

Paradoxes - Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

Pastor Tim Nixon

Turn in your Bible this morning to Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

Years ago, my mother sent me an email full of paradoxical questions:

- Why do people say they slept like a baby when babies wake up every two hours?
- How do deer know to cross at those yellow deer crossing signs?
- Why do they call it Grape Nuts cereal? It has no grapes or nuts.
- What was the greatest thing before sliced bread?
- Is there any difference between partly cloudy and partly sunny?
- How is it one careless match can start a forest fire, but it takes a whole box to start a campfire?
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- Why do we park on the driveway and drive on the parkway?

This morning, Solomon asks and partially answers some of life's more serious paradoxical questions.

Remember, we have just finished with verses 7:13-14 that remind us that:

“As to the crook in your lot, God has made it; and it must continue while He will have it so. Should you ply your utmost force to even it, or make it straight, your attempt will be vain: it will not change for all you can do. Only He who made it can mend it or make it straight.”¹

Here is the reality of life. What does life teach me? What does the grave teach me?

That in the day of prosperity, and in the day of adversity, remember God has made the one as well as the other. And God has not informed us of why he has done it, or what will be the outcome.

With that as our introduction -

Consider with Wisdom What God Has Done (7:15-18)

As we remember the providential care of God, we become aware that it is not always as straightforward as we might expect. The crookedness and injustice of so many things we encounter, especially when we consider the problem of evil, seem to contradict the justice and sovereignty of God.

¹ Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot, Or, The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men*, ed. Don Kistler and Maureen L. Bradley (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, c2001., n.d.)

Christians for centuries have tried to straighten out these things but can never do so to our satisfaction.²

It seems paradoxical to us. Sometimes wicked people prosper, and righteous people don't. Blessing is not always related to righteousness.

Consider God's servant Job. According to Job 1:1, "Job was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." Yet Job suffered, but not out of wickedness.

Sometimes bad things happen to "good" people and sometimes good things happen to "bad" people.

And as Christians living in the West, we want to know why?

Here is why:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Well, that only happened once, when Jesus gave His life as a ransom for sinners.

The real question is: Why do good things happen to bad people?

Same answer: because Jesus gave His life as a ransom for sinners.

Solomon doesn't even try to answer this question. He simply points these things out to help enable us to live with them. God has sovereign rule over everything and will work everything to his own purpose for his glory and the good of his people. This is what Paul writes to the church in Rome:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those

² Jim Winter, *Opening up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 99–10

whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:18-30)

Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? This certainly seems like a valid question. The good die young while the wicked seem to enjoy long lives, and this seems totally contrary to the justice of God. Isn't this what God promised Israel when he said, "Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and *that you may prolong your days in the land* that the LORD your God is giving you for all time." (Deuteronomy 4:40, emphasis added).

The truth is that the wicked only prosper when we take a short-term view of life. But this is not the truth. Psalm 73 is very clear on this point. Turn to Psalm 73. I want us to read the entire Psalm together and rather than have you listen, I want you to see it in your own Bible.

Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
And they say, "How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.
But when I thought how to understand this,

it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.
Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.
When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.

And this is the faith of all who follow their example and sacrifice eternity for now.

Don't misunderstand verses 16-18. Warren Wiersbe writes:

Many have misunderstood by those who say that Solomon was teaching "moderation" in everyday life: don't be too righteous, but don't be too great a sinner. "Play it safe!" say these cautious philosophers, but this is not what Solomon wrote.

In the Hebrew text, the verbs in verse 16 carry the idea of reflexive action. Solomon said to the people, "Don't claim to be righteous and don't claim to be wise." In other words, he was warning them against self-righteousness and the pride that comes when we think we have "arrived" and know it all. Solomon made it clear in verse 20 that there are no righteous people, so he cannot be referring to true righteousness. He was condemning the self-righteousness of the hypocrite and the false wisdom of the proud, and he warned that these sins led to destruction and death.

Verse 18 balances the warning: we should take hold of true righteousness and should not withdraw from true wisdom, and the way to do it is to walk in the fear of God. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10) and Jesus Christ is to the believer "wisdom and righteousness" (1 Cor. 1:30), so God's people need not "manufacture" these blessings themselves.³

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 91.

And so there is a warning here about self-righteousness, or arrogance in your righteousness. But the opposite extreme is being overly wicked.

Wisdom Gives Strength to Pursue Life (7:19-29)

The wise fear the Lord and thus are strengthened. What does this look like? Based on verses 13 – 18, the wise person fears God and that fear brings them the knowledge it takes to not fear anything else.

Whereas it may be difficult to understand the providence of God in allowing the unjust to prosper—the root of that injustice has a simple explanation—sin.

And so what issues of life do we need this godly strength?

Verse 20 makes it very clear that **we must overcome sin**. There is no one righteous, no not one. There is no one that always does good and never sins. The strength of this wisdom guards our hearts and helps us see the idols with in our hearts.

Another issue that we face is in verses 21 and 22. **We care what others say about us**. We fear man. But the strength of wisdom helps us pay no attention to the gossip of others. Charles Spurgeon told his pastoral students that the minister ought to have one blind eye and one deaf ear. “You cannot stop people’s tongues,” he said, “and therefore the best thing to do is stop your own ears and never mind what is spoken. There is a world of idle chitchat abroad, and he takes note of it will have enough to do.”⁴

I have a confession that may be hard for many of you to believe. I still care what other people think about me. When I am criticized, whether face-to-face or in an email or text message, it often makes me sad. I try to always look to myself first to determine what I did to offend the other person. I try to look at these circumstances as opportunities to grow. But every once in a while, I find myself affected by the opinions of others.

And while I am much, much better than I used to be, every so often, I succumb to the self-pity. It is a worship problem. “When we care too much about what others say about us, we are bowing down at the altar of fitting in, standing out, the opinions of others, or whatever else you want to call it. We’re all kneeling and bowing down before something.”⁵ And when we care too much about what others say to us we are worshiping them instead of God.

Verses 23-24 remind us that even with the wisdom of Solomon and all his abilities to understand all that exists, **we still cannot grasp the meaning of all that God is doing around us**. In all of

⁴Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*; Marshall, Morgan, and Scott reprint edition, 1965; p. 3

⁵ Edward Welch, *What Do You Think of Me? Why Do I Care?*; New Growth Press, 2011.

Solomon's searching, testing, praying, and observing, he still found no final answers to all his questions. Solomon has enough wisdom to understand that all is vanity but is unable obtain understanding to the depths he desires. In other words, the wise man knows that he does not know.

Understand that this conclusion comes from the wisest man who ever lived. He exhibited a strong resolve toward this end: "I will be wise." (v23) and "I have focused my heart to know" (V25). While most people put very little, if any, effort into gaining wisdom, it appears Solomon has left no stone unturned. And yet, "...it was far from me" he states.

And finally, in verses 26 – 29 we understand that we deal with the sinfulness of humanity in all areas of our lives. Verse 26 could mean a couple things

- (1) Here we see the sinful woman, possibly unbridled lust, who traps men and leads them into death.
- (2) He could have been speaking of personal experience. 1 Kings 11:1 says Solomon was guilty of loving many strange women. Could it be this is a personal lament for his own sins? Could it be that he found his own sin horrific? Oh the wickedness and foolishness he had been guilty of.

Either way, how does the righteous man respond? His goal in life is focused on pleasing God.

Solomon has discovered the general corruption of man. How many sins can a person name? As we add one upon another he finds the innumerable.

Solomon believes that God has made man upright (7:29). Men and women can stand upright physically and live upright morally. They *can* but Solomon finds they *don't*.

You see, God's sovereignty is not the issue here. No, the issue is man's sinfulness.

Wisdom can improve our lives. Wisdom can make our lives better, clearer, and stronger. We may not fully understand all that God is doing, but we will have enough wisdom to live for the good of others and the glory of God.

Reflect and Respond

Is your thinking properly balanced?

Are you oversensitive?

Consider what God has done for you.

Consider what sin has done to you.

In what ways does this make you any wiser?