

## Ecclesiastes Resumed (Part Twenty-Four)

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We will begin in the book of Ecclesiastes once again. I am beginning to wonder if there is another book in the Bible besides Ecclesiastes. We can laugh at that, but I will tell you ,I have really found Ecclesiastes 7 especially interesting. We will begin in verse 15; I will read those verses once again.

**Ecclesiastes 7:15-22** I have seen all things in my days of vanity; there is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. 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? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all. Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city. For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. 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.

I do not believe that I have ever spent so much time attempting to get a clear understanding of so few verses as I have the paradox that is mentioned there in verse 15. I do not regret it, because of seemingly simple observations there in verse 15, covers a potentially very serious challenge to the converted.

I mentioned to you in the second sermon in this series, that Ecclesiastes 7 may be the most controversial chapter in the entire writing, this is because Solomon says so many confounding things within it, thus people have such varied opinions regarding, what is it that he really meant?

The paradox in verse 15, is one of those head scratching statements, he does not even mention the word paradox, but that is what it is. It presents us with a paradox, I believe the paradox itself is clear, it simply states a why are these things happening to me? In which people he would think would be getting bad times are having good times, while he, the converted person, the righteous one, is having bad times.

Part of the problem arises because Solomon gives no specific answers in the context, to the dangers that are posed. He cautions us in verse 16-17, but another question arises, what is the danger, or dangers? My purpose especially at the beginning of this sermon, is that we do not misjudge the seriousness of what verse 15, is talking about.

Psalms 73 is helpful, because it presents an event in the life of a godly man, that is almost a perfect fit for expanding our understanding, it defines the seriousness of the challenge of discontent in a converted person, combined with envy, both of these reactions are dangerous if they are left unresolved, or are not dealt with.

One should conclude that the issue in Psalm 73, was not merely a passing trial, because it calls into question God's sense of justice, is there ever a time that God judges unfairly? But that is what is happening there, and that is the issue here in Ecclesiastes 7:15. God is not judged correctly on the basis of the thinking of the person who is going through the trial, so the person who is going through

the trial is calling God in question, there is part of the danger, have we ever called God into question? Because He is allowed certain things to happen, or perhaps guided us even directly into a circumstance that really puts the pressure on. Are we going to be stubborn about it? That would be a bad reaction.

We know that the Psalmist did the right thing in order to receive a solution, overall he not only endured it, he actively endured it, through prayer, after a while he was not just passively waiting for God to do something, the Psalmist reports in Psalm 73, that he went into the sanctuary he prayed in faith and God solved the problem. But it still dose not answer why Solomon cautioned his readers so sternly regarding the paradox spiritual danger.

Solomon went so far to ask, this is in his comments, “Why should you die?” that is pretty serious. Solomon is saying that to the person who is going through the paradox that is given there in verse 15, “Why should you die?” this is a serious issue.

I do not believe that Solomon meant why do you die at this moment, rather he meant, why should you die spiritually, that is die without entrance into the Kingdom of God, which might take place a bit later.

The effect of that is that we have to look elsewhere within the Bible, not just in Psalm 73, but other places as well, to find answers and then draw on our knowledge and understanding of God's great purpose and some Israelitish history, as well in order to get a clearer answer.

I am going to continue here to remind you of some of the quotes that are made regarding Ecclesiastes 7, especially verses 16, and 17. I will remind you where I got them from, I got them from the preachers homiletic commentary, I extracted them because I believe that those people caught the essence of the paradox seriousness to a righteous person.

In that commentary, they titled that paragraph in which these verses take place, “The counsels of a religious philosopher” The philosopher was Solomon, in those verses he counseled those who were listening to his teachings as he was giving it. In our case that means us, right now.

Here is the first quote, “This is not a caution against aiming at the highest excellence in goodness or wisdom, for these are the proper objects of a righteous ambition, it is rather a caution against the conduct of those who presume to find fault with the methods of God's dealing with men as if they could devise and conduct a more satisfactory scheme. This is the most daring form of human arrogance.” Calling God into question as to His judgment with, “Why are you doing this God?” It is bad business, if it is done in a wrong attitude, finding fault with God in their misjudgment of the trial, and then the righteous person reacts badly.

That comment warns against the attitude, that misjudging God's part in the trial in the first place, the righteous person then foolishly acts on his misjudgment and begins producing the fruit of that misjudgment, thus his second misjudgment is that he will impress God by means of his works.

Another commentator, same source, his name is Seow, he says this, “becoming overly righteous is the hubris that one must avoid, that attitude is the opposite of the fear of God” a brief interpretation of that comment is, becoming over righteous is a flaunting rebellion against God's will, this is because hubris does not mean merely pride, it is excessive defiant pride. Why? Because God has willed that He will save men by grace, this person is mixing grace and works in a bad mixture.

Exhibiting hubris through super righteousness is saying to God, "I will force you to save me by dint of my works." This person is actually circumventing God's judgment. We are beginning to see what the problem is here, with verse 15, the problem in the righteous person is his misjudgment of God and the combination of God, grace, and works.

Another quote from that same source, "straining for perfection is presumptuous, a refusal to accept human limitations" we are going to compare this to something that the apostle Paul said in the Bible, this comes out in I Corinthians 15, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain, I labored more abundantly than they all yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." Paul humbly accepted his limitation taking no credit whatever for what he did. It was the grace of God working in him.

Finally a commentator named Brown, he states on the same subject, "A life obsessed with righteousness in fact blinds the person to his or her own sinfulness." What did Paul say? The sins were done by sins within him. This comment by Mr. Brown is bluntly insightful regarding the trap within over righteousness.

Each of these comments is a caution to us not to over look the serious consequences of misjudging God and the trial. These quotes isolate the danger, the danger lies in a possible wrong reaction to the spiritual and emotional suffering, the righteous person was experiencing.

Any normal Christian would greatly desire to end the suffering and resolving to do better and that is good, but the warnings that Solomon gives indicates a fear of a reaction that produces bad fruit that threatens salvation. We know from Psalm 73, that the Psalmist reacted in a righteous way, correctly. Please turn to Psalm 73, we will read a number of scriptures there to be reminded before we move on.

**Psalm 73:15-24** If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me-until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. [he was envying the unconverted who seemed to living a life of ease, while he was going through a terrible trial, his judgment was confused] Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image. [his mind is beginning to clear] Thus my heart was grieved and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with You, You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

We are going to go through this as we continue on. Putting the picture together correctly, we can grasp that the Psalmist was in grave spiritual danger, misjudging his suffering as punishment for sin, Judging God, that God was over doing it. We can see that he admitted earlier in the Psalm 73:2, he especially clearly perceived his envy of the wicked, but his grasp of the real problem did not come quickly, the real problem was that he was filled with fear and he lacked faith that God was truly always with him, overseeing his life and best interest and therefore his spiritual development.

What he was going through was not such a difficult trial that with God he could have just simply endured it and overcome it, if he was thinking properly, but his thinking got off track and the first thing you know he had been guided by Satan to begin accusing God and begin envying the people who seemed to be living lives that was free of this kind of vexation.

Any of us can become subject to this if we allow it to occur, the Psalmist allowed it to occur until God began to solve the problem for him, and the Psalmist then changed his way of thinking. His grasp of the real problem did not come quickly, he did not recognize the fear and he did not recognize his lack of faith at first, it was the fear that was driving his envy, twisting his mind perceiving his mind that the wicked were better off than he was.

Can you see how his thinking had come to the place where he was not thinking in terms of faith? The issue clarified when he went into the sanctuary, he may have literally meant the Tabernacle or the Temple, but I think we can understand correctly it does not have to be literally a building, but rather a place of private prayer in communion with God, then God enabled him to think correctly.

As he was going through this Psalm 73:21-24, section here, he began to implement a program that we can see scattered throughout the entirety of the Psalm.

The first solution is, he resolved to continue on in faith enduring the suffering, he put no limitation on God in terms of length, he just decided I am going to endure this, his faith was beginning to click in.

Second solution is, he prayed fervently for God's solution to take effect, he did not just sit there doing nothing, he prayed fervently that God would take the problem away, and now he was praying in faith.

Third solution is, he firmly rejected any attempt to solve the problem on the basis of his own spiritual righteousness. He put it completely in God's hands.

Fourth solution is, he was thoughtfully careful that he did not misjudge the circumstance any further.

I will give you a Psalm where you can see this in a little bit different context. It comes from the Psalm 23, where David is saying that God was with him through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. That is what happened to the Psalmist in Psalm 73, he relaxed in terms of just going with the flow and his faith was being restored.

Because of this I want you to turn back to the scripture that I used in the previous sermon, I want to touch on it briefly once again in the New Testament, II Timothy 1:6-7, this is very important, Timothy was a young man, a minister, but he had fears, we all have fears, we cannot allow our fears to drive us. The fear here is a little bit different than the fear that Psalm 73, presents to us, and chapter 7:15.

**II Timothy 1:6-7** Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

God has given us His spirit to enable us to confront our fears and make sound spiritual decisions in alignment with His, this is how the Psalmist got out of the problem, he finally began to see that he was not exercising the spiritual gifts that had been given to him when he began to do them, his faith began to build, his fears began to dissipate and he just resolved then, I am going to endure this until God removes them, by solving the problem.

He did not just do nothing, he put it into God's hands and determined that he would just go with the flow, and as long as God allowed it to remain that way then it was teaching him something good, he began to look at the problem positively rather than negatively, so his judgment of God changed

drastically, his judgment of people, the unconverted people, also changed at the same time and you see he was in the middle and now it was not bothering him in the way that it had before. God stirred up the Spirit within him, in order to help him to see that he could control the situation.

We have to come to the place where we understand that once we are called, and converted, the trials that we go through are rarely punishment, they are exercises in learning good judgment, spiritual judgment, based on faith in God, based on God's love for us, based in God's love for others, based in God's mercy, that He will save us, because He is God, the judgment changes and allows God to work it out and we begin to see Him as our savior. This is why Paul said, "I am what I am," It was the grace of God that was working within him.

Regarding the faith and fear, if one misjudges the manner of the paradox and therefore reacts wrongly, the effects could lead to either of two possible extremes, and that is why the cautions are given there by Solomon.

Imagine that you have a blank piece of paper in front of you and that there is a horizontal line going from the edge of one side to the edge of the other, both the beginning of the line before and the end of the line on your right, represents extreme results one might produce should he make wrong choices in the midst of this trial, one can react radically to the left, becoming completely liberal, and what would be the most liberal choice that a person could make in the midst of the trial like this? Just give up, that would be really taking it easy on the self. The left side of the page indicates just giving up, what would be the result of that? It would be spiritual death.

The second extreme possibility would be to choose to turn sharply right, becoming righteous over much, and if bad fruit is produced, spiritual death will occur. Either extreme would cause spiritual death, why? Because either extreme is rebellion against God's grace. To do nothing at all, just give up, or to take the other side and become super righteous, or as the king James says in Ecclesiastes, overly righteous or righteous over much. Both of them are rebellion, that is the way that God will judge either one of those.

I do not think that most church members will make the left hand turn, it has been my experience since I have been in the church, especially in the ministry, that most truly converted people will not make that left turn, they just generally do not give up, if they do give up they are probably not converted, that is my guess, because God does not give up on us either. I feel certain that if we make that left hand turn He is going to chase after us pretty hard because He does not want to see anybody lost, He is not interested in anyone perishing.

Therefore I feel that a turn to the right, to become super righteous, is the one that a church member is most likely to make. If we go back through Psalm 73, almost word for word and take those four steps that I told you that the Psalmist made, we would begin to see that the Psalmist made the right choice and that right choice was to go right down the middle.

Turning to the right to become over righteous is the one that I am more concerned about. We will evaluate something here from the scripture as to why envy of the unrighteous, unconverted, is not a good idea. Please turn to Romans 1, I am going into this because I do not want us to evaluate the unconverted wrongly, so that we see clearly not the right direction to move in.

**Romans 1:18-20** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what

may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

My first point here is, to assure you that the unconverted are most definitely being held accountable by God. They are not going forward in their life without being judged, they are not receiving from Him a free ticket, they are not getting a get out of jail free card, they are being judged, that is what those verses are saying. Therefore their poor choices may very well eliminate them from conversion and eternity, you do not want to go in that direction. Just because they are unconverted does not mean that they are home free and that they will come up in the second resurrection, that is not guaranteed, It is a bad choice to go into that direction, their position is precarious to say the least, we will evaluate their position.

First, the wicked are making choices too, but they are making those choices with neither the faith nor the grace of God guiding them, so the chances of them making a good choice and have it being spiritually righteous is almost nil. Why envy those people who are headed definitely toward death?

Second, they are also making those choices without a relationship with God to access, in their times of need. They have no access to God, therefore their choices are almost always going to be bad, in terms of spiritual righteousness, they make good choices to make money, but money is not salvation.

Third, we know full well that God is not giving them a unlimited get out of jail free card just because they are unconverted, there is no guarantee that they will come up in the second resurrection, that is completely up to God, you do not want to go in that direction at all. Do not give up out of envy for the world that seems to have everything going for them.

If you see some envy beginning to rise in you, if you feel it in your mind, do something quick like the Psalmist did in Psalm 73. We must understand that a deep trial is sometimes a situation where we do have to repent and change our way of doing things, in other words, sometimes a deep trial has a measure of correction within it.

The danger is being lured into thinking by our resolve, that God then owes us something if we turn right and become super righteous, not so, we make the change but we do not become super righteous. If we yield to that temptation the trial then becomes a major danger.

Here is a question that requires an answer from each and everyone of us, that is, do we really and truly grasp an intelligent, and thoroughly thought through manner, that God owes us nothing under any circumstance? nothing, absolutely nothing. That is something that has to be resolved in our mind, to know that our salvation is going to be coming to us because God is giving it, it is His pleasure to give it.

We owe Him everything, from life itself to every breath of air we breathe, to the knowledge we have of Him, to the purpose and forgiveness and for His Spirit, I mean everything, nothing is left out, there is not limit whatever, and it is right here that the principle of John 17:3, In knowing God begins to become most important, why? Because knowing Him intimately as John 17:3 is teaching us, is the very thing that our carnality does not want to achieve. Our carnality fears knowing Him, and we by nature draw back from knowing Him, this is why Romans 8:7 warns us that our carnality looks upon God as the enemy.

I will simplify this, our carnality fears being beholden to God, yet that is the very thing that God wants, because that will motivate us to loyalty, it will motivate us to acts of faith, it will motivate us to really come to know Him and to love Him. Carnality will be fighting against us all the way, because carnality is what? It is the spirit of Satan the Devil, and Satan hates God and he does not want to be anywhere near to God. Our carnality is a reflection of that, so it does not want to be close to God, it wants to draw away from Him.

In John 17, Our savior Jesus Christ prayed, right near the end of that wonderful prayer He specifically asked God that we be one with Him, and that is the very thing our carnal nature absolutely does not want. That is why we have a hard time with sin, because we want to be independent of God, rather than being the one setting the determination for how our life is lived. This is what God does not want because that is what Satan did.

We have to avoid the pit falls that Satan fell into, because that carnality, the spirit of the world is still inside of us, it is still there and we have to be aware of it, and we have to make sure that we are resisting the impulse of that nature.

Our carnality is nothing more than a remnant of the spirit of Satan's world within us, it is a spirit of self centered, always want to hold a bit of itself back in order to preserve its independence. What can possibly happen if one chooses to make a sharp turn to the right, thus making an attempt at super righteousness? Just like everything else touching on spirituality, Satan has his counterfeit. In this world, super righteousness as a solution, may appear to be attractive to our carnal nature, it is very interesting because the apostle Paul ran into an occasion where this was happening to a group of people in the church of God. Please turn to Colossians 2.

**Colossians 2:18-23** Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, [this puffed up mind, an unconverted mind, that is filled with pride regarding certain works] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God, Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations- "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,"[over all subject here is asceticism, it is one form of super righteousness] which all concern things which perish with the using according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The phrase rudiments of the world, rudiment means something that is elementary, it is basic thing, whether it is basic law, or basic principle, or something of that nature. These rudiments, these basic things, which involve theses things that he mentioned, do not touch, do not taste, theses are things that involve asceticism, and also demon worship.

A rudiment is a basic elementary principle or act of worship. These ascetic practices have nothing at all to do with God's true religion. I will refer you back to II Timothy 1:6-7, God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, of power and sound mindedness.

Asceticism is not sound mindedness, that is something rudimentary, basic, from the world, and it would be the kind of approach that a super righteous person would make because he has the belief

that he is doing something that is impressing God, but it is not impressing God because it is not a balanced approach to life.

I am going into these verses at this point, because of Paul's counsel on the false concept that extreme discipline such as that practiced in the world by ascetics, in reality what does it produce? It produces a puffed up mind, pride, a haughty spirit, rather than a humble obedience that truly does impress God. God tells us in Isaiah 66:1-2, what impresses Him, it is not this kind of living.

These are people in the world who are sincerely deeply religious, not because of conversion, they are prone to do extremely things, like virtually imprisoning themselves living in an all male or female, religious compound, spending their entire life in prayer and study, but where is the generous giving of their lives in service to fellow man? These are the type of people who will crawl on their hands and knees from the bottom of a mountain to the top of the mountain, out of dedication to their god, they will permit themselves to be nailed to a cross and display it in a parade through town on a holy day dedicated to that town.

Consider for a moment what the Catholic Church does, by condemning their ministry to remaining unmarried, because they think that is holier and it will somehow impress God. Look also at the fruit it has produced in the sexual deviation, and molestation cases. Is that something good? Super righteousness produces that kind of thing.

God gives what He expects of His children, it does not include in any way, any of this, it is a balanced approach to life. Please turn to Romans 12:3, this is where Paul asks us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. What does he mean?

**Romans 12:3-13** For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, [go back and read again Colossians 2, the very asceticism that he was writing of, produces a puffed up mind] but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one of a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them; if prophesy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; [God wants us to serve one another] or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches in teaching; he who exhorts in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. [You do not see asceticism, no super righteousness exhibited at all] Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving reference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

Nothing in Romans 12, co-ordinates with what these people in Colossians were doing with asceticism, that is why Paul said that is not earning any points at all with God. God wants service to each other, asceticism is not balanced, it is worldly, it is demonic. That does not mean that we should not fast, it should be only a day or two, not a long long period of time.

I want to make it as clear as I can what the paradox situation has the possibility of producing in one's life, if it goes unrecognized and is allowed full freedom to take over one's life, and produce its fruits

without resistance, what I am going to give you is in a sense is worst case scenario, I am not saying that everybody will end up this badly, but a potential exists and it is why God gives the cautions regarding the danger, right there in Ecclesiastes 7.

He directed and inspired the psalmist immediately, right after verse 15, to warn that there is a danger here. Do not fall into the trap and become super-righteous, it does not impress God. He wants service from His people to each other.

**Acts 26:2-5** “I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.”

Paul was a Pharisee, they were the strictest sect of the Jews. If you have ever studied into a history of the sect of the Pharisee's you will find that it had thoughts, attitudes, and behavior that would fit well into super-righteousness, right under that label, that started and built the Pharisee's into what they were by the time of Christ.

Super-righteousness is a beginning step into Pharisaism. I think you know well the relationship Jesus had with them, they were strict on themselves—Ascetics. Is it wisdom to become like a Pharisee? They thought God was not strict enough, and added their traditions to His law. They were calling God into account, misjudging the merciful God.

It is truly helpful to know that the foul fruit of super-righteousness is pride, that is why we are cautioned so strongly in Ecclesiastes. What does pride do that is anti-God? It destroys relationships, whether with God or man, because the one with pride demands attention that can never be satisfied. It is the height of self centeredness, they virtually demand attention be paid to them, degrees of narcissism overcome them. In the case of the Pharisee's their narcissism drove them to their absolute failure to not recognize God in the flesh by His teachings. Instead they actively, like Satan, attacked and succeeded in manipulating things to the extent that with the help of the Romans and the Sadducee's, they put God in the flesh to death.

He was not righteous enough for them, and yet He was the very epitome of it! Their super-righteousness drove them to look down their nose at God in the flesh and put Him to death. Do you understand why God through Solomon immediately put that cautionary thing in there? He said, “why should you die?” This is not the way to go. Super-righteousness divides people, because the super-righteous always need the attention of others to satisfy their demand that others be subservient to them.

Matthew 23 shows many of their characteristics. You go through there and you will see these things, they make things hard on others, but they would not bend themselves to help. They showboated their good works, they expected to be catered to, not to serve. They desired public praise, they love to receive titles, they look down on others as inferior. Their teachings were false, they heap greater difficulties on those who were already in need of help, and their sense of judgment was completely skewed.

All of these things appear in one chapter. They pursued tiny points of law with great zeal while overlooking things that were truly important. They were out-and-out hypocrites, they loved to say, "If I was in that position I would never have done that!" They were clever deceivers.

The solution to the Ecclesiastes 7:15-22 circumstance, which so simply stated. It involves the converted one's faith in God. At the same time it very heavily involves one's fear of God, and then it will involve applying wisdom to insure analyzing the circumstance accurately.

You will find that two of those spiritual qualities are directly named right in the Ecclesiastes context. The only spiritual quality not directly named is faith, but it is very important to the right solution. Impacting on all three qualities is knowing God well enough from within the relationship to activate all three correctly. Faith, the fear of God, and the relationship.