



# Ecclesiastes

## (15) Advice from a Disillusioned Teacher

Ecclesiastes 7:14-29

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The title of this sermon is “Advice from a Disillusioned Teacher.” I am not referring to myself; I am referring to the author of Ecclesiastes. He may not have been disillusioned at the time that he actually wrote the book, but much of the book gives an autobiographical account of his thinking during a time of profound struggle with disillusionment with life and with God. The actual message of the book as a whole is positive in spite of all the negativity that we find in the book. The ending of the book is the message of the book. But it is the message in the light of all of the perplexing and disturbing things about life that the rest of the book describes. Here are the last words of the book again, the words that put the whole thing into a perspective that is consistent with the overall message of the Bible: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

The fact that “God will bring every deed into judgement” is the hope in the light of all that is perplexing and disturbing in the world. By fearing God and keeping his commandments you make sure that you are on the right side of that judgment when it comes, but God’s judgment means that at some point everything that is crooked will be made straight. At some point everything will be as it ought to be. At some point the world will no longer be such a perplexing and disturbing place because God will bring a judgment that will be fair and righteous, and everything will be as it ought to be.

This is why Israel sang in hope of the coming judgment of God. Psalm 98:7–9, "7Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! 8Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together 9before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."

This is the point of Ecclesiastes as a whole. In spite of all that is wrong with the world now, there is hope because there is a time coming when God is going to make all things right. To use language that Ecclesiastes uses as an expression of his disillusionment, what is crooked will be made straight. Ecclesiastes 1:15 says, "What is crooked cannot be made straight...." But the last verse of Ecclesiastes is making the point that what is crooked will be made straight. That is what God is going to do when he brings every deed into judgment.

But in our text for this evening, the author of Ecclesiastes is still struggling with the crookedness of life under the sun. And so, the advice that he gives in these verses is advice of a disillusioned teacher. He is struggling with the fact that there is so much in the world that is not the way that it ought to be.

Now this is one of the great struggles that we all face. There is a lot in the world that is troubling. That is even more the case in our day because of modern communications. Every evening, on the news, we get a summary of the horrible things that happened that day all around the world. We are kept up to date on the atrocities of the on-going war in Syria. We see pictures of kids – kids who are just like our kids – lying dead on the streets because they have had the misfortune to be in the vicinity of a chemical weapons attack. Or we see young girls being kidnaped from their homes to be forcibly married to extremist Muslim men or in other parts of the world to be forced to be prostitutes. We see stories of famines and pictures of emaciated people who die because the food that has been donated to keep them alive has been sold on the black market. Or we see pictures of the latest natural disaster in which hundreds and thousands and occasionally hundreds of thousands lose their lives or their reason for living in some earthquake or tsunami. And we ask, "why?" Even if we have the correct theological

answers, we cannot help but wonder – is all that unimaginable suffering really necessary? And we wonder, how can such things ever be right?

Now there are those who believe in God who take God off of the hook by taking the position that all of that is outside of his control. There is a theological perspective called Open Theism which denies everything that happens is part of God's plan and they teach that God is powerless to do anything about the terrible things that happen in the world. Or at least they say that God is purposely allowing his creation to run its course and he will one day make all things right, but in the meantime, he has no involvement in the suffering and the horrific things that happen on a daily basis in this world. That is one of the ways that some people deal with the terrible things that happen in this world.

But the author of Ecclesiastes does not take that route. He knows that God is sovereign. He knows that God is somehow involved in everything that happens. And this is a huge part of his problem. The great problem that he is struggling with is exactly the fact that he knows that God is somehow involved in every bad thing that happens. This is why he is so disillusioned with life in God's world. He knows from his training as a covenant child that God is good and righteous and kind and compassionate, but he is having difficulty squaring that with what he observes in the world around him. And it is from that disillusioned perspective that he gives the advice in this section.

I'm not going to deal with ever verse in this section. We will just look at the main points. Verse 14, "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." We see here his conviction about the sovereignty of God. God has made both the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. He would agree with the WCF on the providence of God. He is not an Open Theist or even an Arminian. He would affirm what we confess in WCF 5:1 "God - the great Creator of all things – upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things from the greatest even to the least." That is the truth behind is statement that God makes the day of adversity as well as the day of prosperity.

And his advice is “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider...” That is good advice as far as it goes, but we must remember the context. The fact that God makes both of these days is troubling him. And we see where he is coming from in the last part of the verse where he says, “God has made the one as well as the other, **so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.**” He is saying that the **reason** that God may bring a day of prosperity or a day of adversity is that he does not want anyone to know what their future holds. God wants us to be completely in the dark concerning our future. You have no way of knowing whether your future will be one of prosperity or adversity. No matter what you do or how you live or how wise you are or how foolish you are, you are completely in the dark concerning your future. And this is how God wants it to be. This is what our disillusioned teacher is saying. God had made the day of prosperity and the day of adversity, “**so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.**” He is saying that God does this in order to keep us in the dark concerning what comes next in our lives.

Now he is reacting to the fact that according to what he has been taught as a covenant child and as student of theology and as a student of Israel’s wisdom, there are ways to have a future of prosperity rather than a future of adversity.

Listen to one of the lessons that he had learned on his mother’s knee: Deuteronomy 28:1-2,11, “<sup>1</sup>“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup>And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God.” “<sup>11</sup>And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you.”

Notice that this verse gives you a way to have a good future. If you obey the Lord and be careful to do all his commands, you will be blessed – the Lord will make you abound in prosperity. This verse tells you how to have a future of prosperity – just obey the Lord. This same point gets made in some of the wisdom literature, in the book of Proverbs, for

instance. Listen to some of the things that Proverbs says about those who get wisdom. Proverbs 3:16-17, "<sup>16</sup>Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. <sup>17</sup>Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

So, both in the promises made to Israel through Moses and in the wisdom tradition of Israel, Israel was shown how to have a good future. If you obey God laws and if you find wisdom and live according to it, you can expect blessings and prosperity and a long life and many children and fruitful farms.

But the author of Ecclesiastes has seen too many instances where things did not work out that way. And that is behind the disillusionment that he is expressing. He is saying that there is no way to know what is around the corner for you. God sometimes makes days of prosperity and sometimes he makes days of adversity and he says that God operates this way "so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." In spite of the fact that the law says that obedience will be blessed and in spite of the fact that wisdom says that those who get wisdom will experience riches and honors and pleasantness, God distributes prosperity and adversity without any rhyme or reason and in that way, he keeps us in the dark about our future. You might be very obedient. You might search diligently for wisdom, but you have no idea whether God will give you prosperity or adversity. God keeps you in the dark concerning what the rest of your life will be like. Keeping his law or gaining wisdom is no guarantee that your future will be good.

So, he is struggling with what God has promised in the law and taught in the wisdom of Israel. There are these wonderful promises and principles. But they are not reliable. The distribution of prosperity and adversity seems to be completely arbitrary so that you really can't know how God is going to treat you. That is his problem.

The next verse elaborates on this line of thought: verse 15, "<sup>15</sup>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." God promises a long life to those who love him and keep his commands, but the author of Ecclesiastes sees too many instances of the opposite: long life for the wicked and short sad lives for the

righteous. Not always, but enough so that we are kept in the dark about how to live our lives so that we will have a good future. What difference does it make if you are obedient and wise if your wicked neighbor may well experience long life and prosperity and you may well experience a short life of trouble?

And here comes the advice that is based on this pessimistic view of God's way with people's lives. Verse 16: "Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Verse 17: Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool, Why should you die before your time?"

Now this is shocking advice to find in the Bible and many commentators try to take the shock out of it by their interpretations. But that is to miss the point. It is intended to be shocking. It comes out of Ecclesiastes' disillusionment with God. He has just said that he has seen "a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness" and he has seen "a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing."

What he says next follows from that. Since you don't know whether righteousness will lead to the blessings that God promises, and you don't know whether wisdom will lead to the good outcomes that it promises, don't be overly righteous and don't make yourself too wise. "Why should you destroy yourself?" Maybe he is thinking about Job. Certainly, he is thinking of someone like Job. Job went all out in his righteousness and look where that got him. So, he is saying, "don't put too many eggs in the righteousness basket."

On the other hand, he is advising not to go to the other extreme either. Verse 17, "Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?" Wickedness and foolishness are not the way either. Even though some wicked people end up living long and prosperous lives, there is a destructiveness that is inherent in wickedness and many wicked people experience broken lives directly because of their wickedness and die young. And so, his conclusion is to avoid the extremes. Don't be overly righteous, but don't be overly wicked either. Stay somewhere in the middle and hope for the best.

So, we come to verse 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." This verse is saying that if you follow his advice, by not being too righteous or too wicked you will somehow survive. This is what fearing God means given the fact that God has made the world crooked and that God gives prosperity and adversity without any regard for righteousness or wisdom or wickedness or folly. Fearing God means keeping your head down and hoping for the best. Here is how one commentator explains this verse, "To paraphrase, if you are moderately wise, you will not let life burn you. Your expectations are moderate, centered; you will not be frustrated or appalled at what you see. This is what it means for Qohelet to "fear God": not a healthy, covenantal fear, as we see elsewhere where in the OT, but something dysfunctional, born out of frustration. God is not to be trusted, so keep out of his way." Clearly fearing God here means something different from the fearing God that he calls us to at the end of the book. This is how a disillusioned teacher thinks about fearing God. Keep your head down and try not to be noticed.

I will make just one quick comment on the rest of the passage to verse 29. In those verses, our disillusioned teacher tells us that he has searched for wisdom and failed to find it. He has tried to understand how the world works and he has failed. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to anything. "Verses 23-24, "All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" Verse 27-28, "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."

So, he despairs of understanding the world. He despairs of knowing how the world works. It does not seem to make any difference how you live. God seems to distribute prosperity and adversity in an arbitrary way.

But there is one thing that he has come to understand. Verse 29 "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."

Here is a hint that he knows in his heart of hearts that God is not completely arbitrary, and that human sin is at the root of the problem. He knows the story of the fall from the Genesis story. He knows that God made a perfect world and that all the trouble that has come into the world is a result of sin. And that shows us that he is not completely hostile to God. He is disappointed with God. He has his problems with God's way of distributing prosperity and adversity. He is giving some very strange advice for a teacher in Israel. But he does know deep in his heart that God is good, and that sin is the ultimate cause of all the suffering and misery in the world.

Now I trust that it is clear that the book as a whole is not giving this as advice to be followed. These verses must be interpreted in the light of the whole book, particularly the ending. "The end of the matter: all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandment, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will be every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." This is what he ends up affirming in the end. The book as a whole is not saying that we should not be overly righteous. The book as a whole is saying that we must keep the commandments of God and we must live in light of the judgment of God. Therefore, obedience matters and the judgment of God means that in the end the wicked will get their due and the righteous will get their due and God will fix this broken world, and everything will be as it ought to be. This is where the author of Ecclesiastes ends up. But he is not there yet in chapter 7.

And the point of chapter 7 is that sometimes we may end up feeling the way that the author of Ecclesiastes felt when he experienced the thoughts and feelings that he expresses in that chapter. These verses are in the Bible to help us when we are disillusioned with life. They are there to show us the way when we are so discouraged and perplexed that we are not thinking straight and are questioning God and are disillusioned with God. These words are in the Bible to help us when we are hurting so badly or so disturbed by the way that the world is that our hearts are bitter, and we are thinking that trying to live an obedient life gets you nowhere. These verses are in the Bible for those times when we are not shocked by them, but we agree with them.

God's people struggle. God's people have their doubts. God's people do not always approve of God's way of running the world or their lives. God's people sometimes feel that there must be a better way than killing 280,000 people in 14 countries in one tsunami or allowing some crazy dictator to send chemical bombs into places where innocent children play on the streets or taking one of our children in the prime of his life or forming us in such a way that must spend our lives battling with an irrational anxiety.

We have doubts too. And it is good to know that we are not alone. The experience of the author of Ecclesiastes expressed in these words of disillusionment can help us when we are in a place of doubt and disillusionment with God. For one, he expressed those doubts. He did not just pretend that all was well. He did not just parrot the party line. He expressed his thoughts. He wrote them down. He worked his way through them. And as he does so, sometimes he is in a dark place. Sometimes he has a little more hope. He has ups and downs. He is not always in the same place.

And his doubt is not unbelief. That is an important distinction. Doubt is the questioning of a person who acknowledges God and is looking for answers. Unbelief is the settled decision to reject God and live apart from him. The author of Ecclesiastes is dealing with his issues before the face of God. God is part of his thinking and he is dealing with his struggles honestly before God. And in the end, he comes to a place that is in line with the biblical teaching. The fact is that there are all kinds of things in this world that are disturbing and troubling. And the fact that God is sovereign over all these things makes them more disturbing and more troubling. But God points us to two things – the beginning and the end. The reason that things are as they are in the world is the sin that entered God's good creation when Adam sinned, and the reason that we need not despair is the coming judgment of God who will one day make all things right.

The reason that a passage like this is so important is that having thought through these things will help us to deal with our own questions and doubts so that we are not devastated by them. If we do not think deeply about these questions we can be overwhelmed when something

happens, or we start dwelling on things that we find deeply troubling. This passage shows us that believers before us have had similar thoughts and God has helped them through them. There is nothing new under the sun and that is also the case when it comes to the doubts and struggles of God's people.

And the good news here is that God is working towards the solution to all the bad things about the world and he is doing that in a hidden and mysterious way. When Jesus came he was not what the people of Israel expected. From the perspective of human expectations, it looked pretty pathetic. God promises to bring salvation for his people and defeat all their enemies and make all things new and who shows up? A carpenter's son. A nobody. A decidedly unimpressive figure as far as human judgment was concerned.

And yet through him, God solved the fundamental problem of human existence. Through that one life and death and resurrection, God accomplished more to fix the world than the combined efforts of all of mankind in all of history. We have come a long way as a human race. But we have not solved the evil of the human heart. We have very impressive accomplishments in medicine, but we have not solved the problem of death. We have very impressive accomplishments in technology, but we have not solved hatred and murder and selfishness and unconcern with the suffering of others. Jesus did not invent some stunning new procedure for lengthening our lives. But what he did do was provide a solution for our guilt. He did not invent a cure for poverty or world hunger, but he did provide a cure for twisted and disordered and evil hearts. He did not bring a cure for cancer, but he did bring a cure for death.

What Jesus did was the beginning of the new creation. What he did while he was on earth will lead to a world in which there will be no more terrorists and no more chemical weapons and no more starving babies. It will also lead to a world in which there will be no more selfishness and no more indifference to others and no more preoccupation with things that do not matter. It will lead to a world in which everyone will know God and love him and follow his commands.

But we are not there yet. We will see another batch of horrific things on the news tomorrow. There will be more examples of good people suffering horrible meaningless tragedies and bad people living lives of ease and luxury without a worry in the world. There will be more perplexing and troubling things for us to witness and experience which will tempt us to despair and disillusionment. The solution is trust in the God who is not inclined to give us the answer to our questions, but who has entered the pain and misery of our world and who has sacrificed himself in order to deal with the root of all pain and misery. When we are tempted to despair and to be disillusioned with God, he calls us to trust – to consider what he has done through Jesus and to trust that what he has begun in Jesus he will also bring to completion and to live in hope on that basis in spite of what we will see on the news tomorrow.