

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Fourteen): A Summary

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With this article we complete our study of Ecclesiastes 7. In terms of Christian living, it is without doubt the most significant Old Testament chapter I have studied. It contains many truly intriguing concepts, providing us with helpful counsel that aims to help us meet the challenges of living in this seductive world. As a result, we need a summary of the many high points of instruction within it before moving into Ecclesiastes 8.

Solomon does not expand on each element significantly but provides enough thought-provoking commentary to trigger our interest so we grasp that this is important to God and to our lives in glorifying Him. He treats each issue as a constituent part of a whole, one to which we need to pay attention to develop more fully over the course of a well-lived life. It is as if, without further development of each part, we will not be well-prepared for God's Kingdom.

Vital, Practical Counsel to Live By

The first concept Solomon mentions is the importance of one's reputation, that is, having a good name (Ecclesiastes 7:1). His concern is weighted, not so much toward a person's reputation before other people, but toward his reputation before God. He does this because people often do not know how to judge the true value of character traits. A good reputation is built upon faithfulness to God and His way of life.

Proverbs 22:1 confirms the value of a good reputation: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold." God's desire for faithfulness in us is seen in His many reminders to us to keep His commandments. A good continuing relationship with Him is established on trust, dependability, and responsibility in His children, who speak wisely and keep their word.

The second point Solomon touches on is that a person must prepare for his death (Ecclesiastes 7:1). That we are going to die is a reality. Especially during youth, we easily overlook the reality of approaching death as we concentrate on the present. Of even greater importance is that Ecclesiastes is written primarily for the converted, which means we get only one chance to make the most of our calling. Thus, when we die, there is no changing our reputations from the reality of how they turned out to what they might have been. Proverbs 10:2 tells us bluntly, "Treasures of wickedness profit nothing, but righteousness delivers from death."

The third element Solomon broaches is that we learn more from difficult times than from the times we would consider "good" (Ecclesiastes 7:2). We may not enjoy days of difficulty, but if we are seriously considering the consequences of our choices, we find that the difficult times force us to consider our ways and make corrections. "Fun," on the other hand, influences us to remain as we are.

Solomon is not saying we should go out of our way searching for difficulty, but that difficulty is a part of every life, and we must face it if we are to be more fully developed. Proverbs 21:25 reminds us, "The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands refuse to labor." If an individual does not work, he does not produce, and his life is without value.

The focus of his fourth point is to reinforce the third by modifying the illustration (Ecclesiastes 7:3-4). He reminds us that the heart of the wise person disciplines him to make profitable use of difficult times, while those in the house of fools consistently look for fun, fun, fun. The lesson is that life does not reward a person lacking achievement, and achievement requires effort. The apostle Paul sharply charges us by his example in I Corinthians 9:26-27: “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

Solomon’s fifth piece of wisdom is that we must not let pride get the better of us by allowing ourselves to reject correction from a person we know has experience in a difficulty we are going through (Ecclesiastes 7:5-6). If we fail to humble ourselves in such a case, we will likely later regret passing off the correction as nothing more than arrogant interference. That can be a major misjudgment, as Proverbs 11:2 bluntly reminds us, “When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom.”

A sixth piece of Solomonian sagacity appears in Ecclesiastes 7:8, where he reminds us not to let impatience defeat us. When a trial is resolved, we will be glad we stuck with it. Impatience is a restlessness of mind that can easily become anxiety-ridden. It rises when we want to put an irksome and perhaps dangerous task behind us. Peace departs and the quality of our involvement in the situation dwindles. We so easily become frustrated and angry when things seem stacked against us. Some trials must be endured for long periods, often the case in relationship problems. Thus, Proverbs 11:12 cautions, “He who is devoid of wisdom despises his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his peace.”

A seventh nugget of sound advice: Do not look back, bemoaning one’s commitment to God’s way of life (Ecclesiastes 7:9-10). Solomon directly states that is not wisdom. Wisdom is to keep plowing forward as one’s best defense. Jesus says in Luke 9:62, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” He adds in Mark 4:17 that some called ones have no root in themselves and so endure only for a while, and when tribulation and persecution arise they stumble. We must continue forward, though it is difficult at times, because it will pay off handsomely in the end.

A final item of wisdom appears in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14: We should never allow ourselves to lose sight of God. Paul promises in I Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” God—the same God who gives us days of prosperity—remains with us during adversity. In adversity, even though it appears dark and perhaps never-ending, He calls on us to use our faith.

The Paradox Briefly Revisited

The two most significant concepts presented within this chapter are somewhat related; they are two elements of the same subject. The first is accepting and surviving the paradox found in Ecclesiastes 7:15, into which any of us could be drawn as we endure a difficult trial. The chapter also includes a few broad conclusions that help to give us some guidance.

The paradox seems to be the initial motivation for the second of these two concepts, which is Solomon’s description of his detailed and diligent search for wisdom that continues for the rest of the chapter. His search was only partly successful, as he admits in verse 23 that a complete answer was

far from him. However, he diligently kept at his search, and interestingly, his reflections reach back to creation and the introduction of sin into the world.

The danger within the paradox is for the Christian to misjudge that his circumstance is unfair. This error is initiated when he perceives that a Christian, a servant of God, should be greatly blessed with peace and prosperity, while for the sinner everything should be going badly. However, in the paradox the circumstances are reversed. The Christian's life seems to be in tatters, while everything is coming up roses for the sinner. The Christian, not being as fully aware of this as he needs to be, is feeling pressure to make a choice as to how he will react.

The wrong reaction lies in his becoming motivated to rid himself of the burden by resorting to radical measures to correct what he concludes is the cause of his stress. On the one hand, he may be strongly tempted to resort to super-righteousness, believing it is the solution. Yet, on the other hand, he may, out of frustration and lack of faith, resort to sinning deliberately as a means of relieving the pressure—and perhaps give up his place among the saved. Either of these radical measures can turn the paradox into a failed experience.

The correct solution is provided in Psalm 73, a complete commentary written by a deeply converted man who went through this very trial. The psalm reveals that the correct foundation of the solution is to understand that rarely is this difficult trial a punishment but a test. One must endure its stresses through a great deal of prayer, drawing on one's faith in and fear of God and believing in His promise never to allow us to be tempted above what we are able. We must put our trust in God's faithfulness.

Wisdom's Strengths

The paradoxical circumstance taught Solomon that, if a person is not wise and therefore does not have wisdom to use as a resource, not only in times of difficulty but during life in general, he will be unprepared to face the onslaught of this world's pressures. In verse 19, following the paragraph containing the paradox, he writes, "Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city." So Solomon made the accumulation of wisdom a major goal in his life, saying in verse 23, "I will be wise." He wanted to be strong and able to confront all circumstances that beset him. He sought to be prepared.

In verse 25, he expands on his goal: "I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things." This is a goal all of us should have. Wisdom does not stand alone. It is a result, built upon true knowledge and understanding that a person accumulates along the way to attaining wisdom. All of these will serve us well in life, not only spiritually, but also in family life and business and civic responsibilities in our communities.

It is interesting that in his search for wisdom, what he discovered may have also included insight into his personal defects. One of these may be revealed in verse 20, "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin." Another may appear in verses 21-22, "Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others." We can take these statements as encouragement not to allow what we discover in our search for wisdom to deter us from continuing on, despite how it affects us personally.

In the rest of the chapter, Solomon touches on a few things he learned that can help us in setting our expectations. However, he says other things that, while not negatives, we should also understand as we search, for instance, writing in verse 23, “But it was far from me.” The search for wisdom is a lifelong endeavor, requiring diligent and continuous effort. In verse 24, he asks, “As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out?” He is gently informing us that we will never find answers to some things.

A Disappointing Conclusion

Verses 26-29 contain the conclusions he drew from this particular search:

And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be trapped by her. “Here is what I have found,” says the Preacher, “adding one thing to the other to find out the reason, which my soul still seeks but I cannot find: One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

His conclusions are certainly not inspiring. He finds the world to be full of alluring but discouraging wickedness. Only one man in a thousand, he deems, actually lives what Solomon considered a righteous life.

His findings on women reflect experiences of extreme disappointment. Blaming no woman in particular, he seems to cast all women with whom he had had personal experience as no more than snares to entrap him into a form of slavery. He must have felt that, because he was not pleasing to God, God did not make a way for him to escape women of that nature. His experiences led him to assert that he could not find even one woman in a thousand who lived a righteous life!

He probably did not feel that way about all women because in other places, such as in the Song of Songs and Proverbs 31, he speaks highly of them, and in Proverbs 4, 7, 8, and 9, he uses a woman to represent wisdom. Therefore, it cannot be said that he looked upon woman as an evil creation, yet his personal experiences definitely color his comments here.

We can perhaps clarify this conclusion by restating it: He found that righteousness is rare indeed regardless of gender. Few people are living before God as they should.

Following these declarations, verse 29 provides an intriguing concluding statement about this search, and it triggers questions.

He calls what he is looking for “wisdom,” and it truly is wisdom because, within the context of his search, the answers would provide a clearer basis for making good choices in life. But considering what we have covered—beginning even with his statement in chapter 1:2, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”—what he seems to be looking for are answers to why God has created all this and why life is so difficult and puzzling. He seems to be expressing the thought that, if he knew the answers to these questions, it would help his search a great deal.

Who Made Life Difficult?

It cannot be known how much Solomon searched the Bible for an overall answer, but the writings of Moses were available to him. Certainly, his father David knew a great deal, and being the godly man he was, it is impossible to imagine that he did not instruct his son from what Moses was inspired to write.

Deuteronomy 29:29, available to Solomon, is recorded for our understanding: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” The Bible indeed reveals a great deal, but apparently, Solomon did not understand that God chooses to reveal some matters personally and individually in the same way He has called us. God has clearly revealed much more to the elect, but the eyes of the uncalled are still blinded (Romans 11:7-8). Solomon understood a great deal but not every aspect of it.

He writes in Ecclesiastes 7:29, “Truly, this only have I found. . . .” The word “only” is inserted in his conclusion to draw attention to the importance of his conclusion. Righteous living is truly rare, and it has been so from the beginning, from Adam and Eve until now.

After this qualification, Solomon immediately asserts that God did not create human beings for the purpose of sinning but to live righteous lives. He is implying that we should stop blaming God for all of mankind’s troubles—that we get ourselves into this mess we call life. God made us upright, but we all have deliberately chosen to sin.

Undoubtedly, he is reflecting on the early chapters of Genesis, in which appears a clear pattern of deliberate, willful sin. Genesis 1:31 reminds us of God’s evaluation of His creation: “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.” Will we challenge God’s judgment of what He had just created? Adam and Eve had already been created at this point, and God judged what He had made as “very good.”

They were not flawed by sin, and God had not placed in them a mechanism to sin deliberately. They had not been created to live fractured, sinful lives but upright, righteous lives. In terms of sin, whatever became part of them occurred after this point. He did not entrap them. However, they were capable of sinning because God created them with minds able to learn, discern, and make choices between options. Sinning was something they opted to do.

Genesis 6:5 suggests an interesting connection between the overwhelming sinfulness of the days of Noah and Solomon’s conclusion in Ecclesiastes 7:29: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” The intriguing relationship is between the word “schemes,” “inventions,” or “devices,” depending on what translation is used in Ecclesiastes 7:29, and the word “intent” in Genesis 6:5. While not the same word, both are formed from the same root, indicating thinking and/or planning. In both contexts, the thinking is being done with evil intent. That is, the ones doing the devising are deliberately planning evil.

In Adam and Eve’s sin, a measure of deliberateness is evident. Curiosity, it seems, got the best of her, but Adam’s choice was clearly deliberate. First, notice Genesis 2:16-17: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” Adam was instructed and warned of the penalty.

Genesis 3:2-6 adds:

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Clearly, Eve, like Adam, was instructed and warned. In that regard, both were without excuse. Eve adds the prohibition against touching the fruit, and the context shows she admired its beauty, which is not a sin in itself but reveals her intensifying desire for it even before the serpent made its sales pitch. The problem became much more critical because she listened to the serpent, apparently making no effort to flee the potentially sinful situation. As the Bible reports, she was clearly deceived, but she was thinking right along with the Satanic sales pitch, as the desire to eat and be wise grew within her. All these pressures were edging the pair closer to choosing to sin. In doing so, they reaped the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, experiencing the pains of suffering and death.

Adam was guilty of idolatry and of deliberate sin. God directly curses Adam in Genesis 3:17, charging him, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it,’” He then lists a series of consequences, which would make life more difficult for him. These, of course, affected Eve as well.

Deliberate Sin Clearly Emerges

As time and humanity move away from the Garden of Eden, mankind’s deliberate scheming to control its destiny apart from God becomes stamped on its way of life. For instance, Cain’s murder of Abel is unmistakably planned and executed. In another, Genesis 4:17-22 records one of mankind’s earliest, larger-scale achievements:

And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son—Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad begot Mehujael, and Mehujael begot Methushael, and Methushael begot Lamech. Then Lamech took for himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the second was Zillah. And Adah bore Jabal. He was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal. He was the father of all those who play the harp and flute. And as for Zillah, she also bore Tubal-Cain, an instructor of every craftsman in bronze and iron. And the sister of Tubal-Cain was Naamah.

This passage records the foundation of humanity’s development of a more complex system of community living, including that of agriculture, art, and technology. God surely intended more complex human communal systems to arise, but since these are descendants of Cain, Scripture indicates that they were not working alongside God to produce these developments. Their planning and building are deliberately undertaken apart from God. The fruit of such development produced the evil society before the Flood.

Genesis 11:4, 9 records what developed a few generations after the Flood, as mankind repopulated the earth:

And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.” . . . Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Within a few generations of the Flood, mankind had begun devising schemes again, centered on a city which they believed could help them attain the destiny they desired for themselves. Like all the other preceding attempts, this one resulted in failure.

Isaiah 53:6 summarizes humanity’s habit of deliberate sin against God: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” In Genesis, this theme shows mankind devising wicked schemes against God on a large scale. But within these large-scale undertakings, each individual is also devising self-centered plans on a smaller scale to advance himself toward his self-perceived destiny, in opposition to and despite God’s clear instruction.

Infected by Sin

Why do we become carriers of a nature that is at war against God, and at the same time, are so self-centered that we can hardly take our mind off ourselves to love others as God commands? Since God did not create us this way, something happened after creation to cause it. That event can be identified and traced in Scripture. The Bible shows that sin is a spiritual matter, one that arises from our own hearts. But how does it get there in the first place?

Job 32:8 declares, “But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.” The spirit mentioned here is not the Holy Spirit. This “breath of the Almighty” is a separate and distinct spirit that enables people to have qualities in God’s image while remaining merely human. It enables communication to take place, even between God and humans. God, however, is not the only being who can communicate with and to us. Of course, other humans can communicate with us, as can angels. Such communication is not only verbal, but it can also be through the influence of other spirits and attitudes, be they evil or righteous.

A living spirit possesses the power to sway another’s attitudes and conduct. A spirit that places the desire to sin in a person’s mind can be resisted, but if his guard is not “up,” he can allow that influence to enter his heart and become part of him. This is what happened to Adam and Eve when Satan came calling to influence them toward the desire to take of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

As long as Adam and Eve were only in the presence of the holy and righteous God in the Garden of Eden, sin was not a problem because God’s communication with them was entirely righteous, encouraging, and positive. But when the personification of evil showed up, they did not resist his appeals to join with him in sinning against the holy God. Their spirits picked up on what he was communicating to them, and they joined him in sin.

It seems such a simple process, but it is nonetheless true. Sin enters us from contact with a sinful source, to which we then yield ourselves. Adam and Eve's innocence prevailed while they lived righteously with God, their Creator and companion, in the Garden of Eden. What about us?

Put Up Your Guard

The apostle John states in I John 5:18-19: "We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one." The spirit of Satan and his demons floods this world, which is why we must be alert to its negative influences—as John writes, we must "keep" ourselves. Their influence is always pushing at us to break our loyalty to God and His way.

We have no need to be terrified. However, Paul gives the watchword for every Christian in Ephesians 6:11-12:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.

Not until the original source of sin, Satan, was allowed into Adam and Eve's presence—when they rubbed shoulders with him and allowed themselves to become infected by his attitudes—did their natures begin changing, and they sinned. What changed is that, as he wove his deceptions, they gradually became more self-concerned and self-centered in their hearts. As their desires shifted, they became increasingly motivated to satisfy their personal desires rather than God's instructions. They failed to raise their defenses, their armor—which resided in their knowledge of, faith in, and love for God—and flee. They became abettors of their entrapment.

Paul attests that infection with the sinful nature is communicated by means of contact with one or many persons already infected. If it is not the initial infection, it then tends to intensify what is already resident. The apostle writes in I Corinthians 15:33-34: "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame." *The Revised English Bible* translates this more bluntly: "Make no mistake: 'Bad company ruins good character.' Wake up, be sober, and stop sinning: some of you have no knowledge of God—to your shame I say it."

In this world we are surrounded by and metaphorically almost swimming in the influences of Satan's mind. This may seem unfair to some, but it is nonetheless what humans must face. In His creation of mankind, God willed that people must voluntarily and deliberately choose which way they will go: Satan's or God's way? Which will we be loyal to? Our loyalty must be demonstrated by the way we live our lives, even though faced with the temptations of a disobedient and rebellious influence.

God provides protections so that we are safe from what would ordinarily be constant pressures from demonic influences (Job 1:6-12). Even so, the apostle Paul warns us that we are still subject to being influenced. We cannot be careless. He writes in II Corinthians 11:1-3:

Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly—and indeed you do bear with me. For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I

may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

This instruction is given to those who already have God's Spirit. Following God's Word is always wisdom, though it is not always easily understood. Sometimes, it takes diligence to clarify its meaning and application to our lives. We have to take the time to search things out, believe it, and choose to use it in our lives, regardless of the sacrifices it might require.

Adam and Eve, though without God's Spirit, did not do what we are instructed to do: to be careful and thoughtful and to use the wisdom we already possess from God to resist the influences we are still bombarded with. I Corinthians 10:13 promises us that we have God's willing help. Therefore, we can grow to the level of comprehension and conduct we need to fulfill our responsibility to resist the influences of Satan and his world.

We, who have formally dedicated our lives to glorifying God, must be thoughtful and focused, not allowing Satan to deceive us into carelessly becoming disloyal to our Creator. This is wisdom.