

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Thirteen): Confessions

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Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 is a brief, two-verse paragraph addressing an element of the paradox-event of verse 15, one we should consider before moving on: “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.”

Here, Solomon deals with what might be a lingering effect of the trial of the paradox. While the individual endures what transpires, it attracts the attention of others, usually close friends and family members—and they talk. This kind of talk has a tendency to intensify the paradox’s discomfort.

The talking might be better called “gossip,” but that is not an absolute because it may be sincere, well-intentioned conversation. Even if it is sincere, well-intended, and in no way malicious, it may be taken very hard by the one experiencing the paradox and be difficult to overcome.

Human nature is prone to take advantage of another’s hard times, pointing out and passing on what it thinks are others’ mistakes or outright character weaknesses. But for the other person, it is like taking a punch to the gut. Every one of us will be on the receiving end of gossip, maybe even frequently.

Why is it so difficult to deal with? Because it damages our pride, our opinion of ourselves. The best defense against it is a clear conscience, that is, to be innocent of what the gossip supposes of us and to be consistent in goodness, a fruit of God’s Spirit. Such a person can patiently weather the passing of the gossip storm clouds.

Though He was perfectly innocent, Jesus had to endure the taunts of others. Should we expect to escape the same? Thus, verse 22 follows with the reminder that we are in all likelihood guilty of practicing the same against others. What goes around comes around. What one sows, one also reaps (Galatians 6:7). It is a character weakness to give in to the hurt feelings, forgetting that none of us is infallible, and we might have given cause for the grief now coming back on us.

Can we remember the times we lost our tempers and called somebody a “stupid idiot”? Can we remember when we cut somebody off on the highway and given others grief? How many times have we forgotten, been late, or been outright careless in our self-centeredness? Since we have not been absolutely pure in character ourselves, we cannot claim the high ground above others, maintaining we do not deserve the gossip.

God’s counsel through Solomon is that it is best just to take our licks, repent, and do better in the future without feeling we have the right to complain.

A Confession from the Preacher

Ecclesiastes 7:19, 23-29 might be titled “Solomon’s Search for Wisdom.” In the previous article we saw that *The Preacher’s Homiletic Commentary* titled the paragraph containing the paradox as “The Cautions of a Religious Philosopher.” The key word is “cautions.” This subsequent paragraph is titled, “The Confessions of a Religious Philosopher,” the key word being “confessions.” God is

allowing us some insight into Solomon's heart and life. He gifted Solomon with a proclivity for understanding and wisdom, but this paragraph reveals that achieving them did not come easy.

Note that the true God gifts us to enable us to fill our place in the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:1-11), but this does not mean He gives the gifts in full-blown perfection so we can fulfill that role without effort (Matthew 25:14-30). His gifts must be developed, fine-tuned, and polished until they are truly fit to be used—even then they are still less-than-perfect in actual practice.

Solomon is confessing a truth that we, too, discover as we continue our conversion. Finding wisdom is difficult and not as satisfying as what we might think. What we see in this paragraph is an exposé, a confession by the author that, despite all the great intellectual gifts given him, in the end what he did not know far exceeded what he actually knew.

This paragraph is a reminder of Solomon's purpose, as stated in Ecclesiastes 1:12-13: "I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this grievous task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised." He was indeed gifted, but God in no way drilled a hole in the top of his head, stuck a funnel in the hole, and poured wisdom in, requiring no effort on Solomon's part. He had to participate in the search to reach his goal. It became a lifelong pursuit.

This pursuit took earnest effort. Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:23, "All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me." His goal was set; his was no superficial overview. With earnest, exhaustive thoroughness, he applied himself to discover what lay behind the conduct he observed. He wanted to know the reason of things, as verse 25 shows: "I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things." Why did he search so thoroughly? A major reason appears in verse 19, "Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city." He was looking for spiritual strength through understanding. The fruit of that search would be wisdom to equip him to make better choices.

Wisdom, in terms of spiritual sagacity, can be an extremely valuable resource. *Sagacity* indicates "discernment," that one is "keen," "perceptive," and "sound in judgment," insuring that one's choices produce good fruit. Through verse 19, the Bible is showing us that wisdom can govern thought, the will, and one's actions in order to produce good results. This is not to say that he found them all, but that is what he was determinedly seeking.

The deep insights he found revealed the order and harmony supporting the things he witnessed from the outside. However, we should understand that seeking wisdom exacts a price. It is interesting how the Bible compares the costs of achievement: by the value of what a person might buy on the market. It declares that one pays more for wisdom than for goods that people expect will fetch a high price on the open market. Wisdom's costs are largely in terms of time, attention, and discipline to achieve. Notice these examples:

» Proverbs 3:13-15: "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her."

» Proverbs 8:11: "For wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared to her."

» Proverbs 16:16: “How much better to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.”

These expressions of value clearly state why Solomon sought wisdom so diligently. Should we not do so too?

He looked at problems from all sides, and even analyzed the opposite of the way he first saw things. He uses terms like “wickedness,” “folly,” and “madness,” showing that he was looking deeply at human behavior. He examined these things so closely that he believed that at least emotionally, he experienced a small measure of the characteristics—even the bad ones—he was searching into.

What did Solomon learn from this? Ecclesiastes 7:23-24 reveals it was humbling: “All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, ‘I will be wise.’ But it was far from me. As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out?” It was far more difficult than he imagined when he began. If we measure our gifting against his, what kind of wise plan could we produce that would impress God to remove the burden of a trial? As we can see, searching for wisdom is a necessity but difficult. The answers are rarely right on the surface.

Humility and Judgment

This entire section examines wise judgment, whether the source of our problems is God, our fellow man, or ourselves. We must ask ourselves if we are truly making an effort to pursue holiness, without which, Paul says in Hebrews 12:14, “no one will see the Lord.” Is that where our problem lies? Are we really making an effort worthy of the treasure we have been freely given? Do we have something to repent of regarding the time and energy we expend? Our conclusion will parallel his conclusion to some degree: It is no wonder that salvation must be by grace!

A thought from Ecclesiastes 3:11 will balance this: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” We will never have complete answers because God in heaven is also working things out in our lives, and His purposes take precedence over our weak efforts and conclusions. There is much beyond our control.

We can learn two major truths from Solomon’s confession: First, a truly wise person will be humbled knowing that he does not know everything, and this lack of knowledge will affect his choices and conduct because he knows he is terribly ignorant. Second, the humbling will move him to be cautious in his judgments so that he does not condemn God, others, or even himself. Recognizing these truths tends to balance our thinking because we know that what we have now is marvelous—but crumbs compared to what is coming. Thus, we can see that a study of the path Solomon took, though difficult, can be beneficially humbling.

The children of God must be constant learners. Why? We are not merely looking for salvation but also preparing for the Kingdom of God and for service to Him and mankind in that Kingdom. However, we must submit to the fact that the knowledge of God is like a distant star, a destination so far off that we will never reach it in dozens of lifetimes. This reality points to a reason we need everlasting life. It is something we must humbly accept now, knowing we will never reach it, but will nonetheless earnestly work toward it to be as prepared as possible.

I Corinthians 4:1-8 presents a hurdle that we must deal with regarding the accumulation of knowledge or position:

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you have not received it? You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!

There is a pitfall in even the earnest searching for wisdom and truth: Human nature sometimes follows the path of flaunting it. This must be strongly resisted. The wise person knows what Paul says here is true and resists self-glorification. This restraint makes him wiser.

A Few Conclusions

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:26-29:

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 taken 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.

Beginning in verse 25, Solomon makes clear that wisdom is found, not on the surface of events, but only by those willing to work, to dig, to study, and to analyze to uncover it. Truth and error are most often mixed together in the same problem, so they must be disentangled from each other. We are discovering in the current liberal bent of our nation that some forms of human evil are so bold and irrational that they almost defy description. By way of contrast, Satan was so subtle in deceiving Eve that he slid the lies right in front of her, and she, in her naïveté, missed seeing the trap altogether.

We cannot expect, then, to have wisdom and safety always clearly spelled out for us. Some evil does not collect its due until a long time has passed. For example, Adam and Eve did not die for many years. Solomon's phrasing at the end of verse 25 suggests that he is searching for the most vivid examples of the most painful aspects of evil that he can find.

We covered a few examples in chapter 2. Recall that he deliberately sought pleasure. He clearly learned that sometimes evil is pleasurable, even seemingly fun, as one participates in it. But know this: Pleasure is deceptive, as his testimony shows, because it eventually produces painful enslavement.

It is becoming clearer that wisdom has two major elements. The Bible emphasizes practical wisdom, which, in actual usage, is skill in living. In the world, though, the emphasis is on sagacity, which is more intellectually slanted, but also has practicality in being helpful in giving or receiving counsel. Both of these elements are good, especially when enhanced with God's truths.

In this section, Solomon is weaving the two elements together, which is why he uses such strong terminology. He uses "folly," "foolishness," and "madness"—significant terms—as descriptors. He wants to grasp the full gamut of wisdom; he digs deeply. In one sense, this is a warning: Do not be fooled by initial feelings. Everything that is not truly wisdom never satisfies for long, but it inevitably becomes more difficult to bear and overcome. The folly and madness of sin, which is never wisdom, always eventually appears. Its fruit cannot be hidden.

We can deliberately hide from its folly, but it is there. A lack of wisdom is always destructive. The Hebrew terminology in verse 27 indicates that he carefully made this search and that he apparently wrote Ecclesiastes late in life.

In verse 26, God gives him the opportunity to provide an example from his own life, which he does with vivid description. He describes a woman whose heart is "snares and nets and whose hands are fetters." It seems he writes of this woman in Proverbs 7:

Follow my advice, my son; always keep it in mind and stick to it. Obey me and live! Guard my words as your most precious possession. Write them down, and also keep them deep within your heart. Love wisdom like a sweetheart; make her a beloved member of your family. Let her hold you back from affairs with other women—from listening to their flattery.

I was looking out the window of my house one day and saw a simple-minded lad, a young man lacking common sense, walking at twilight down the street to the house of this wayward girl, a prostitute. She approached him, saucy and pert, and dressed seductively. She was the brash, coarse type, seen often in the streets and markets, soliciting at every corner for men to be her lovers.

She put her arms around him and kissed him, and with a saucy look she said, "I was just coming to look for you and here you are! Come home with me, and I'll fix you a wonderful dinner, and after that—well, my bed is spread with lovely, colored sheets of finest linen imported from Egypt, perfumed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come on, let's take our fill of love until morning, for my husband is away on a long trip. He has taken a wallet full of money with him and won't return for several days."

So she seduced him with her pretty speech, her coaxing and her wheedling, until he yielded to her. He couldn't resist her flattery. He followed her as an ox going to the butcher or as a stag that is trapped, waiting to be killed with an arrow through its heart. He was as a bird flying into a snare, not knowing the fate awaiting it there.

Listen to me, young men, and not only listen but obey; don't let your desires get out of hand; don't let yourself think about her. Don't go near her; stay away from where she walks, lest she tempt you and seduce you. For she has been the ruin of multitudes—a vast host of men have been her victims. If you want to find the road to hell, look for her house. (*The Living Bible*)

Jesus testifies, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). In this case, the temptress' very heart is snares and nets, which she uses with consummate skill to accomplish her purpose. Notice her flattering secrecy. It is as though she is letting him in on something nobody else has access to. She makes it seem as if she deliberately sought him to the exclusion of all others. She puts her all into the part, an actress playing in a dangerous drama. She continues to use alluring salesmanship, emphasizing enjoyment and safety, since her husband would be away for a long time. This fellow is trapped from the beginning, as it seems he deliberately took the path right past the place where she frequently plied her trade.

What principles are at play in this illustration to provide wisdom in facing temptations beyond the use of a prostitute? The temptress stands as a type of the enticement of any unlawful desire burning in the mind as that desire seeks fulfillment. Notice how many tricks the prostitute employs to play on her customer's desire.

In another situation, that desire might be for drugs. Some are greatly vexed by the desire to smoke, while others have a keen yearning for alcohol. Others crave great quantities of food or certain foods that are not healthy for them. These days, through its easy availability on the Internet, pornography is a strong temptation. Perhaps the possibility of winning is the lure that draws some to gamble. Some desire to skip work or school. Many drivers hanker to drive much faster than the law allows. Sometimes it is a desire to put off a distasteful chore that needs doing.

Whatever the desire, the enticement's purpose is to induce some form of pleasure. It is like a siren's song, increasing the pressure by offering one reason after another why it would not be so bad to fulfill that desire just one more time. All too often, the lusting person becomes progressively more willing to fulfill his desire until he caves in. He can no longer endure the sacrifice of denying himself.

In reality, we argue ourselves into surrendering and fulfilling our desire. Like the young man in Solomon's illustration, we deliberately walk in temptation's direction. Despite the Bible's counsel regarding wisdom's value, when we give in, it has done us little good to that point, if at all.

In an overall sense, Solomon found what we might label “the overwhelming, general sinfulness of mankind.” Worded another way, he found that sinfulness is not rare and not hard to find. In fact, it is everywhere, universal. Conversely, it is righteousness, purity, and wisdom that are hard to find.

The Prostitute Imagery Expanded

It is interesting that Solomon begins to relate his conclusions by listing the prostitute first. It seems he uses her in three senses: The first is in the specific sense of Proverbs 7, the way of a literal street-walker. The second sense is the suggestion that she could illustrate any of the powerful but unlawful desires working within any of us. The third way is perhaps that she symbolizes all of mankind being lured by the spirit of this world. In other passages, God characterizes Israel's conduct before the world in this way.

I Kings 11:1, 4-6 sums up Solomon's life in one vital area:

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. . . . For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not fully follow the Lord, as did his father David.

This same man advised in Proverbs 5:3-6:

For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps lay hold of hell. Lest you ponder her path of life—her ways are unstable; you do not know them.

Failing to follow his own advice, Solomon was ensnared by many foreign women who lured him away from God and into the worship of foreign gods. The term "foreign" can apply, not only to those of a different ethnicity, but also those of a different religion and thus a different way of life that should have been alien to him. Used in this way, the prostitute symbolizes the world and its gods to the Christian. The world may be alluring to the senses, but it is deadly poison to a relationship with God.

The third sense may lead us to a positive solution. Solomon gives solid advice in Proverbs 7:4-5: "Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister,' and call understanding your nearest kin, that they may keep you from the immoral woman, from the seductress who flatters with her words." It has been scientifically determined that children are genetically more closely related to each other than they are to their parents. With this knowledge, we can grasp why Solomon suggests making understanding one's sister. Such a close, protective relationship would serve a young man well. In addition, Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:18, "For he who fears God will escape them all."

Putting these factors together, we find that understanding, wisdom, and the fear of God are effective deterrents to any temptation. Solomon's greatest weakness appears to lie in his lack of the fear of God.

Believed and used, I Corinthians 10:13 provides a wonderful promise from our faithful God: "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." Understanding and wisdom, combined with the fear of God, will enable a person to find ways to flee the temptations to fulfill evil desires, as Joseph did in Genesis 39. The solution equation is easily stated and remembered—but we cannot let the intensity of the impulse to give in build, or we will probably lose.

Was Solomon a Male Chauvinist?

Before allowing ourselves to conclude that Solomon was a sexist pig as a result of his writing about women, we should rethink it. We should not think that he was totally down on women, since he speaks positively of them in many other places. However, God allowed a small bit of Solomon's

personal experiences and their results to appear in His Word because they can serve as wisdom for us. Wisdom must be used!

Ecclesiastes 7:27-28 take us further along the line in terms of Solomon's personal experiences and attitudes toward women:

“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.”

The text directly labels this as his personal experience. He might have actually been counting. Several commentators believe they are simply general statements similar to what we might use today. We may have even heard a person, whether male or female, described as “one in a million.”

If taken as true, the one-in-a-thousand figure posits that a man is but one one-hundredth of one percent better than a woman. But sin is an equal-opportunity predator. Taken as a whole, the Bible has much more to say about sinful men than sinful women. Solomon himself says in verse 20, “There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.”

The emphasis in verse 28 is on man as contrasted to woman. The reality is that even the one good man that he found was still a sinner. In Solomon's personal experience as king, a high number of the women he had contact with were from aristocratic families, likely spoiled and bitter floozies accustomed to getting their way all their lives. Considering his writings (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), he generally has good things to say about women. Yet, even the righteous women, such as the lady of Proverbs 31, were, like men, still sinners who need saved by grace. Overall, though, his experiences with women seems not to have been good.

Man's Many Schemes

Ecclesiastes 7:29 is especially thought-provoking as an Old Testament statement containing a little insight into what is called the Doctrine of Original Sin: “Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” It plainly asserts that God did not create man for the purpose of sinning.

Through the millennia, mankind has shown a persistent and strong proclivity for blaming God for all his troubles. We are indeed created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). God gave us a spirit (Job 32: 8), and by it, we have the ability to understand and harness many of the powers that God placed within our nature and environment. But Ecclesiastes 7:29 clearly indicates that man, specifically Adam and then all humanity after him, including women, have deliberately chosen to sin.

This point appears in the final part, “But they have sought out many schemes.” Time and history have proven repeatedly that we do not always do things constructively. We seem to pollute everything we touch, creating new problems with each generation, most of which we cannot solve. Potential problems exist now that could, except for God's mercy, wipe life itself from the face of the earth.

We could loosely interpret verse 29 as, “God made man to be upright, but man has defeated himself by his own schemes. He strives to do things his way. He goes to so much trouble to make trouble for himself instead of reading God's Book, believing it, and submitting to it.”

Mark Twain is highly respected as a writer, but he was, according to contemporary accounts, sarcastic and cynical regarding God and life in general. By means of his skilled writing, he managed to hide from the public his hatred of God, Christianity, and life itself. However, it is revealed in *Huckleberry Finn*, his most popular and critically acclaimed novel. In it, he portrays God, and Christians especially, as ignorant, pharisaical, and silly, demanding dolts, killjoys who take all the fun out of life.

Twain blamed God for all of mankind's troubles. On these thoughts, he wrote a book in the last few months of his life, *Letters to Earth*, and it so offended his daughter that she would not allow it to be published until thirty years or so after his death. She feared it would destroy his reputation. In another place he wrote, "Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is, knows how deep a debt of gratitude we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world."

Thank God that there is also a Last Adam! By virtue of His sinless life, atoning death, and resurrection, we can by God's grace receive the quality of life God intended from the beginning. We do not have the wisdom to solve all the deep mysteries of life, but from our experiences, we should be wise enough to look within ourselves and see the deadly sin in our hearts, asking God to be our Savior through Jesus Christ.

We will conclude chapter 7 next time, summarizing Solomon's counsel.