

An Empty Life? (9): Wisdom and Folly

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 7. As we have worked through this book, we have seen the author of Ecclesiastes look squarely in the face of life apart from God, and acknowledge its emptiness, to say that life apart from God is meaninglessness --it is vain; it is futile; it is fleeting; it is without substance or satisfaction.

And having stated that stark reality of what life is like apart from God, he explores, in the first several chapters, different escape routes that people attempt to provide themselves to get away from that bleak reality. Some people go the escape route of philosophy. They attempt to philosophize themselves out of the conundrum. Some go the escape route of pleasure. They attempt to pleasure themselves out of that emptiness and lack of satisfaction. Some go the escape route of work. They throw themselves into a vocation or some great task in life, and they try and work themselves out of the emptiness, while other go the way of affluence and they attempt to assuage their empty hearts with wealth and riches.

In Ecclesiastes 6, the Preacher summarizes some of the ways that people attempt to fill up the hole that is inside them. He speaks of wealth; he speaks of family--a large family; he speaks of long life; he speaks of work and he speaks about words--our wisdom, again. All these ways that people attempt to fill up this void in life, and all of these things, he says, fail. Now, he says this not only because he's wise; he says this because, throughout this book, he says that he himself has attempted to fill up that void in these ways. And he has been able to experience these things in a state far beyond that which most people are normally able to experience them. He has been exceedingly productive, and so the way of work, if it should have worked for anyone to provide satisfaction in life, should have provided it for him, but it didn't. He has been exceedingly affluent, so if wealth was able to provide satisfaction, it should have provided it for him. But it didn't. He has had a large family. He has had many wives and children, and so if a family was going to provide meaning and satisfaction in life, surely he would have experienced meaning and satisfaction. He has experienced pleasure *par excellence*, and so if pleasure was going to provide meaning, fullness, and satisfaction in life, it should have provided it for him. And all of these ways have failed. In the book so far, only one thing, only one time has he explained to us from a positive standpoint what truly supplies meaning to this life, and he has

located that meaning in the providence of God and in our acknowledgement of the providence of God. He's going to come back to that again in Ecclesiastes 7, and he's going to mention our embracing the reality of God's providence as a key to living wisely in this life, to being wise in this life, and to experience meaning in this life.

The passage outlines, beginning in verses 1-6, with what looks like a disconnected set of proverbs, but it is actually a meditation on the potential instructiveness of suffering and death, of how looking at these hard things in life can actually reveal wisdom and create wisdom. Then, in verses 7-10, we see him mention a series of dangers, or trials that face us in this life: compromise, impatience, anger, discontent, and he meditates upon how our response to those things reveals wisdom or foolishness. In verses 11-12, he meditates on the necessity of wisdom, the need for wisdom. In verses 13-14, he meditates on the providence of God, and our realizing that our life is under God. Verses 15-18 are a meditation on the futility of life, and the futile things that he has seen in this life which force us to admit that this life is empty apart from God. Verses 19-22 are another meditation on the necessity of wisdom. Verses 23-24 are his thoughts on the elusiveness of wisdom. Wisdom is necessary, but it is hard to get. Finally, in verses 25-29, he thinks on the pervasive fact of human sinfulness. Now there may not seem to be coherence in the passage, because he seems to ramble from one place to the next. What's his design? Well, our purpose, as we look at this text, is to see the design of this argument from Ecclesiastes 7. Let us hear now God's word:

A good name is better than a good ointment,
And the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.
It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart.
Sorrow is better than laughter,
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.
The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.
For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool;
And this too is futility.
For oppression makes a wise man mad,
And a bribe corrupts the heart.
The end of a matter is better than its beginning;
Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.
Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,
For anger resides in the bosom of fools.

Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.
Wisdom along with an inheritance is good
And an advantage to those who see the sun.
For wisdom is protection just as money is protection,
But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its
possessors.
Consider the work of God,
For who is able to straighten what He has bent?
In the day of prosperity be happy,
But in the day of adversity consider--
God has made the one as well as the other
So that man will not discover anything that will be after him.

I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others. I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation, which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices." Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

O Lord, as we consider Your word, show us wisdom and show us foolishness. Reveal to us our own foolishness, move us by Your Spirit to seek wisdom, the first wisdom, the great wisdom, the most important wisdom of all, we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

So you ask me, "What in the world is Ecclesiastes 7 about? What is he rambling on about?" Let me suggest to you that by presenting a series of opposites, a series of contrasts, a series of dangers, a series of life scenarios—situations that

we find ourselves in in this fallen world—the Preacher is showing us true wisdom and the folly of trying to make sense of life apart from God. He is also revealing to us in this passage the difference between wisdom and folly. And the characteristic actions and attitudes that reveal to us the heart of wisdom and folly. You can't look in to someone's heart and you can't look into someone's heart and tell whether they are wise or foolish, but you can look at their actions and attitudes and discern either wisdom in those actions and attitudes or folly in those actions and attitudes. More importantly, you can look at your own actions and attitudes and discern whether there is wisdom or folly in your heart. He reveals these things to us so that we may look at our own hearts and take stock. Is there wisdom there or only folly?

Let's look at this passage together. We don't have time to do everything here so what I propose that we look at the first, second, third, fourth, and eighth section of the passage. We'll look at verses 1-14 and then we'll look at verses 25-29. We'll draw a few points from the other verses that we skip over.

I. Death, sorrow, grief and laughter have the ability to reveal wisdom and folly.

Let's look first at verses 1-6. Here the Preacher asks us to meditate on the potential instructiveness of suffering and death. In other words, he says that death, and sorrow, and grief and--interestingly with that combination--laughter, have an ability to reveal wisdom and folly. In verse one he says something fairly strange: "A good name is better than a good ointment and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth." Now those two things may seem to have absolutely no parallel but realize that he's making a comparison. He's saying, "Just as a good name is better than ointment, so also is the day of one's death better than the day of one's birth." Now, that may not help explain that particular verse to you. It's still seems fairly cryptic. Why is a death day better than a birthday? He is asserting that the day of death is better than the day of birth. Well, the answer is in the context of everything he says in verses 1-6, but it's fairly obvious. The funeral, he is saying, poses and reveals ultimate questions, issues and answers about life.

This next Wednesday, Bill Bright's funeral will be held in the First Baptist Church in Orlando, Florida, and at that service a life's work devoted to the Kingdom of God will be recounted. God will be the center and God will be glorified, but a man's wisdom in living life for God will certainly be one of the things that is celebrated in that service of worship. That funeral service will reveal far more than the birthday of Bill Bright revealed, because the funeral reveals certain ultimate issues about life. A funeral reveals what you've lived life for. That's why it's so bad when a bad life is covered up in a funeral service.

There's a story from the hills of eastern Tennessee where my mother grew up

about a man in a particular town who lived a very immoral life. His wife was a godly woman and she came to the preacher the day before her husband's funeral and she said, "Now preacher, everybody in this town knows what kind of a man my husband was. Don't you preach him into heaven in the funeral. You tell the truth and you preach the gospel." So everyone waited to see what the preacher would say the next day. As he stood up at the funeral service and leaned over the pulpit down into the casket he said, "Well, Ben, you're in hell now." And a loud "Amen" came from the front row; it was his wife. The funeral service had revealed what his life was like. A death day, the Preacher says, is better than a birthday because the funeral poses and reveals ultimate questions about life.

Look at verse 2. He goes on to say, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting." There's another strange quotation. It's better to go to someone's house after the funeral service than it is to go to a party. Why? Once again, he tells you here because that is the end of every man and the living takes it to heart. Death brings the wise to think about life, to take stock of their own end, to take account of their own priorities because every funeral anticipates our own. So the wise person goes to the house of mourning while the fool only thinks about parties.

He goes on. Look at verse 3. "Sorrow is better than laughter. When a face is sad a heart may be happy." The Preacher is saying that sorrow, even mourning, is better than an empty laughter. There are those who laugh quickly and loudly and raucously, but that laughter is empty. He says sorrow is better than that kind of empty laughter. Indeed, behind many a sad face is a fundamentally happy and content heart. Just because there is a face of sorrow in the time of mourning, doesn't mean that a person doesn't know happiness and contentment. Billy Joel once sang that he would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. That is precisely the thinking of the fool described here in Ecclesiastes 7. The author of Ecclesiastes would respond, "I'd rather cry with the saints than laugh with the sinners because the sinners are fools." The saints are wise, and behind the sad faces of those saints is, in fact, a heart far more profoundly happy and content than the empty heart of the fool expressed in his empty laughter.

This theme continues in verse 4. "While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure." In other words, he says the wise are thinking about going to comfort someone in their time of mourning and loss, while fools are thinking about going to parties. That's basically what he says in verse 4. We have a ruling elder who likes to repeat this word of great wisdom: "*Walk* to a wedding; *run* to a funeral." That's exactly what is being celebrated here. The wise person is ready to comfort in time of mourning while the fool avoids that and only thinks of empty partying.

Again, as we look at verse 5, this one also may seem to be out of place: "It's better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the song of fools." He's saying that it would be better to hear and experience the unpleasant rebuke of a wise man, than it would be to join in with the singing and laughter of

fools. Why? He tells you in verse 6. "For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool." Just like thorn bushes light quickly and crackle loudly and burn out even faster under a pot, so also a fool laughs loudly and quickly and briefly. The wise man's rebuke serves a greater end than the short, shrill laughter of the fool.

What does all this say? It says that death, sorrow, grief and empty laughter have the ability to reveal wisdom and folly. If you are one that never pauses to think about death, that runs away from looking at the hard issues that death brings. If you are one that would rather have the empty laughter than the contented sorrow, then the heart of a fool has been revealed. And the fool is the one who attempts to live life under the sun, apart from God, to find some sort of meaning and pleasure and satisfaction apart from the living God.

II. The various trials of life in a fallen world reveal the heart's wisdom or folly.

He continues to meditate on the trials of life in verses 7-10, and he thinks with you on the dangers of compromise and impatience and anger and discontent. And once again, he says the various trials of life in a fallen world reveal the heart's wisdom or folly. Oppression, he says, makes a wise man mad and a bribe corrupts the heart. Here he deals with two trials. How does the wise man respond to oppression? Not with a shrug, but with indignation, and ultimately it drives him crazy to see oppression occurring. Have you thought of what it would have been like to live in Iraq under the Hussein regime--to experience that kind of oppression? The author of Proverbs, the author of Ecclesiastes, says that that type of oppression inherently drives the wise man crazy. He can't be satisfied and turn a blind eye to it. It oppresses his heart; it drives him crazy. And he also says that a bribe corrupts the heart. These trials cannot be ignored by the wise man. The end of a matter is better than the beginning. Why? Because the end often reveals the purposes of God in ways that those purposes cannot be seen at the beginning of a matter.

Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit. Here he's reminding us of the danger of impatience and he's saying that impatience is actually a reflection of being prideful. Glen Knecht tells this story of humility. He says humility is going the speed limit when you know that no one else is around. You have to exercise some patience to do that, don't you? I wouldn't know. But that's the perfect illustration, isn't it, because haughtiness is impatient; you're ready to do what *you* want to do. That is at the heart of pride.

"Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools." Is there a heart of anger in you? Then that is a mark of foolishness. Don't say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" How often have you said that? Longing for the good-old days, the best years of life, looking to the

past for those best years. He says that it is not from wisdom that you think about this. These attitudes to certain situations in life reveal either a heart of wisdom or a heart of folly. Does oppression and bribery vex you? Well, if it does, that's good; it reveals that God has implanted some wisdom in your heart. Are you indifferent to them? That's bad. That reveals foolishness of heart. Are you patient? Are you able to deal with anger? This reveals, too, either wisdom or foolishness. Are you always looking to the past as the best days, sentimentally thinking about things gone by? Or, are you looking to serve God now and in the future and forever? These things either reveal wisdom or folly. Again, the folly is living life *apart* from God.

III. The necessity of wisdom.

In verses 11 and 12, thirdly, we see the necessity of wisdom. Here the Preacher celebrates the value of wisdom. Wisdom along with an inheritance is good and an advantage to those who see the Son. His point is that wisdom is better than money. Money is protection, he says, but wisdom can help you live.

In this passage he's reminding us of the need to have wisdom, the need to walk in the way of duty, to believe what God says in His Word, to look at life from God's perspective, to depend upon what God has told us about this life in order to make sense of life. If we attempt to make sense of this life apart from God, apart from His Word, apart from the way of duty that He has given us; this life will make no sense. And so, wisdom is necessary and it preserves the life of its possessor.

IV. The beginning of wisdom is the fear, the reverence, of God.

And in the fourth section if you look at verses 13 and 14, he sees the heart of wisdom is to realize that life is under God. You see, providence, our embrace of God's providence is the key. "Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider--God has made the one as well as well as the other so that man will not discover anything that will be after him." In other words, the heart of wisdom is revealed when you respond to the good things of life by saying, "God has given," and you respond to the hard things, the bad things of life by saying, "God has done this and He has a purpose for this and I accept *His* wisdom even when *my* wisdom cannot search this thing out."

V. The pervasive fact of human sinfulness.

And yet, in verses 25-29, the Preacher says that he has looked around an awful long time and he hasn't found many wise men and women. But he has found this.

Look at verse 29. “That God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.” Here is the beginning of wisdom. To recognize that there’s not much wisdom out there. Wisdom is not native to us. It is a gift of God. In fact, what is native to us is seeking out our own devices. God made men upright. God made our first parents, Adam and Eve, upright and yet, we have sought out our own devices and we have traded wisdom for foolishness. And so the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, the recognition that we need wisdom from Him, that we lack wisdom and that it can only be found in Him and that we can’t make sense of this life apart from Him. An awe-inspiring reverence of God leads us to see our lack and need, and the fulfillment of that lack and need only in Him. That is what the author of Ecclesiastes teaches us in this great chapter as he looks at wisdom and folly. Let’s pray.

Lord and God, as we measure our hearts before Your Word today, all of us can see different aspects of foolishness. We may struggle with some of these things more than others, to different degrees than others, but we all see parts of our heart captive to different foolishnesses. Lord, some of us here today are completely captive to folly. By Your grace, release us from that folly. Others of us have been changed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet, find ourselves wandering back into the pathways of foolishness--so far into those pathways, that we are wreaking destruction upon ourselves and upon those that we love the most. Lord, forgive us and guide us back into the way of wisdom. Show us that way in Your Word and grant us hearts of contentment even in the face of death and sorrow. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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