that, if we will give ourselves with wholehearted understanding and repentance to His purposes, He will forgive our sins and actively create us in His image.

Concerning our part, Luke 14:26-27 relates the terms in a condensed form:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

He then concludes by saying in effect, "If you agree to these terms for this relationship, we can move forward." Thus, the covenant is made.

It must be this way, or it shifts our position in the relationship with Him to one in which He owes us for what we do. This is absolutely not good for our character because it shifts the balance of the relationship with God toward equality. Complete dependence sets the proper tone, leading to our willing submission to His commands, including the trials He has us experience to create us into His image.

Notice that Solomon agrees, stating in Ecclesiastes 7:20 (*New Revised Standard Version*), "Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning." This includes even a super-righteous Christian. Could we imagine God, who never sins under any circumstance and has continued so for eternity, being expected by a mere creation to give a blessing for performing what is required of him as a matter of course? Such arrogance! Clearly, near equality with Him would generate pride!

Solomon continues his thought in verse 22, "For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others." He is reminding us of how spiritually weak we are—that we cannot go

a day without sinning in some manner! Thinking we can meet the terms we are setting for ourselves reveals substantial pride. Yet, by dedicating ourselves to super-righteousness, we are foolishly demanding blessings.

Solomon is not directly saying so, but such a course of straining for absolute, moral, spiritual, yet unattainable perfection leads to a frustrating dead end. Our resolve will not cause God to be persuaded to comply with our demands because it would not be good for us and our relationship with Him.

More New Covenant Realities

The New Testament records the legalities of making the New Covenant, as well as the experiences of many early disciples as they strove to live up to God's requirements. Many of these testimonies are from the apostle Paul, as is Romans 7:13-25:

Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Do we not believe that Paul was a sincere and dedicated example of a fully committed Christian? Yet, his testimony confirms that we have to face and accept the humbling fact that sin, as long as we are in the flesh, forever stains our character. We will never be rid of it until our change in the resurrection. Can we accept the fact that no amount of personal exertion to purge ourselves of sin will be completely effective? Paul did, and it led him to be thoroughly humbled and thankfully aware of God's mercy.

However, it did not cause him to disregard whether he sinned. Paul resolved not to sin because he loved Christ for what He had already done and continued to do every day. As a former Pharisee, he understood that super-righteousness on his part would never work.

In I Corinthians 15:8-10, he makes a telling statement about how he judged his past before his conversion:

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was

not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

Paul had a firm understanding that super-righteousness could not replace what Christ had already mercifully done in his behalf, and nothing he did could ever replace it. He used this as an example, as a prod to himself, so he would never forget exactly where he stood in terms of being gifted by God's grace. It took a perfect Sacrifice to pay for his past sins and also those he continued to commit as a Christian! Despite sin still being a part of him, he says, "I am what I am by means of God's grace." He valued what was done on his behalf so deeply that he never let his appreciation lag.

He adds in Romans 4:4-8

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
And whose sins are covered;
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.

Do we truly understand that we cannot add to the quality of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived without sinning His entire life? When His pure righteousness is accounted to us, we stand before God blameless because of His sinlessness. Even our righteousness done through our obedience following baptism and receipt of God's Holy Spirit lacks the purity of Christ's righteousness imparted and accounted to us, because our righteousness is still tainted by sin that remains within us.

I Corinthians 1:26-31 states a truth of supreme importance to us:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

This is why our integrity must be guarded by humility because our obedience—given because of God's mercy and which He graciously accepts—is still flawed. None of this removes our responsibilities regarding our continuing sanctification; it does not do away with our accountability to obey God's law and grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We do not stop learning, obeying more perfectly, and maturing within the relationship that we now have with the Father and Son. Nevertheless, we cannot add to the righteousness of Christ. It is futile even to think such a thing—and that is why it is dangerous.

Upon receiving God's Spirit, attitude is of major importance. Conversion is a matter of a changed heart combined with more perfect knowledge of His truth. It is a matter of knowing, believing, living

in, and accepting our place within the relationship. It is a matter of submitting with all our heart to the Father's placement of us within the body. A person with wisdom will know he must not go beyond what the relationship will permit.

Not submitting to God's placement of him within His order is what led Satan to do what he did. In his rising pride, based on the glory God had already given him, he wanted more. When God refused, he lost his grip on reality and attacked.

Super-righteousness is destructive because one of its major fruits is a proud attitude of "God owes me" because of what we feel we have accomplished. Pride destroys humility before God and is therefore deadly. How destructive? Jesus began His preaching in the Sermon of the Mount with one of the most important of all of His sayings: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Humility begins and reinforces a right relationship.

Solomon charges us in Ecclesiastes 7:17, "Do not be overly wicked." Does he mean we should aim at being just a little bit wicked? Of course not. He knows that we are already flawed, sinning creatures: "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (verse 20). He is not counseling us in any way to add sin to what we already are. His words caution against choosing to sin deliberately, for it is highly likely to lead to death. It reveals a "what's the use" attitude. Sin is like a highly addictive drug. Solomon knows that some sin in everyone's life is inevitable because it dwells in us. But those who deliberately embrace it engrain it in their characters and are deliberately destroying the opportunity to be in God's Kingdom.

Thus, Solomon gives the solution, counseling in verse 18, "It is good that you grasp this, and do not remove your hand from the other." *The Revised English Bible* translates this more clearly: "It is good to hold on to the one thing and not lose hold on the other." What is he referring to? "Hold on to the one thing" refers to holding firmly to the counsel not to become super-righteous. "[Do] not lose hold on the other" refers to maintaining our grip in restraining ourselves from sinning. In other words, "Don't lose control of the character you have built." More to come.