

Righteousness and Wisdom in Light of Creation and the Fall

Ecclesiastes 7:15 In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.

¹⁶ Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

¹⁷ Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

¹⁹ Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

²¹ Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

²² Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.

²³ All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

²⁴ That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

²⁵ I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

²⁶ And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

²⁷ Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things--

²⁸ which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

²⁹ See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

(Ecclesiastes 7:15-29)

The Greatest Debate

The human condition. It is something that if one but takes a moment to look around and consider, it is not difficult at all to find out the truth. The problem is, most people do not want to look around and think about it, and this is due, in part, to **the human condition**. What I'm talking about is **sin**.

Long ago, St. **Augustine** would pray, “**Lord, command what you will and grant what you command**” or as another translation render is, “**Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!**” (**Augustine, Confessions 10.29**). Sproul asks of this, “**Why would Augustine ask God to give us what He commands from us? He was wrestling with the severity of our fallen condition,**” or to put it in my words, he was looking around and thinking

about the human condition. He continues, “God commands perfection, and yet we are born in a state of corruption in which it is *morally* impossible for us, on our own strength and ability, to do what God commands. The only way we can possibly be obedient to the commandments of God is if He helps us in the process by extending grace to us and enabling us to do what He calls us to do” [emphasis added].¹

Augustine lived and thrived in North Africa. But his writings were spread throughout the Roman Empire. A contemporary of his, living in a monastery at the farthest recesses of civilization in Britain, was reading Augustine’s *Confessions* one day and came upon this little prayer. It greatly agitated him. He reasoned that God would never command something that we do not have the power to obey. The way I put that is important, because he did not make any distinctions as it regards power. Curiously, Augustine would actually to a point agree saying, “Indeed, it is entirely true that *all men have this in their power if they will...*” [emphasis added] (Augustine, *Retractions* 1.9.2). Augustine made a distinction this monk would not. “*If they will.*” But Augustine insisted, based off of Proverbs 8:35 LXX that “... ‘*the will [thelēsis] is made ready by God*’ and is strengthened by the gift of charity to such

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Are People Basically Good?* Crucial Questions 25 (Mankato MN: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2016), ch. 6.

a degree that they have it in their power” only who have been given new life in Christ.

The greatest mind of the first 1,000 years of the church set himself to think clearly about this paradox that a person can be both **able** and yet **not willing** or **willing** and **not able** to do a thing simultaneously. In a comment worthy of much contemplation he writes,

Someone will ask whether the faith itself, in which seems to be the beginning either of salvation, or of that series leading to salvation ... is placed in our power. We shall see more easily, if we first examine with some care what “our power” means. Since, then, there are *two things*,—*will* and *ability*; it follows that not every one that has the will has therefore the ability also, nor has every one that possesses the ability the will also; for as we sometimes *will what we cannot do*, so also *we sometimes can do what we do not will*. From the words themselves when sufficiently considered, we shall detect, in the very ring of the terms, the derivation of *volition*² from *willingness*,³ and of *ability*⁴ from *ableness* [emphasis added].⁵

² *Voluntas*—choice, will, volition.

³ *Velle*—wish, desire.

⁴ *Potestas*—power, ability.

⁵ *Posse*—to be able.

What Augustine distinguished as will vs. ability, later theologians would call **natural vs. moral ability**. But it is essentially the same thing. That is, a moral choice⁶ involves both a natural *and moral* component for it to choose the right thing. All men have a natural ability to make choices. But to make a *right* choice, this needs a further component: morality, or as William Twisse (1578-1677), Prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly would put it, “a sanctified inclination unto that which is good, whereby it is freed from the power of sin and Satan.”⁷ You must be freed *before* you can have freedom of will. Before that, the will is in slavery to sin.

⁶ It is interesting to consider whether or not all of our choices in life are ultimately moral choices. In one sense, I think they are, in the sense that everything we do is a choice to either glorify or not glorify God.

⁷ “But if the will of man be corrupt, and averse from believing. We justly say, such a man cannot believe as our Savior says, “How can you believe that receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that comes from God,” Joh. 5:44, *yet this is an impotency moral only, which is to be distinguished from impotency natural*. For notwithstanding this, it may be truly said, “All men may believe if they will” *and herein consists the natural liberty of the will*. The moral liberty consists, rather in a sanctified inclination unto that which is good, whereby it is freed from the power of sin and Satan; and then in a power to do good if they will, and not otherwise. But I never find that Arminians do distinguish these” William Twisse, *The Riches of God’s Love*, (Oxford: Printed by L.L and H.H. Printers to the University, for Tho. Robinson, 1653), 1:1.72.

Manton is similar. “Impotency and weakness, which lies in the willfulness and hardness of their hearts ... *Our inability lies in our unwillingness*: “They are like to the deaf adder, that stops her ear, which will not hearken to the charmer, charming never so wisely” (Ps 58:4). “How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye would not?” (Matt 23:37). “His citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14). Now what more proper cure for all these evils than the word of God? *Teaching is the proper means to cure ignorance, for men have a natural understanding*. Warning of danger and mindfulness of duty is the proper means to cure slightness. *And to remove their impotency (which lies in their obstinacy and willfulness)*, there is no such means as to beseech them with constant persuasions. *The impotence is rather moral than natural*. We do not use to reason men out of bare natural impotency, to bid a lame man walk, or

Going back to Augustine, this was not good enough for the monk Pelagius who read Augustine's prayer. Pelagius had a **presupposition** that got in the way of this important nuance that a person's will could be both free in one sense, but not free in another. For the great champion of what most people mean by "freewill" today, his presupposition was that huminites will is *only* free in *every* sense for the moment we are conceived. That is, we are not slaves to sin, we are not born into this condition. Rather, we are all born *basically good*. He wrote,

Reflect carefully then, I beg you, on the good which is yours if you always remain such as God created man from the beginning and as he sent him forth thereafter, when he had brought him into the world. Observe what a blessing it is to be always in the state in which you were created and to preserve the features of your first birth. *For no one is born corrupt nor is anyone stained by corruption before the lapse of an appointed period of time.* Every man is seen to possess among his initial attributes what was there at the beginning, so that he

a blind man see, or bid a dead man live; but to make men willing of the good which they rejected or neglected; in short, to inform the judgment, awaken the conscience, persuade the will: yet it is true the bare means will not do it without God's concurrence, the evidence and demonstration of the Spirit; but it is an encouragement to use these means, because they are fitted to the end, and God would not appoint us means which should be altogether in vain." **Thomas Manton**, "Sermons Upon 1 Peter 1:23," in *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873), 21:332.

has no excuse thereafter if he loses through his own negligence what he possessed by nature.

(Pelagius, *On Chastity*).⁸

It is this idea that people are all born basically good that causes many to not want to look around and think about the human condition. If they conclude that each is born wicked, then what must that mean for *their own hearts*? And thus, confronting sin is less likely to happen. And when that happens, a plethora of evil can only follow, assuming we are not actually basically good.

For the moment, let's ask how pervasive is this anthropology today? The polling, data taken 30 years ago, told us that 83% of Americans believe that people are basically good. That included 87% non-Christians, 89% Catholics, 90% Mainline, and even 77% of Evangelicals.⁹ I'm guessing those numbers have not gone down. This is full blown Pelagianism that infects essentially the entire church and our country.

But this theology does not come from the Scripture. It comes from the imaginations of our own hearts. As Jeremiah said, “The heart is *deceitful* above all things, and *desperately*

⁸ *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, ed. by B. R. Rees (Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 1991), 259.

⁹ George Barna, *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 89.

sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). The heart is like that person who is not feeling good but refuses to go to the doctor because they don’t want to hear the bad news of what is actually happening inside them. So they pretend that if they don’t hear the news, it must not actually be true. They deceive themselves and always end up in a worse position than they were at first, because they have no way of dealing with the disease because they refuse to admit that they have one.

The Scripture is *chock full of verses like this* from Genesis’ “*every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen 6:5) to Revelation’s “*her sins are heaped as high as heaven*” (Rev 18:4). It is into this context that we come to our passage in Ecclesiastes.

Many people view Ecclesiastes as this book that deals *merely with life down here*. It isn’t particularly concerned with spiritual matters, until maybe the very end. We’ve seen many secular people who have fallen in love with its teaching. And yet, they don’t consider that the Preacher is a believer in the Son of God and that all of his wisdom of grounded in his belief *that people must fear God*. They do not seem to want to take *his theology or his anthropology* with his practical advice or pessimistic outlook on the world. That would strike too close to home. In this, they ignore the

same thing that we just said so many other people ignore: the human condition.

And yet, [Ecclesiastes 7](#) has one of the most pointed discussions of sin, both its origins and its pervasiveness, in the entire Bible. And this, in turn, becomes the necessary backdrop to being able to interpret this section of his sermon, and the whole of it, properly. Only in doing this will you be able to carry out the daily task of putting true wisdom to use which he is so focused on teaching you. But why would this discussion come up at this point in the book? For that, let's turn to the context.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 – Context and Structure

Our passage is [Ecclesiastes 7:15-29](#). It comes as perhaps the beginning of a long section that goes through [10:19](#) which mirrors things discussed about wisdom in [1:12-2:26](#):

- A. [the brevity and insignificance of life](#) 1:2-2:26
- B. [wisdom's failure to discover life's meaning](#) 1:12-2:26
- C. regarding [time](#) 3:1-15
- D. **fear God** 3:16-6:9
- C'. [time](#) revisited 6:10-7:14
- B'. [wisdom's failure](#) revisited 7:15-10:19
- A'. [life's brevity](#) revisited 10:20-12:8¹⁰

¹⁰ Admin, "Ecclesiastes," *Chiasmucexchange.com* (April 28, 2018), <https://www.chiasmucexchange.com/2018/04/28/ecclesiastes-1-12/> following [David Dorsey](#), *The Literary*

It has certain parallels with 4:7-5:12,¹¹ but the immediate context is the most important, for it explains something that is otherwise inexplicable.

That is, what exactly is the proper unit of thought here? Is there one? Coming to terms with this question, we find commentators all over the map. While most see 7:15 as the beginning of a new unit of thought, there is no general agreement of where it ends (ch. 10? Ch. 8? Ch. 7?). And, in fact, even the beginning must bear in mind vv. 13-14, and many will start the unit in vs. 13. Given that 6:10-12 paralleled these two verses, they also provide important immediate context.

As we saw last time, those verses very clearly had in mind God's work of creation where the Almighty named his creation, thereby showing his sovereignty over it (6:10-11) and then his decree or "work" (7:13) where he ordains all that comes to pass, whether it is straight or crooked. Reading the Hebrew and LXX texts, it is difficult to see any kind of connection to this in vv. 15ff. In fact, these verses seem to

Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 192-198.

¹¹ Tzemah Yoreh, "Symmetrical Structures in the Writings; Ecclesiastes Symmetries English," *Biblical Symmetries*, http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical_structures.html. Also (though totally in Hebrew) Tzemah Yoreh, "Happiness, What is it Worth?" *Beit Mikra* 46 (2002): 353-370. https://www.academia.edu/18513265/Happiness_what_is_it_worth.

completely change the subject, moving from God's sovereignty over his creation to considering the righteous vs. the wicked person and living in light of that. This feels more like something Proverbs would do than Ecclesiastes, which is a sermon with clear development of thought (I think we probably misunderstand Proverbs if we think this, but that's for another time).

However, [the Targum](#) reveals something most helpful about this. Remember, [a Targum is an ancient Jewish paraphrase](#) of the biblical text. They were used in synagogues in Jesus' time, and from time to time the NT writers and even Jesus himself used them. Their purpose was to provide commentary so that the people speaking Aramaic, and who were far removed from the original context, might understand the original meaning. It's not all that dissimilar to a sermon or commentary today.

Now, like a sermon, this does not guarantee that its commentary *is* the original intent, only that this was what the interpreter back then believed the original intent to be. Nevertheless, listen to the difference between the text of [Ecc 7:15](#) and the targum on this verse. First the Scripture: [“In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man](#)

who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” Now the targum: “I have seen everything in my futile days *that from the Lord are decreed good and evil to be in the world on account of the planets under which men were created. For there is an innocent man who perishes in his righteousness in this world, but his merits are preserved for him in the world to come and there is a guilty man who prolongs his days in his sin, but his evils are preserved for him in the world to come to exact punishment from him on the great judgment day.*”¹²

As you can see, the targum is nearly three times as long. It talks about things that just reading the verse by itself you would never yourself come to its conclusion. Why would it talk about the Lord decreeing good and evil in the world? Where could it possibly get “the planets” from? What’s going on with the whole idea of the world to come and judgment and rewards? How can that possibly be what the verse is talking about?

The answer is that the targum is reading *the fuller context* and it clearly does not see the context as having changed. As I said, 6:10-12 and 7:13-14 discussed God’s decreeing of all things and his sovereignty over them. As we saw last time, there are also deep eschatological links in the former passage

¹² In these quotations, italics are the targum’s comments; regular font is the biblical text.

of Ecclesiastes that we see in Jesus's first coming with the Beatitudes and then in his Second Coming which allows us to read the book in light of his resurrection and our own future resurrection and reward. In fact, the Targum already brought this out:

What was in the world, behold it was already given its name and made known to men from the day Primordial Man (i.e., Adam) existed, and everything is the decree of the Memra ["Word"]... On the day that the Lord does good to you, you also be good and do good to every one so that the evil day does not come upon you. See and consider that the Lord made this against that in order to reprove the people of the world so that a man will not find after him anything evil in the world to come. (TargEcc 6:10; 7:14)

There are **two specific things** that the Targum brings out that demonstrate it sees 15-29 as a unit. The first is its strange use of **planets**. Planets only appear three times in the Targum of Ecclesiastes. We've just seen one. The **second** is in **vs. 27**. *"See, this is the matter I found, said Qohelet who is called Solomon the king of Israel. I determined the relationship of the planets one to the other to find the reckoning of men what will be at their end."* This comes just two verses from the end of our

passage. The second is its interpretation of 7:29 (our last verse). Again, let's hear the Scripture and then the Targum. "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." Now the Targum. "Only see this, I have found *that the Lord made the first man upright and pure before him, but the serpent and Eve seduced him to eat from the fruit of the tree whose fruit enables those who eat it to know the difference between good and evil, and they caused the day of death to be imposed upon him and upon all the inhabitants of the world and they tried to find many calculations in order to bring a plague on the inhabitants of the earth.*" Let's look at both more carefully.

First, why does it bring up planets? There are two reasons. One, because the planets were created in Genesis 1 and creation is the larger context of Ecclesiastes. Two, because it is wrestling with what appears to many people to be the **fatalism** of the Preacher. This deals with God's sovereignty. It sees that all events were ordained by God through these mediaries, something that makes most Evangelicals very uneasy. Someone writes, "According to the targum, Ecclesiastes finally concluded that incomprehensible astrological factors determined man's fate, though these factors are

themselves under divine aegis [protection].”¹³ However, the Targum is **not saying you should become an astrologer!** Actually, it says the opposite. “**It strongly argues that it is impossible to predict or comprehend [the future, the day of your death, the secrets of the coming Messianic age, etc.]**” and so “**recourse to the occult is futile.**”¹⁴

I’m bringing this up here only in the context of the context. The Targum clearly sees **the context as creation** and this continues in how it interprets **7:29**. Notice that it brings up **Adam**, “**the first man.**” Its interpretation is to blame **Eve** and the **serpent** and to get Adam off the hook, something that we will see is *not* what Ecclesiastes does. But the point remains. Just as **it saw Adam in 6:10**, so it continues to see him now, because the entire focus of this part of Ecclesiastes never changes. This will become **very important as we move along**. Seeing that the proper unit of thought (**7:15-29**) is bookended in the Targum by the planets and Adam helps us see that in fact **there is a grounding theology and anthropology** to this entire section, one that most commentators miss.

¹³ **Etan Levine**, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1988), 72-73. This is made clear in the third and final appearance of “planets” in Ecclesiastes. “**For time and chance happen to all of them according to their planets**” (TargEcc 9:11).

¹⁴ Citing TargEcc 11:4, “**A man who pays attention to sorcery and divination will never do good and one who observes the constellations does not collect a reward. For sorcery and divination are compared to the wind which are not to be seized in the human hands and the constellations are compared to the clouds of heaven which go and do not return.**”

That theology is creation, the fall, and God's sovereignty over it all. This is why it has such a concentrated section on the human condition. That is why this discussion comes at this point in the book.

As for the passage itself, it is **difficult to find a coherent structure**. No one has attempted to put it all into a chiasm, other than as part of the larger structure of the book, though some have attempted this with **vv. 20-26**.¹⁵ So instead, people usually break it up into smaller, mostly unrelated sections. So for example:

Balanced Living (vv. 15-18)
Wisdom Rather Than Perfection
(vv. 19-22)
The Search for an Explanation (vv.
23-29)¹⁶

The Limitations of Human Wisdom
& Righteousness (7:15-22)
Inaccessible Wisdom (7:23-24)
Seeking and (Not) Finding (7:25-
29)¹⁷

However, if we read this passage as the Targum does, then I think all these smaller units should be read **in light of creation, the fall, and God's sovereignty**, and this makes it much

¹⁵ **Nigel**, "Ecclesiastes 7:20-26," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 10, 2015), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2015/01/10/ecclesiastes-720-26/>.

¹⁶ **William D. Barrick**, "Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament, Chapter 7 (cont.)," Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship (Placerita Baptist Church, 2010), <https://drbarrick.org/files//studynotes/Ecclesiastes/Ecclesiastes07BPBC.pdf>.

¹⁷ **Tremper Longman**, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 192-201

more helpful than just seeing them as proverbial stand-alones. This is all the more critical when you realize as Greidanus has said, “This is one of those passages that sets preachers to pacing in their studies, wringing their hands: What does it mean? How do we preach it? The temptation will be great to either skip over it or to preach on just a few verses.”¹⁸ I’m not going to give into that temptation.

Instead, I’m going to break up the passage into two parts. I’ll call them:

1. Righteousness and Wickedness in Light of Creation (Ecc 7:15-18)
2. Wisdom and Folly in Light of the Fall (Ecc 7:19-29)

Righteousness and Wickedness in Light of Creation (7:15-18)

We’ve seen that the Targum views 7:15 in the context of creation, so now let’s look at what the Scripture says. “In my vain life I have seen [הָאֵל]everything.” This is a man of comprehensive insight. Curiously, the last verse says, “See [הָאֵל], this alone I found...” So he sees everything, but he

¹⁸ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 178.

finds one thing. This is the direction his thinking is will take him, but this gets us ahead of ourselves.

He begins to think about **the righteous man vs. the wicked man**. “There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” Now, some suggest that in the wisdom tradition (Job-Song of Songs), the righteous person is one who “does the right things (Prov 10:1–4; 12:10; 28:1; 29:7), says the right things (Prov 10:11–21, 30–31), and has the right thoughts and attitudes (Prov 12:5; 13:5; 15:28).”¹⁹ While this is certainly true, as we are going to see, it does not go far enough. This is Holy Scripture, **not the sayings of Confucius**.

The Preacher is seeing something that seems wrong, especially in light of God’s promises. For example, the Fifth Commandment says, “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days *may be long* in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12; cf. 20:12; Deut 4:40; 5:33; 6:2; 11:9; 25:15; 32:47; Prov 3:1–2). If God promises that righteous behavior will cause you to live a long life, when **why do the righteous die young**, and moreover, why do the wicked live long lives? The answer, as we will see, is **because**

¹⁹ C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 267.

of sin. Consider that Abel was righteous, but died young because his brother, Cain, who was wicked, murdered him. And so the whole idea of sin is actually right here at the beginning of the passage, even though it isn't mentioned yet. But it will be. For now, let's just remember our context and that **God is sovereign and powerful over this situation**. The Commandment is a general principle and often comes true. But it is not a recipe for a certain outcome. **God may have other plans**.

He continues thinking about the righteous and wicked. “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?” Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?” (**Ecc 7:16-17**). What could it possibly mean by do not be **overly righteous**? Didn't Jesus say, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?” (**Matt 5:6**)? Didn't he say, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect?” (**5:48**)? Some people think he means do not be *self*-righteous. But that isn't what it says.

Let's remember what he just said. There are **righteous people who perish** in their righteousness. Greidanus says, “Since God had promised a long life to the righteous, some Israelites may have thought that these people who died

young were not righteous enough. Therefore they may have drawn the conclusion that they themselves should be *more* righteous: that they should pursue righteousness with greater vigor in order to prolong their life.”²⁰ In other words, Ecclesiastes is saying, *Do not try to be super-righteous, because then you turn into Job’s friends* (there’s Job again!). They thought that he must have sinned and was not righteous enough and that’s why these terrible things were happening to him. You cannot be perfect, and even for the only perfect man who ever lived, he was put to death at around age 33. *You aren’t going to add a single second to your life* that God has ordained by being more righteous.

The idea of being *too wise* is similar. Look at what that brought to Solomon’s life! His life became a train-wreck, and this is why he adds, *why should you destroy yourself?* On top of this, think about what he said earlier. “*In much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow*” (1:18). Those who think themselves super-wise and super-righteous are actually those who are full of pride and blinded to their own sin. “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*” (Prov 16:18).

²⁰ Greidanus, 189.

Some may think that this therefore gives them a reason to not care about righteousness. After all, if “only the good die young” as Billy Joel sang, if “sooner or later it [just] comes down to fate,”²¹ you might as well do whatever you want. But the Preacher is not telling you that you might as well aim to be a little wicked by saying, “Do not be overly wicked.” He’s saying, like he did with righteousness, do not choose to be wicked, do not choose to sin deliberately,²² because if you want to push the envelope, you’re probably going to find yourself dead. Like MGMT sings, “This is our decision to live fast and die young. We’ve got the vision, not let’s have some fun.”²³ The streets of popular music are strewn with the dead bodies of young fools who did just this. As Solomon knew. It isn’t only the good who die young after all.

Vs. 18 completes the section. “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” This is a difficult verse to translate and understand, but it is clearly talking about these observations of the righteous and wicked. It is a **summary verse**. Thus, the Preacher is telling you do not try to be super-righteous and super-wise and at

²¹ Billy Joel, “Only the Good Die Young,” *The Stranger*, Columbia Records (1977).

²² Louis Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 97.

²³ MGMT, “Time to Pretend,” *Oracular Spectacular*, Columbia Records (2007).

the same time do not choose to be very wicked, because that is the definition of a fool.

Instead, you must **fear God**, and in that way, you will succeed in both. Earlier I said that many people read this book as merely dealing with the secular and mundane. But here it is very clear that he sees the key to living life on God's earth as living in the fear of God. It is **the fear of God that grounds all of his wisdom**. This is the theology of the passage that you must understand. And if you do, then you will understand that **he is sovereign** and has numbered your days and is in charge of both the good and bad that come into your life, because he is the God of creation. You can't prolong your life and you know this is if you fear God, and it should lead you to not try to become super-righteous. Similarly, if you fear God then you will realize the folly of deliberately doing evil. You will want to live your life in obedience to God. But the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and you need wisdom to live in this world this way. Thus, we move into our second section.

Wisdom and Folly in Light of the Fall (7:19-29)

Wisdom is effectively the main idea of **vv. 19-20**. It begins, "**Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten**

rulers who are in a city.” This is clearly a proverb and so it may not have any historical example in mind. The idea is simply that ten rulers (a perfect number) have incredible power to make rich or create poverty, to give freedom or create slavery, to even give life or take it. Wisdom gives the wise man more strength to live life than all these rulers combined.

The Targum here sees the ten sons of Jacob as an historical example. Joseph’s wisdom helped him become so wise enough to save the ten brothers who themselves had the power to take life, and did so, in the city of Shechem and tried to do so to him. But he was not ruled over by an evil inclination that caused them to eventually sell him into slavery.

But it is just at this very point that the Preacher gives us his anthropology. You may think that the wise man is the man who never sins. That is not the wise man, but *the perfect man*. The preacher says, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (20). Earlier, the righteous man and the wise man were synonymous. This is one of the bluntest verses in the Bible about human depravity. When it hits you over the head, you feel it like a hammer. There is not a single man on this planet who does good and never sins. Without this grounding that humans are not in fact basically good, you will never know how to live

wisely. Indeed, you will forever be a fool. Fools think too highly of their own goodness. The wise knows his place and the deceitfulness of his own heart.

“Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you” (21). Rather than changing subjects, this continues the thought with an example. There are two people in the example. You and your servant. That the servant curses you is easy to see, and it may demonstrate that he is himself sinful.

However, the point of this isn't him, but you. The next verse makes this clear. “Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others” (22). Paul thinks very much like the Preacher in Romans 2-3. First he calls out the self-righteousness. “You then, if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth...” (Rom 2:19-20). Then he calls out their hypocrisy. “You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law” (21-23). All

this leads him to the same conclusion as our last verse, “None is righteous, no not one ... no one does good, not even one” (3:10, 12).

The Preacher found out the hard way that **this included himself**. “All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me” (Ecc 7:23). If wisdom and righteousness are, for him, synonymous, then this means that **righteousness was far from him too**. And indeed, the life of Solomon displays this abundantly (we will see this come up again starting in vs. 25).

He then tried to understand how this could be. After all, hadn't God given him **wisdom beyond all men**? “That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out” (24)? What is he searching for? Perhaps it is to the paradoxes that the righteous die young while the wicked die old. Perhaps it is to why he would be given wisdom and yet not be able to find it by using it to discover it? Perhaps it is all the riddles of the past, the secret day of death, and the secret of the day when King Messiah will come (it never loses its grasp on the context), per the Targum.

But his search reveals that it is to be found only at **an unfathomable depth** that no man can reach. Many of us sit perplexed at the irony and paradoxes throughout

Ecclesiastes, especially as it regards wisdom. We fail to come to a satisfying solution. This verse tells you why. Not even Solomon could figure it out, though he tried. Understanding the very wisdom he was given was like the wind in his fingers.

And so, ironically, he does the very thing he warns you not to do. “I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness” (25). He will be the super-wise so that he can tell you wisdom. He will be the super-wicked so that he can show you why it is foolish. And madness. Insanity. Can he escape his own warning? What do you think?

In his quest, he finds four things. Vs. 26, “And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.” In Proverbs, there are two women. One is Lady Wisdom. The other is Lady Folly. This is Lady Folly. She is a temptress. She is a trap. She is personified by actual women—lewd, loose, contentious, fretful, forbidden women. She is Delilah. Tom Jones:

*My, my, my, Delilah
Why, why, why, Delilah
I could see, that girl was no good for me
But I was lost like a slave that no man could free²⁴*

She is the woman in the Traveling Wilburys' song "Last Night":

*She was there at the bar. She heard my guitar
She was long and tall. She was the queen of them all
She was dark and discreet. She was light on her feet
We went up to her room. And she lowered the boom
I asked her to marry me, she smiled. Pulled out a knife
The horror just beginning. She said "Give money or you'll die."²⁵*

It is as Proverbs says, "Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths. For many are those she has laid low, and numerous are her victims. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death" (Prov 7:25-27).

The Preacher did not escape the snare of Folly and this is because, at this point in time, he was not pleasing God, he

²⁴ Tom Jones, "Delilah," *Tom Jones Fever Zone*, Parrot Records (1968).

²⁵ The Traveling Wilburys, "Last Night," *Traveling Wilburys Vol. 1*, Wilbury (1988).

was not being obedient, he was sinning. He was enslaved by her bonds. His will was not free.

The second thing he found is ironically what he did not find: “Behold, this is what *I found*, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have *not found*” (Ecc 7:27-28a). He is trying to put everything he has observed together and make sense of it. This is where the Targum says, “*I determined the relationship of the planets one to the other to find the reckoning of men what will be at their end.*” But like an accountant who adds up a huge sum of figures and finds that he miscalculated, the Preacher says that he cannot figure out why God runs the world the way that he does. Even though he sought the answer repeatedly, he cannot make sense of the paradoxical world.

The third thing he finds returns to *the woman*. “One man among a thousand *I found*, but a woman among all these *I have not found*” (28b). This refers to righteousness. At first, it appears to say that at least he found one man among a thousand who was righteous. But there was not a single woman. He seems to be a *misogynist*. But this is a typical way of doing comparison in wisdom literature. For instance, the proverb says, “There are six things that the LORD hates,

seven that are an abomination to him” (Prov 6:16), and then proceeds to list seven things. So which is it, six or seven? Yes. Both. The numbers are symbolic. The number of man (six) and the number of perfection (seven). The same thing here. The Targum explains this by saying that from Adam to Abraham (and Sarah is included in the Rabbah²⁶), the righteous came, there was no one righteous, but among all those kings at Babel, there were no righteous women. So it isn't that you can't find at least find one woman that is righteous, since Sarah was also righteous. Rather, the focus is on the other 1000 or 999. It is on wickedness. People are basically evil. The only reason you would ever turn to Christ is because you realize that, for his offer is to be cleansed of this and to be conformed into his perfect image.

This then takes us to the last thing he finds and notice how he puts it again. “See, this alone I found...” Of these four things, this one sums it up perfectly. “That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” The Targum here blames Eve and the Serpent in an attempt to get Adam off the hook. But the language is clear. They have sought out many schemes. It isn't some, but all.

²⁶ Ecclesiastes Rabbah is a longer commentary on Ecclesiastes.

But who are they? Literally it is, “**God made the man upright.**” It refers to creation, to Adam. It refers to his original posture. He was not crooked. He was not fallen. He was upright. That is, he was morally innocent. However, they, including all there in the Garden and every single one of his posterity, have sought out many schemes. That is, we have all sinned. Just as he said, *surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*

This is the doctrine of **total depravity**, the very **opposite of being basically good**. It is the universal acknowledgement of Scripture about the human condition. No one escapes this. It lays us all bear. It is the axe at the root of each son of Adam. It shows us, not that we *may* topple over if we choose bad things later, but that we are all already toppled to the ground. If man was upright, this verse shows that this is no longer the case. We are no longer upright. We are fallen in Adam.²⁷

²⁷ **Going Deeper.** Dr. Heiser has made inroads on a very interesting idea that the Jews did **not see one fall, but three**: the Garden (Gen 3), the Watchers (Gen 6), the Tower of Babel (Gen 11). He is claiming that if you were to ask a Jew in Jesus’ day what the origin of sin was, that the overwhelming majority of them would say it was the Watcher story, and I agree that there is much material in Second Temple Judaism about this. However, the point is being overstated, in part because he denies the doctrine of original sin. Now, importantly, *he is not a Pelagian*. He does not deny that all of us are sinful. Rather, he takes more of an Eastern Orthodox approach that original sin was not needed to make us all sin. He in fact agrees that we are all sinful.

But it is worth noting that **the Jews in fact were talking about Adam** in a way that was similar to Augustine’s doctrine of original sin. For instance, “**For the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. Thus the disease became permanent; the law was in the people’s heart along with the evil root,**

This is an **incredibly depressing** way to conclude a passage. Many people think that they are supposed to come to church to be uplifted, to hear about good things, happy things, things that will make them leave and conquer the world. Maybe. But this only comes through the knowledge of sin and the fear of the Lord. Without it, you are a fool.

Yet, we must not end here, for **there is in fact one who has escaped this plight**. He is the one not born of the seed of the woman. He is the promise given to Eve after she and her husband fell into sin. He is the one born of the virgin, who suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, though he was without sin.

He is the one **the Targum specifically looks forward to (vs. 24)**, though it says no one can find out by his own wisdom when the day of Messiah would come. But we can, because it is now history rather than prophecy. Scripture and

but what was good departed, and the evil remained” (4Ezra 3:21-22). And, “For, although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who has been born from him has prepared for himself the coming torment. And further, each of them has chosen for himself the coming glory. For truly, the one who believes will receive reward ... Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam” (2Baruch 54:13-14, 19).

I was reacquainted with these text in the blog, **Jeremy Bouma**, “Pagitt and Pelagius: An Examination of An Emerging Neo-Pelagianism—Interlude on Sin,” *Jude Academy* (Feb 2010), <https://www.judeacademy.org/pagitt-and-pelagius-an-examination-of-an-emerging-neo-pelagianism-interlude-on-sin/>. For predecessors to Augustine’s doctrine (which people claim out of the clear blue sky see, **Jesse Couenhoven**, “St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36.2 (2005), 388-89, https://www.academia.edu/1958072/St_Augustines_Docctrine_of_Original_Sin).

history have clearly shown us that this Messiah, this Savior of the human race, has come in human flesh. His name is Jesus, and he is the Christ, the Messiah not only of Israel, but of the whole world.

He alone did not go in search of many schemes, but rather to perfectly obey the will of his Father in heaven. He alone is the Good Teacher and has never sinned. He alone knows true wisdom and righteousness, for he is the Wisdom and Righteousness of God incarnated. For he is God in the flesh.

He is the one who above all other things feared God. And he did this without sin! He is the one who pleased God. And he came to put upright those who have fallen. He came to make wise those who are fools. He came to bring life to those who are dead. He came to make perfect those who are wicked.

But we must first recognize our fallen condition. Sadly, as anyone from Luther to Thomas Manton to R. C. Sproul have all taught us, we are all born Pelagians. The natural state of a deceitful heart is to deceive. That most basic of all deceptions is that we all want to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Only when you are personally laid low by God's verdict of what you are and what you have

done, only in burying you with the law and seeing God's own righteous holiness in comparison to your depravity does it even make sense to have new life. **Do not be like the majority of people** in this country and in our churches who think much too highly of themselves, for this is the very trap the Preacher warns you about which leads inevitably to ruin and disaster, both in this life and in the life to come.

Instead, see **the verdict**. God tells you of your sin **so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world be held accountable to God.** (**Rom 3:19**). But more, he tells you this so that in hearing of your condition, through the life-giving words of the Gospel, you may come to life when you then hear that there is unconditional love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus for anything and everything you have ever done wrong.

Make Augustine's prayer your prayer. "Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!" Do it on a consistent, life-long basis that you might increase in godliness and godly fear and so experience the wisdom and grace of God taught to you by the Preacher.

Bibliography

Augustine. *Confessions*.

_____. *Retractions*.

Barna, George. *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991.

Barrick, William D. "Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament, Chapter 7 (cont.)." *Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship* (Placerita Baptist Church, 2010). <https://drbarrick.org/files//studynotes/Ecclesiastes/Ecclesiastes07BPBC.pdf>.

Bouma, Jeremy. "Pagitt and Pelagius: An Examination of An Emerging Neo-Pelagianism—Interlude on Sin," *Jude Academy* (Feb 2010), <https://www.judeacademy.org/pagitt-and-pelagius-an-examination-of-an-emerging-neo-pelagianism-interlude-on-sin/>.

Couenhoven, Jesse. "St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin." *Augustinian Studies* 36.2 (2005): 359-96. https://www.academia.edu/1958072/St_Augustines_Doctrine_of_Original_Sin.

Dorsey, David. *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah.

Ecclesiastes Targum.

Goldberg, Louis. *Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.

Joel, Billy. "Only the Good Die Young." *The Stranger*. Columbia Records (1977).

Jones, Tom. "Delilah." *Tom Jones Fever Zone*. Parrot Records (1968).

- Levine, Etan. *The Aramaic Version of the Bible*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1988.
- Longman, Tremper. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- Manton, Thomas. "Sermons Upon 1 Peter 1:23." *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton vol. 21*. London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873.
- MGMT. "Time to Pretend." *Oracular Spectacular*. Columbia Records (2007).
- Nigel. "Ecclesiastes 7:20-26." *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 10, 2015).
<https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2015/01/10/ecclesiastes-720-26/>.
- Pelagius. *On Chastity*.
- Rees, B. R. (Ed.). *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*. Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 1991.
- Seow, C. L. *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C. Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Sproul, R. C. *Are People Basically Good?* Crucial Questions 25. Mankato MN: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2016.
- The Traveling Wilburys. "Last Night." *Traveling Wilburys Vol. 1*. Wilbury (1988).
- Twisse, William. *The Riches of God's Love* vol. 1. Oxford: Printed by L.L and H.H. Printers to the University, for Tho. Robinson, 1653.
- Yoreh, Tzemah. "Happiness, What is it Worth?" *Beit Mikra* 46 (2002): 353-370.
https://www.academia.edu/18513265/Happiness_what_is_it_worth.
- _____. "Symmetrical Structures in the Writings; Ecclesiastes Symmetries English." *Biblical Symmetries*, http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical_structures.html.

