



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Living a Balanced Life

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-29, Solomon discovers that life is to be lived with moderation or balance. He begins by describing his life as vain (*hebel*). Here the idea is that life is like a vapour; not long in duration. In his short life, Qoheleth says “I have seen everything.” So this wise man, who who as “seen it all,” chronicles what he has observed that leads him to conclude a life of moderation is the proper way of living.

In verse 15 he has observed that the righteous sometimes die young while the evil live long. Christians have often commented that the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous life is filled with trouble. Qoheleth is not saying this is always true, but it is sometimes true and seems to go against the natural order.

- 1. Have you ever been perplexed when you see the righteous suffer while the wicked seem to prosper? Why does this happen?**



Verse 16 at first reading, seems inconsistent with what we believe is true. Solomon is not urging people to lack righteousness or wisdom, but is teaching his readers not to trust in their own righteousness or wisdom. There are those who believe they can be “good enough” to please God and then become overconfident and take pride in their own goodness. They are “self-righteous.” Though Solomon has shown wisdom to be superior to folly, constant seeking of wisdom to excess will not lead to the understanding of everything that happens in life. Qoheleth asks, “Why should you destroy yourself?” The word translated as “destroy” literally means to confound or confuse oneself.¹ In other words, you are not going to be good enough or wise enough to understand everything that happens in life.

- 2. Describe the lifestyle and attitude of those who believe they can be good enough or wise enough to find the answer to all of life’s questions.**
- 3. Can there ever be an excess of true righteousness?**

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 768.

The next thought is similar, “don’t be overly wicked, neither be a fool.” Even though Solomon has previously said that sometimes the wicked live long, this is not the usual outcome. Wickedness and foolishness more often leads to a premature death in this life and eternal punishment in the life to come.



The balance between being overly righteous and overly wicked is found in verse 18. The one who will find success is the one who fears God. The person who believes he can be righteous and wise enough to please God and discover the answers to all life’s complexities will ultimately fail and this failure could cause him to lose his faith. No one will understand everything that happens in this life. The one who persists in wickedness and foolishness may come to an early demise. The proper balance is to “fear God.” Trust God to know what is right and place your faith and hope in him.

4. How can we assess whether or not our life has the balance described in verse 18?

While it may have seemed Qoheleth discounted wisdom in verse 15, instead he values real wisdom when used by the one who fears God. The metaphor that is used of ten rulers in a city describes the best of human wisdom. The number ten denotes completeness, the city shows that this is not a small community, but wisdom is drawn from the best of a large population. Wisdom is necessary because there is no one who never sins (vs. 20). Wisdom will lead a man to see the error of his ways and return to the fear of God. Again we see the balance needed in life. While we cannot be sinless, we can live wise lives and fear God.

5. What does 1 John 1:8-10 teach Christians about sin?

Verses 21-22 moves to practical instruction about handling criticism. Qoheleth has already stated that no one is sinless, but even if we could be, that would not stop criticism. It is best to attempt to avoid hearing what others say about you when you aren’t present. If you do overhear someone talking about you, the instruction is “do not take to heart all the things people say.” Then comes the need for self-evaluation if you do overhear a criticism. Have you ever criticised others?



6. What makes criticism so painful?

7. What steps can a person take to “not take to heart” what others say about them?

Qoheleth had tested his conclusions by wisdom, but the deepest of things eluded him. He understood much of what he observed in life (Ecc. 1:16), but strive as he might, he could not understand those things that are described as “far off” and “deep, very deep.” He could not know

what was “far off” either before the Creation or into the distant future. He could not understand the seeming contradictions of life (as in verse 15). He could not fathom the intricacies of what God knows. They were and would always be beyond the grasp of his wisdom. Solomon has come to this conclusion about the limits of wisdom after great effort. In verses 24-29 the phrases “find out,” or “sought out,” or “search out” are used repeatedly. This indicates “the intensity of Qoheleth’s search.”²

Since Solomon could not understand the things that are “far off” and “deep, very deep” he turned his heart to understand life in his world. He wanted to know “wisdom” and the “scheme of things.” The “scheme of things” is a phrase used in verses 25, 27, and 29 and “is an accounting term, which involves the idea of taking inventory, of calculating or adding up the facts of life.”³ Qoheleth wanted to understand life so desperately that he turned his heart to “know,” to “search out,” to “seek.” He made every effort to understand the scheme of things. In this search concludes that folly and foolishness are both wickedness and madness.

Along the way Solomon finds something “more bitter than death.” This bitterness comes from the seduction and ensnaring of a wicked woman. She can only be overcome by a man who pleases God. We do know from Biblical accounts that Solomon allowed the women in his life to lead him away from faithfulness to God.

What we now need to determine is the identity of the woman in verses 26-28. Certainly Solomon is not describing the female population in general. Often he has written of the joy of marriage in Ecclesiastes and in Proverbs 31 he writes about the great value of a virtuous wife. Perhaps he is speaking of an evil woman as he does so often in the book of Proverbs. This evil woman is one that a man allows to lead him into sin and debauchery. Others take this woman to be a personification of folly. In Proverbs 9, Solomon writes of the woman “Folly” which is not a physical woman, but rather worldliness personified as a woman named Folly. Perhaps it can be both a seductive and evil woman or the personified “Folly.”⁴

8. Why is the bitterness of the ensnaring woman of verse 26 worse than death?

9. How does the evil woman “snare” and “net” and in what sense are her hands “fetters?”



Again we must be reminded that Solomon is not making a wholesale condemnation of women for often in his writings he praises women. What he is saying is that an evil woman can bring a righteous man great pain. The opposite would be equally true. Solomon’s experience with evil women (and his experience was expansive) led him to his conclusion after learning lesson after lesson (vs. 27).

² Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 359.

³ *ibid.* p. 360.

⁴ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 773.

Solomon found in his search for wisdom and the scheme of things that there were very few righteous. He found only one man in a thousand and not even one woman to be righteous. This is not to be taken as a literal percentage, instead he is saying that righteous men are very rare and from his observation, probably from his many wives and concubines, there were even less righteous women in his day.

Qoheleth's final conclusion in verse 29 is this: God is not to blame for man's failure because God made man upright. Man is to blame for his own failures which have come through many schemes which are contrary to righteous living.