

Is Wisdom Beyond Our Reach?

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. But please do keep that passage open in front of you. Ecclesiastes is a complex book, isn't it? As we've been going through the last seven chapters, I've occasionally found it quite hard work trying to figure it out and put a sermon together.

Turns out the first seven and a half chapters were absolute child's play. Okay, let me just say right off the bat, I imagine some of you, maybe most of you, will have been confused or uncomfortable or maybe even angry about some of the verses we just read there. Maybe particularly verse 28. What's that saying? Well, we need to do some work before we get there. But let me just tell you right away that it's not a great translation. Okay, those are not the words of the teacher. Those are the words of the NIV. But we'll get there in due course, and we will deal with it, and we will deal with it hopefully helpfully.

But for now, let us follow the teacher's course through this chapter and come back to the beginning of our reading. Ecclesiastes is complicated because life is complicated, isn't it?

Remember, last week the teacher was showing us what was good to do during the few days of the life. But as is so often the case, his advice comes with a caveat. Right? Life is not simple.

It doesn't break down into neat little rules that you can follow and everything will go well for you. What's so helpful about Ecclesiastes is that the teacher is dealing with life as it really is, not as we wish it would be.

[1 : 5 7] And life is complicated, so a complex life the teacher rightly responds to with complex wisdom. There are lots of things going on here that we need to try and keep in our minds at the same time. If it could be boiled down to a single sentence, that's what the teacher would have done.

But he's given us a whole book of it. So you can do what is good, and you should do what is good. That's what we saw last week. But, verse 15, don't think that will lead to a long life.

Who is it that lives long and prospers in the world? Well, not always the righteous, and not never the wicked.

That's what the teacher sees, and that's definitely true, isn't it? How many lives of kind and caring people, of young children, have we seen cruelly cut short?

While the lives of people who are unquestionably more wicked seem to go on and on and on. The teacher sees them both. He acknowledges them both, and so he has some wisdom to share with us off the back of it.

[3 : 1 7] Verse 16, Do not be over righteous, neither be over wise. What?

If you're like me, right, you'll have done a double take there. Don't be too righteous? Are you sure? Verse 17 sounds fine, doesn't it?

Don't be over wicked, and do not be a fool. Good, we can get on board with that, but what do we do with verse 16? I think the key is in the words, over.

And we can start to understand what the teacher is saying when we get through to verse 18. Verse 18, It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other.

Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. If we want to understand how to live well, we need to fear God.

[4 : 26] Kind of the overall message of all the wisdom books in the Bible. And fearing God means relating rightly to Him. Fearing God means fundamentally knowing He is your creator and He is your redeemer.

Knowing He is your creator and your redeemer, right? Two fundamental truths of the Christian life is that we are creatures and we are sinners.

We are creatures and we are sinners. When we fear God, we rightly remember those two things. So what does an over-righteous life look like? What's the teacher telling us to avoid?

Well, an over-righteous life is obviously one that tries to do goods, isn't it? But I think what the teacher has in mind here is doing goods while forgetting that we are creatures and that we are sinners.

The Pharisees are the classic biblical example of this, aren't they? We met them this morning on the passage, this morning's passage on the banks of the River Jordan.

[5 : 47] They didn't fear God and so they forgot they were sinners. They thought by their righteous acts they could become something that by nature they are not.

Sinful people, no matter how much good we do, cannot make ourselves right with God and we cannot, we can still come up with our own pharisaical little rules, can't we?

We start measuring our holiness, our religious performance with metrics we can track. I'm doing good this week because maybe because I've got through my daily Bible readings.

A good thing to do but it's not going to make you good, is it? You're not more righteous at the end of the week because of it. You're either unrighteous on your own merit or you are righteous in Christ.

Nothing we do changes that status but we quickly forget that, don't we? When we don't fear God, we forget that we are sinners and so we assess our righteousness by measuring ourself up against man-made rules.

[7 : 04] That was the Pharisee's attitude and there's often a little bit of that that lingers in us. But I wonder if we have a hard time remembering we're creatures as much as remembering we're sinners.

There's an infinite number of good things to do, isn't there? Righteous things to do. How many of them must you do?

God requires that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before our God. He's not giving you an unending list of things to do this week that you must get through.

Who is it that gives us the unending list of things we must get through this week? It's ourselves, isn't it? We put that pressure on ourselves.

But we are creatures with limited time and with limited energy. An over-righteous person does not fear God and so forgets that they are a creature.

[8 : 30] God does not require more of you than He has given you time and strength to do in a week. And when we demand more of ourselves than God has given us the strength to do, what happens?

End of verse 16. We destroy ourselves, don't we? A couple of weeks back, I wasn't very well, but I demanded of myself more than my body had to give.

I demanded of myself more than my body had to give. I wonder if that's you on a weekly basis. I destroyed myself because I expected more righteous deeds, things that were good to do, but I expected myself to get through more of them than God had actually given me the strength in that week to do.

That when we learn to fear God, we learn that we are sinners and we are creatures.

That is what the teacher wants us to remember, I think, in calling us not to be over-righteous. Don't be over-wise. You are limited.

[9 : 59] But, right, before you go running on thinking the teacher's given license to just sit back and chill on the sofa all week, don't be over-wicked.

Do not be a fool. What's he saying? Hold life in the balance. That is what it means to fear God. You were created and redeemed for good works.

But you are also a finite creature who will fail. You are created for good works, but you are a finite creature who will always fail. So, fear God by going to neither extreme.

Don't think you can sit back and do nothing. Do what is good. Build healthy habits. Okay, but don't live slavishly by them and don't demand more of yourself than God has given you the time to do.

The one who fears God verse 18. The one who fears God holds both of these things in their hands. That is wise living.

[11 : 08] Recognizing our limits. Recognizing wisdom's limits. There is a limit to what wisdom can do for you.

It's what the teachers found out on his great search. I think all the way back in verse 13 of chapter 1, he said, I'm going to try everything by wisdom. And here's what he's finding as we get near the end.

Wisdom cannot do it all for you. The teachers acquired wisdom beyond that of anyone before him. But, verse 20, no one on earth is righteous.

No one does what is right and never sins. The wisest man in all the world, he's not righteous, is he?

Wisdom, your wisdom, won't save you. Remember that. Don't be over-righteous. Don't be over-wicked.

[12 : 11] But rather, fear God. Remember your purpose. But also remember your limitations. That's the teacher's first observation, I think, this evening. Remember the limitations of wisdom.

But again, life is complicated, isn't it? So wisdom is complicated. Don't think that means wisdom is not important. Wisdom has its limitations.

Wisdom won't save you. But secondly, we are nevertheless reminded of the importance of wisdom. Tucked in into this section of wisdom's limitations is verse 19, which emphasizes how great wisdom is.

Right? Well, wisdom's a really good thing. Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. Wisdom gives us strength.

It's the obvious message there, isn't it? What does wisdom give us the strength to do? Well, many things. But two things, I think, that the teacher highlights in the following verses.

[13 : 28] wisdom gives us the strength to forgive others. And wisdom gives us the strength to resist temptation.

Wisdom gives us the strength to forgive others and resist temptation. Two things, actually, we saw in the Lord's Prayer this morning, didn't we? Wisdom won't save you, but it will help you live life well.

Wisdom is still a good thing and I think, again, right, verse 20 is the key. It's the key to us knowing our limitations.

It's also the key to us knowing wisdom's importance. Because knowing we are not righteous will actually help us live life well.

G.K. Chesterton, he was a very well-known Christian writer, an apologist in the late 19th, early 20th century. He was very well-known and in 1908, the Times newspaper asked a few authors to contribute on the topic What's Wrong With The World?

[14 : 47] What's Wrong With The World? I wonder how you would answer that question. He asked a few different well-known writers to all submit their answers and G.K. Chesterton's was the briefest response.

He wrote, Dear Sirs, I am. Yours sincerely, G.K. Chesterton.

What's Wrong With The World? I am. Because there is no one who is righteous. Not anyone else and not me.

He was not righteous. He knew he was part of the problem we see in the world. And when we recognize that, it helps us to live graciously towards others, doesn't it?

Wisdom gives us the strength to forgive others the sins they commit against us because wisdom teaches us that actually we are no better than they are.

[15 : 54] The teacher gives a really simple but brilliant illustration of it in verse 21 and 22. I'm betting every one of us here has been hurt by something someone else has said, by something they've overheard by a bit of gossip they've caught wind of.

People gossip and slander, don't they? And sometimes we are the object of the gossip and the slander. And it can really hurt, can't it?

We want people to speak well of us. We want people to think well of us. Words hurt, but how do we react? How should we react? Well, the teacher says, verse 21, don't pay attention to it.

Ignore it. But look at his reason for ignoring it in verse 22. He doesn't say ignore it because that's the best way to just avoid the pain. He says ignore it because if you think about it, if you actually stop and think about it, what have you said about other people?

What have you said about other people that you would be horrified if they hurt?

[17 : 19] Let's dig a little deeper, actually, the teacher says. What have you thought? Maybe it's not quite made it to the tip of your tongue, but what have you thought in your heart about other people?

Maybe you can even just take a look a little bit around this room and ask yourself, how many people in here have I thought poorly of? How many people in this room have I actually talked behind their backs?

How often have I said or thought something about someone I would never dare say to their face? The answer for all of us is an awful lot, isn't it?

Remember, we are not righteous, and remembering we are not righteous will help us be more gracious and forgiving towards others.

Because while we recognize that we might not like what they say, we're not actually any better ourselves. That's not the only good response to gossip and slander, but it's the response the teacher wants us to go away with.

[18 : 43] The wise person goes, well, yeah, that's not very nice, but I suppose I've said worse, and I've definitely thought worse. Because wisdom, wisdom is important because wisdom knows our own limitations.

Wisdom knows our lack of righteousness, and so wisdom gives us the strength to be gracious to others when otherwise we might react in anger or tears.

And wisdom also gives us the strength, I think we see, to resist temptation. Verse 26, I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains.

The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. What we have here in verse 26, I think, is the appearance of woman folly.

If you just look up to the last word of verse 25 there, right, folly is introduced, and then here comes the personification of temptation. Why is she a woman?

[20 : 06] I think simply from the perspective of a man, women are attractive, and temptation is attractive, and wisdom is attractive.

I think what we see here is the teacher brings us back to Proverbs 7 and 8, if you want a fuller picture. that's where we kind of meet the full picture of woman folly.

In Proverbs 7, Solomon sees woman folly trying to lure in the young man, calling out for his attention. And then in chapter 8, wisdom calls out too for the young man's attention.

And wisdom too is personified as a woman. Why? Because both of these, in the eyes of the man who is writing it, are potentially attractive.

There's something endearing, alluring about them. But here in Ecclesiastes 7, we only have woman folly appear on the scene, don't we?

[21 : 26] And how do we resist the calls of folly? By pleasing God, by fearing the Lord, by living in wisdom.

When we are wise, we have the strength to resist temptation. Why? Because wise living is godly living. God is the one who gives us the strength to resist temptation when it comes calling.

Again, wisdom is having the self-awareness to realize our own weakness, our sin, and so throw ourselves onto God for help. To admit that we don't have the answers, and we need God's help to show wisdom on our part.

Calvin famously called it learned ignorance. Wisdom is learning our limitations. Learning our limitations.

Fearing God, pleasing God, that is the key to wise living, and that is the key to resisting temptation's lures. Wisdom won't save you, but living life well absolutely means living wisely.

[22 : 53] It will give us the strength to be gracious to others and the strength to resist temptation's call. But there's one last thing the teacher discovers here in chapter 7.

And it brings us to the end of the chapter as the teacher looks desperately for wisdom, but finds only folly. If you look back to verse 23, you'll see the teacher sat out on a quest for wisdom.

He wants to find wisdom. I think that'll be key for the next few verses. I turned my mind to understand, to investigate, and search out wisdom and the scheme of things.

And then he says in verse 27, look, this is what I discovered. I set out to find wisdom, this is what I discovered. Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things while I was still searching but not finding.

I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found. God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.

[24 : 13] We get quite a few kind of, what did he just say? Verses in Ecclesiastes, don't we? As the teacher often brings about hard-hitting truths in hard-hitting ways.

We saw one of them in verse 16. Makes you stop and go, huh? What did he just say? But I would understand if that's not the verse that stuck with you when we first read this passage.

Verse 28 in the NIV, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. Right, so if you want a chance of being upright, better be a man.

Let me be absolutely clear that that is not what this verse is saying at all. Let me also be clear that if I thought that's what this verse was saying, I would say it.

Even when the Bible is uncomfortable and politically incorrect, it is not my job to explain it away. It is my job to preach it as it is, whether we like what it says or not.

[25 : 28] But here in Ecclesiastes 7, the Word of God is actually much less uncomfortable, although maybe slightly more confusing, than the NIV makes it sound.

Let me just stress again at this point, Bible translators have a really hard job. It's a bit like being on the AV team at the back. 99.9% of the time you get completely ignored, don't you?

And then a slide doesn't change quite when it's meant to, and this sea of heads swivels and stares. Go and thank them after the service. They do a great job.

But the point there is like most of the time we don't mention translations, do we? Because they do a good job. And we've not really mentioned it since verse 2 of chapter 1, because it's been doing a good job.

In Ecclesiastes 7, 28, however, it's not really a shocking verse, it is a bit of a shocking translation. Let me just read you, word for words, a translation of the Hebrew.

[26 : 34] Hebrew. One person among a thousand I found, and a woman among them there was not. Would you say that again?

One person among a thousand I found, and a woman among them there was not. A few things to note is that there is no mention of uprightness at all in the Hebrew.

The word isn't in the verse. You can see that if you're looking at an ESV. You can flick to one on your phone if you want to. And that makes sense, doesn't it? Because what's the teacher found in verse 20?

There is no one who is righteous. There is no one who is upright. None. Zero. No men. No women. No one is upright and your chances don't improve according to your gender.

Second thing I noticed, which I think is really key. I've been kind of wrestling with this over the last week. One person among a thousand I found, and a woman among them there was not.

[27 : 50] He's not looking for uprightness and he's not contrasting men and women. There's a specific word for men, males. That's ish.

And then there's the more general, all-encompassing word for mankind, which is adam. It's used, the latter is the one that's used in verse 28.

It's the same one that's used in verse 20 to say that there is no one. Right? There are zero adams who are upright. The teacher finds one person in his search amongst all people.

So hopefully that's clarified what the teacher isn't saying, but what on earth is the teacher saying? Right? It's a really tricky verse to understand.

Hence why translators start adding their own interpretations to it. They do it because they want to help people understand the text, even when they sometimes get it wrong. Here's what I think is going on here.

[29 : 00] Okay? The teacher is searching for wisdom, isn't he? That's what he's on the lookout for. That's what he's trying to find.

But what he finds in verse 26 is people led astray by temptation. Temptation personified as a woman.

So maybe we start thinking temptation's the problem. It's when temptation comes knocking at our door that we start going astray.

And if temptation just stayed away, actually we'd be all right. But then he goes searching among a thousand people and he only finds one.

In his search for wisdom, he only finds one person and here's the kicker, there's not a woman among them all. There is not, how's women being personified earlier?

[30 : 04] Temptation. There is no temptation anywhere nearby here. And I think the reason he uses those words is to remind us of an age-old problem.

It's Adam and a woman. Adam and a woman. What happens when Adam sins in the garden?

He doesn't go, oh, I'm really sinful, does he? He goes, it was her. it was the woman.

What's the teacher saying in Ecclesiastes? No one's upright and there's no woman around to blame. You can't say, this isn't my fault.

When we go wondering, when our lack of wisdom is exposed, we have no scope to go and say, well, it was temptation's fault.

[31 : 13] It was someone else's fault. They made me do it. What the teacher finds, verse 29, is that God created man upright, but they have gone, again, the words there, Adam, God created Adam upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.

What happens when temptation doesn't come knocking on your door? You go knocking on temptation's door. We're the ones that go and find out the ways to be led astray into sin.

The teacher wants us to know that we can't blame other people for our lack of uprightness. But he does find one person, doesn't he?

He does find one person. He does find one person with wisdom. I think what we see in the Old Testament, and what we can pick up from Ecclesiastes 7 as well, where does wisdom come from?

Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. The man who pleases God will escape temptation. If you want wisdom, it only comes from God.

[32 : 44] The one wise man who was given wisdom like no other in the Old Testament was given the wisdom, wasn't he?

it was a gift from God, because no one is upright. No one does what is right. And so, if you want the wisdom to live life well, what do we do?

It's what James says in his letter, isn't it? Go and ask God for the wisdom. Ask God and he will give it to you. but there is a wisdom beyond the ability to live life well that God has already given to us, isn't there?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2 that the wisdom of God has come that we might be redeemed.

Our wisdom won't save us. That's what the teacher wants you to know. But the wisdom given by God, wisdom incarnate, he has already given us in order to save the sinners who on our own are so utterly helpless, who on our own go astray time and time again, who on our own go knocking on temptation's door.

[34 : 17] To us who have failed time and time again, God has given us wisdom and self in the person of Jesus Christ, that we who are not righteous, that we who will never be righteous, might become the righteousness of God.

Pray that God would give you wisdom to live life well, but pray more than anything else that you would know the wisdom of God who came in the person of Jesus Christ.

Because then and only then can we start living life as it was meant to be lived. And only then can we grow in the wisdom from God that we need if we want to make the most of life under the sun.

Let me pray as we close up. Amen.