

## Can't Scheme to Figure It Out Ecclesiastes 7

## PHBF 02.18.18 Chasing the Wind

It's been said, "We see the world, not as it is, but as we are" (S Covey). The statement illustrates the power and importance of our paradigm—i.e., the framework of basic assumptions we make about the world, people, and life. In other words, we all view the world through a particular lens that shapes everything we see, **often without even realizing it.**

ILLUS: An incident from the life of Teddy Roosevelt (which I've shared before). When Teddy was 13 years old, his father gave him a hunting rifle. But whenever he'd go shooting with his friends, he couldn't hit anything. Yet his friends would fire into what looked to Teddy like the blue blur of the sky or the green blur of the trees, and their prey would mysteriously drop out of nowhere. The truth was slow to dawn on him. He mentioned his problem to his father, who sent him to an eye doctor, who in turn fitted him with his first spectacles. He later wrote in his journal: "[This] literally opened an entirely new world to me. I had no idea how beautiful the world was until I got those spectacles. While much of my clumsiness and awkwardness was doubtless due to general characteristics, a good deal of it was due to the fact that I could not see, and yet was wholly ignorant that I was not seeing."

When Teddy Roosevelt first put his glasses on, he realized the world in reality was quite different from the world in his perception. We see the world, not as it is, but as we are. It's quite possible for us to look at life, see what we see, and yet have no idea that we can't really see at all.

It's the problem the Preacher illustrates for us in our text for today. Ecclesiastes 7 is the Preacher's attempt to answer his own question at the end of chapter 6:

**6:12** *For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?*

Thirteen times in chapter 7 he uses that same Hebrew word for "good/better," most of them in the next few verses:

**vv1-3** *A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. <sup>2</sup> It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. <sup>3</sup> Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.*

The Preacher is saying, "What to know what's good in life? I'll tell you what's good..." It's the theme of this entire chapter.

There's another word that runs through this entire chapter, also appearing 13x:

**vv4-5,10-11** *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. <sup>5</sup> It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. <sup>10</sup> Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. <sup>11</sup> Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.*

What is good? One word. "Wisdom." The Preacher says, "Wisdom is good—certainly much better than folly or madness. And I'm glad to share mine with you..." We'll look at what he shares in just a moment, but first notice at the end he admits a problem:

**vv23-24** *All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup> That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?*

When the Preacher tried to find wisdom, it was far from him, "far off and deep, very deep." In other words, **he couldn't find it.** Why not?

In answer, let me remind you once again what we're dealing with in this difficult and unusual book. Ecclesiastes is the personal journal of a man called "the Preacher." The Preacher's deepest self is a man of conviction and faith who accepts the revealed light of God's word. But his provisional self and the identity he assumes for this journey is a man who ignores all that and instead gropes along by the light of nature alone—a viewpoint he sums up in the phrase "under the sun." All of his opinions, his conclusions, his knowledge is independent of God.

Of course, this approach to finding wisdom is the exact opposite of what the Bible's other wisdom literature teaches:

**Job 28:28** *Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.*

**Psalms 111:10** *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.*

**Proverbs 1:7** *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

**Proverbs 9:10** *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

The Bible's consistent testimony is that true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord. It doesn't matter how good it sounds or well it works, if this viewpoint does not START by acknowledging God, it is NOT wisdom!

...which means—and here’s the key to this chapter—**everything the Preacher concludes from his “under the sun” perspective is inherently flawed and untrustworthy!** His paradigm is wrong. True wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, but the Preacher is viewing the world through the lens of personal autonomy. As a result, the “wisdom” he uncovers is no real wisdom at all because it operates without reference to God. It’s whole chapter of painfully ironic vanity. If you don’t understand that, this chapter will be confusing, misleading, and even offensive. So let me say it again: nothing the Preacher concludes from his “under the sun” perspective is true wisdom. His entire paradigm is wrong!

Let me quickly clarify: I am NOT saying you shouldn’t trust this part of your Bible. I’m saying you need to read it correctly in light of what the author intended. It’s similar to the speeches of Job’s three friends—whole chapters that God later says are flat wrong! And some of it even makes good sense. But when you read those speeches in light of the whole story and you see what’s going on, you realize they are mistaken, you shouldn’t trust their words, and it’s written that way on purpose.

Likewise, the Preacher is doing it this way on purpose. He knows his conclusions here are wrong. Later he reminds us: “Fear God.” But unlike the other wisdom books which *begin* there, the Preacher doesn’t firmly establish that until *the very end*. In the meantime, he adopts the mindset of someone who does not fear God just to see where that gets us. This whole chapter reflects the empty “wisdom” of human autonomy—i.e., the futile result of trying to figure out “what is good” (6:12) without God’s revelation. Here’s what we’ll see:

- The greatest human wisdom is folly.
- The greatest divine foolishness is wise.

### **The greatest human wisdom is folly.**

The Preacher’s approach to wisdom leads him into all kinds of contradictions, dead ends, and questionable conclusions. Some of it sounds right (like Job’s friends), but the overall context reminds us this viewpoint can’t be trusted.

Notice the contradictions he runs into first:

**vv1-6** *A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. <sup>2</sup> It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. <sup>3</sup> Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. <sup>4</sup> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. <sup>5</sup> It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. <sup>6</sup> For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.*

Sorrow and death are inevitable, and we can certainly learn much from by keeping that in mind. But just a few moments earlier, the Preacher recommended the direct opposite attitude as good:

**5:18-19** *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment...<sup>19</sup> Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil - this is the gift of God.*

So which is good—joy or mourning? When you abandon God, there are no clear answers. In fact, even wisdom (in this view) is untrustworthy:

**v7** *Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.*

Even the wise can be corrupted or driven into madness. So much for the value of that!

**vv8-9** *Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. <sup>9</sup> Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.*

True enough. Proverbs would agree. But what about:

**v10** *Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.*

Wait a second – what makes this a foolish question? The warnings in the Law and Prophets would indicate that, if life gets bad in Israel, God is trying to get their attention. They *ought* to ask why former days were better, right? But if all you can see is life “under the sun,” you see no divine intent behind your changing circumstances, no lessons to be learned, just endless and meaningless cycles of life.

Again, the Preacher casts a shadow on the value of wisdom:

**vv11-12** *Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. <sup>12</sup> For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.*

How different from the wisdom of Proverbs, which is more valuable

than any financial gain and offers countless advantages in both this life and the next. Do you see the cynicism and pessimism creeping into the Preacher's viewpoint? But of course – after all, without God, what basis could you possibly have for joy?

Speaking of God, look how human wisdom views Him:

**vv13-14** *Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?*<sup>14</sup> *In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.*

“God makes things crooked; don't even try to straighten them out. In fact, prosperity and adversity both come randomly from His hand, so don't even try to figure it out.”

Let's think about this for a moment: does the Bible teach that God is sovereign over all things and that both calamity and blessing come from His hand? Most emphatically, yes, it does! Just read the book of Job. But **the Bible always uses that truth to encourage God's people to trust Him and praise Him for His wise and mysterious purposes**, not to cause them to throw up their hands and say “What's the use?” The theology here is right, but the conclusion and attitude is all wrong—just like Job's friends. Lest you think I'm being unfair in how I'm characterizing the Preacher's point here, keep reading:

**vv15-18** *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.*<sup>16</sup> *Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?*<sup>17</sup> *Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?*<sup>18</sup> *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.*

“Righteous people die young. Wicked people live long. So what's the use? Best practice: chill out, relax, and stay somewhere in the middle.” He even uses the phrase “fear God” in v18, but the context makes clear he's being ironic, perhaps even sarcastic, not sincere. He's saying: “Look, if God makes things crooked and randomly brings adversity, then this is what the fear of that kind of God would look like—not overly wicked, but certainly not overly righteous.” Moderation is the only option that makes sense.

**vv19-20** *Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.*<sup>20</sup> *Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good*

*and never sins.*

True enough, and all the more reason for moderation. Just in case you don't agree, consider:

**vv21-22** *Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.*<sup>22</sup> *Your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.*

The quickest way to prove that “no one is righteous and never sins” is to listen to their words—particularly how they talk about other people. You yourself scorn, criticize, and judge others—all forms of “cursing.”

This is his best shot at human wisdom—his best effort to answer his own question from 6:12 “What makes a good life for a human being?” Contradictions, dead ends, and theologically questionable conclusions. He wraps up this section by admitting his failure to find any real wisdom and then to confess he did find something tragic:

**vv23-29** *All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.*<sup>24</sup> *That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?*<sup>25</sup> *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.*<sup>26</sup> *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.*<sup>27</sup> *Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things -*<sup>28</sup> *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.*<sup>29</sup> *See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*

What he didn't find: wisdom (vv23-24). What he did find: twisted, broken, and destructive people (vv26-29). He even goes so far as to report that, at least in his survey, he couldn't find a decent woman among the whole lot. Thankfully, he ends on a strong note: “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” = “We are a complete mess, and it's actually not God's fault.”

So here are the best results of human wisdom—cynicism, contradiction, pragmatism, prejudice, and hopelessness.

Let's be honest though, friends. It's easy to sit here and point out the problems with this guy's thinking, but don't we all fall into the same tendency? Yes we do! This problem has plagued humanity since the

Fall—doubting God’s word, listening to other voices, believing our own interpretation of the world. This is fundamentally what it means to be a nonChristian—you are an “unbeliever”- i.e., someone who does not believe what God says. You trust your own thoughts and feelings far more than the word of God:

- It’s not wrong if it doesn’t hurt anybody.
- A loving God would never allow so much pointless suffering.
- Follow your heart.

Those ideas sound so compelling and wise, but it’s not hard to show every one of them is sheer folly! One example: “It’s not wrong if it doesn’t hurt anybody.” Setting aside for a moment the fact that God is part of “anybody” and He has rights and interests that can be violated in how we behave, let’s just assume that statement is true. How can you ever use it to prove anything is right or wrong? It assumes way too much! To prove that “this action” (whatever it is) doesn’t hurt anybody, you would have to have 1) exhaustive knowledge of the present to take in all effects of this action, 2) the foresight to predict all future effects this action, 3) the capacity to consider every single person who could be affected, and 4) the moral discernment to evaluate perfectly what is hurtful and what is helpful. That’s not wisdom; it’s the height of arrogance. It’s sheer foolishness, and if you’re honest, you’ll admit it. It’s just as foolish as the “wisdom” of the Preacher. That’s because even the greatest human wisdom is folly.

### The greatest divine foolishness is wise.

So where can we find true wisdom? God. Only God is vast enough to tell us for certain: This is true. This is beautiful. This is good. Human beings were made with a built-in need for the word of God. We do not live well on our own:

**Matthew 4:4** *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Friend, you need God’s word every day. Read your Bible. It is pure milk for your soul, solid meat for your strength.

But as soon as we start reading the Bible for nourishment and wisdom, we run into a problem, don’t we? The Bible isn’t written very efficiently for finding quick meals and handy answers? No topical index. No

alphabetized list of common problems: “fighting with spouse, kids won’t behave, fear about health, money running out.” Wouldn’t it be nice if, instead of this obscure book, God had given us a digitized spiritual reference tool like WebMD—search symptoms, find causes, apply cures. The way it is all seems so... well, so foolish sometimes, right? Sure it does. And yet, maybe it’s not so foolish after all...

**1 Corinthians 1:21-24** *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

It’s the height of foolishness to worship a crucified Savior. But then again... think of what we have in Jesus. A new relationship with God – sins atoned and God’s wrath satisfied. A whole new identity as a child of God and a new creation in Christ. A new horizon for our lives and goal for our future, headed for renewal and glory fully remade in the original image of God. A new purpose, able to live to know God and show God. A new hope – the power of God’s Spirit changing me within and the promises of God’s covenant assuring me He will never leave or forsake me.

Initially, that is not the wisdom we think we need. We want a technique, a 3-step process, a quick-fix solution. We find something we think will work, we try it for a while, and we find it just as empty as what we had before. Instead God gives us a Person:

**1 Corinthians 1:28-31** *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

If it’s true that we see the world, not as it is, but as we are, THIS is the wisdom we really need. “My wisdom for your life,” God says, “is a Person.”

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