

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 14

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

In verses 13-29, we come to what may be the most difficult passage in a difficult book. While some of what he says is straightforward, some of it is, to put it mildly, cryptic. But there are some crucial lessons here that we won't find elsewhere in Scripture.

Three main points: First, in vv. 13-18, living in the crooked world, again. Second, in vv. 19-24, wisdom and its limitations, yet again. And, third, in vv. 25-29, seeking and finding.

I. Living in a Crooked World

First, then, living in the crooked world. The early 18th c. Scottish preacher, Thomas Boston, wrote a famous sermon shortly before he died entitled "The Crook in the Lot." The title refers to what is bent or twisted in the lot of our lives. And Boston knew of what he spoke. He was a melancholy man, his wife suffered from chronic illness, and the couple buried 6 of their 10 children. Boston's sermon was based on the question in our opening verse, Ecclesiastes 7, verse 13.

Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? This does not refer to moral crookedness, but to crooked and twisted way providence falls out in a fallen world. Since God has cursed, or bent, the world, it is not transparent. We must take this seriously. The preacher tells us to consider, to reflect, to meditate and take to heart, the work of God. And the question is clearly rhetorical. If God has twisted it, no one can straighten it out.

Verse 14: In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other. We should enjoy the day of prosperity. There is no call to stoic resignation here. But we must realize that all the days, with all their features, fall out from the hand of God. It is foolish to think that on our good days, that all days will be wonderful, just as it is foolish to assume that in our darkness, all days will be miserable.

The point is that you do not know what a day will bring. God orders the days inscrutably so that a man may not find out anything that will be after him. The

future is not known, and it is not knowable. Even to futurists or futurologists or whatever they call themselves. I've noticed that occasionally a news show will have a commentator on whose profession is listed simply as futurist. I've also noticed that no one has ever heard of these people. I've also noticed that they are not billionaires. So I assume they really have next to no insight into the future. And the reason is the same reason that palm-readers don't live in exclusive gated communities: the future is unknowable. And men make fools of themselves trying to predict it. They forget how the days of prosperity and adversity are served up.

But if this apparently random ordering of prosperity and adversity is exasperating, the next example of crookedness in providence is just plain heart-breaking. Verse 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. The crisis here is real and should not be minimized. The OT is full of promises of long life for obedience (Ex 20, Dt.4). The Scriptures of Israel proclaim this is a moral universe run by a just and good God, and that He punishes evil and blesses righteousness.

Yet, Solomon, like all of us, sees grievous counterexamples. If we were to count them, they would be too numerous to count. And to make us feel the force of this anomaly he emphasizes the continual, pervasive, nature of the contrast: The righteous man perishes IN HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS. The wicked man lives long IN HIS EVILDOING. And the wisdom Solomon offers here in vv.16 through 18 is difficult to grasp. On first reading he seems to be saying something like seek a kind of pagan moderation. Don't be overly righteous and don't be overly wicked. Be moderate in religion and moderate in evil. Since behavior is not related to life-span – the righteous die young, and the wicked live long – keep a foot in both camps and don't be too extreme. Indeed, this is how a good number of commentators read the preacher here.

As obvious as this appears, it won't work, and as we look at what I take to be the correct interpretation, we'll see why. Overly righteous refers to a kind of rigorous, super-righteousness. It is rooted in the cause and effect theology that says: If I am just righteous enough then maybe I can gain a long life. Since God has promised long-life to righteous behavior some would be tempted to cash in on the promise. Solomon is saying that no matter how righteous you become, you cannot unbend the providence of God, you cannot take the crook out of the lot.

Long-life may be CORRELATED to obedience, but it is not BOUND to it. It is still a gift of God's kindness and He never relinquishes His sovereign freedom to our performance. Thus, he says at the end of v.16: and do not make yourself too wise. Here we can see that he is being ironic. Solomon is well aware of the limitations of wisdom in a vaporous world. He does not think people can be too wise. He is saying: to live in this strict behavior-consequence manner is, at the end of v.16, to destroy yourself.

The parallel in v.17 is: be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. He is not saying be a little wicked. In v.20 he says all men are sinners, and in v.29 he will say they have sought out MANY devices. He doesn't think people are, or can be, just a little wicked. He is saying don't reason as follows: well, since wicked men can live long in their wickedness, I might as well give full range to my wicked tendencies. I might as well be overly wicked. To live this way is to be a fool. Here, it turns out that he thinks there is some sort of correlation between behavior and life-span. At the end of v.17 he says: why should you die before your time? In other words, righteousness, especially super-rigorous righteousness, may not lead to a long-life, but giving full-vent to wickedness will often, not always, but often, shorten one's life.

He combines both pieces of advice in v.18: it is good that you should take hold of this and from that withhold not your hand. Meaning take hold of the advice in v.16 and don't withhold your hand from the advice in v.17 either. Lay hold of these two things: don't think you can buy a long life with your super-righteousness, yet don't be so foolish as to think you can give full range to wickedness either. The one who fears God, he says at the end of v.18, comes forth with both of them. The God-fearer grasps both of these riddles. Fearing God is the summary of how we are to live in a crooked world.

II. Wisdom and Its Limitations

Our second point is wisdom and its limitations. Verse 19: Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Wisdom is more powerful than political or military might, but as we will see, it is a power manifested through weakness.

The first thing wisdom affirms in a crooked world is in v.20: surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. The only NT citation of Ecclesiastes comes from this verse. Paul cites it in Romans 3. And the Preacher gives an example of this universal sinfulness which is of great relevance to the church in v. 21: do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Don't be the type of person who is always worried about what others are saying about you. Eventually, you'll hear stuff you don't want to hear. Pascal darkly observed: if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world. We need to have thick skin and tender hearts. That is the key to maturity.

And if we know our own tongues, our own uncharitable speech and sinfulness, this is made easier. Thus, in v. 22 the preacher says: your heart knows how many times you yourself have cursed others. This is a sad, but tragic fact. With blunt realism the Preacher says: how about a little self-knowledge? Don't worry about what others say about you; worry about what you have said about others.

We are to resolve, as Jonathan Edwards did, to “never say anything at all against anybody that is not agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor, to the love of mankind, and agreeable to the lowest humility and the Golden Rule.”

We see the severe limits of wisdom, in v.23: All this I have tested by wisdom. Solomon tests all this. He said “I will be wise,” but it was far from him. Here he is seeking a kind of comprehensive wisdom which the providence of God and the sinful mystery of men, simply will not allow. Verse 24: That which has been, or that which is, is far off and deep, very, very deep. Who can find it out? This is, or should be, the epitaph of every philosopher. The nature of the world and men is elusive. It’s like looking out over an ocean, it’s horizontally too far and vertically way too deep to fathom. People who think they have life and people wired are fools. They have no sense of what they are up against.

Pascal in his famous *Pensees* (thoughts, fragments) said this: when I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity that lies before and after it, when I consider the little space I see and I fill, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I rest frightened and astonished, for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there. Who put me here? Why now rather than then? Futurists never talk like this. Neither do fools in their hubris. The principal thing wisdom must learn is its deep limitations.

III. Seeking and Finding

Our third point is seeking and finding. The preacher, chastened as he is, even disheartened, is not ready to give up the quest. In v.25 he says: I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things. This last phrase, the scheme of things, or the sum of things, again tells us Solomon is looking for comprehensive wisdom in a bent world. It’s like he’s saying: let me bang my head against the wall for you a bit more. I won’t move the wall, but the little pieces of plaster that fall off might be of value to you. Here he wants to know, as the end of v.25 asserts, the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that it madness. In other words, as a central mystery of the scheme of things, he wants to grasp the nature of human evil.

Now, he doesn’t find what he’s looking for, but he does find four things in his quest. First, in v.26, he finds something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. The woman here may be an actual woman Solomon encountered, or she may be a composite picture of the personified woman named Folly in Proverbs chapters 1-9. (esp ch 9) So either this particular woman, or folly itself, is a snare, a trap, a net. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. To escape this Woman Folly, we must live to please God.

The second thing that the Preacher found is in v.27. Behold, this is what I found, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul sought repeatedly, but I have not found. He found that as he counted things up and weighed them to figure out the scheme of things, that he couldn't find it. Providence is a calculus test and he only has arithmetic at his disposal. But he does mention two more things he does find.

The third thing he found is in the middle of v.28: One man in a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Now, the NIV adds the words upright before man and woman. So they take the verse, as many do, to mean that Solomon is saying I found one upright man in a thousand, but no upright women. So you can add misogyny to Solomon's list of sins. And many do at this point. Even if that is what he means, it would only be his own experience. He had a thousand women (700 wives and 300 concubines) and it's not surprising that he didn't find much righteousness there. He thinks all people, men included, are sinners who, as v.29 will say, sought out MANY devices. So, I don't think he is saying that he found one upright man in a thousand, and no upright woman in a thousand.

Here, by the language of "finding" a man or a woman, he means understanding them. When the Preacher says he's "found" something it means he's come to understand it. But people, like providence, are mysterious and ungraspable. Fallen people even more so. The Preacher's point is that maybe he can understand one man in a thousand; the opposite sex is a total mystery.

Finally, the fourth thing he found is in v.29. And here he has found something he can positively affirm. Folly is a bitter trap, the scheme of things is hidden, sinful men and women are riddles, but this he knows: See, this ALONE I have found, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many schemes. This is a reference back to Genesis 1. God made man good, man has corrupted himself. It's important to see that the preacher has no problem asserting v.13 – God has bent the world – and v.29 – God made men good, and THEY have twisted themselves, and thus the world. God is sovereign, and He has imposed a curse, but God is not the author of sin. The state of the world is here laid at the feet of man for the first time in the book. Notice also the play on words here. He sought for the SCHEME of things in v. 25 and 27, and all he found is that man is a SCHEMER.

So wisdom, in all its impotence, limping Jacob-like through the world, has discovered two key truths. First, God is inscrutably sovereign over the bent world. And second, Man has twisted himself and mangled God's good creation. This cannot be remedied apart from God Himself becoming the second Man, the new Adam, in Jesus Christ. It will take the crookedness of the cross to unbend the world. But even here, in the NC, we do not grasp the things Solomon is seeking to grasp. We grasp Jesus Christ in whom, and notice this, in whom are HIDDEN, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Wisdom and knowledge remain hidden, they need to be dug out and unearthed. But as God's people in the NC we need to DIG in the right place. Dig for wisdom where God has said he's hidden it: In Jesus Christ. Become a student of His Word. Seek the scheme of His revealed Word, not the scheme of a twisted world. For the secret things belong to the Lord, the things that are revealed are for us and our children.

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