

**“Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.”**  
—*Ecclesiastes 7:29 (NASB)*

Pride is rightly recognized as the chief of all vices. As the Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock stated, **“Pride is self-contending with God for preeminence,”** and there can hardly be anything more evil than that. Nowhere is this quest for preeminence more evident in human history than in Genesis 3—in the account of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. It began with the serpent’s claim to Eve that God’s word regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was unclear: “Did God actually say . . . ?” (Gen 3:1b). It crept further with the serpent’s assertion that God’s word about the tree’s fruit was untrustworthy: “You will not surely die!” (3:4–5). In both cases, the serpent’s objective was to introduce *doubt* into the mind of Eve and invite her *to think independently* of God’s revelation—to submit God’s word to her own judgment of what is right and wrong. Although God’s command and warning were unambiguous (see 2:16–17), the serpent tempted Eve with a completely different worldview—one in which the indicatives and imperatives of God would be subjected to skeptical, autonomous human reasoning. It was the serpent’s invitation to join him on “a quest for moral and epistemological autonomy” (Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 63). Summarizing this assault Eve’s trust in God’s word, Carl Trueman writes,

Both of the serpent’s approaches, then, call into doubt the trustworthiness of God, first by the doubting of his word and second by the doubting of the God who speaks the word. In both cases, it is the words spoken that form the focus of the attack; yet it is ultimately the integrity of the one who speaks, God himself, which is undermined. (“The God of Unconditional Promise,” 181)

Eve accepted the invitation, and Adam joined in: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

Adam and Eve’s original sin set the course for humanity in different ways. One of those ways was to introduce for all their progeny the unrelenting quest for “moral and epistemological autonomy.” From Genesis 3 onward, man is naturally bent on determining his *own* good, finding his *own* solutions, establishing his *own* righteousness, and securing his *own* salvation. In short, man’s bent is toward pride—of elevating himself while downplaying his need for God. As John MacArthur states,

Now nothing is more natural to fallen human beings than pride. Pride, frankly, is the defining sin of fallenness. If you want to get in touch with what it means to be fallen, it means to be self-centered. Self-love, self-satisfaction, self-promotion, self-exaltation, self-fulfillment, those are the passions of a fallen heart. (“The Mark of True Greatness, Part 1,” sermon on Luke 9:46–48)

This problem of pride becomes the focus of Solomon’s deliberations in Ecclesiastes 7:15–29. In particular, Solomon’s depiction of this sin is not so much about man’s skepticism in response to the *revealed* will of God in His word, although that certainly is a problem. Rather, it is about man’s moral and epistemological independence with respect to the *mysterious* will of God—the will of God made manifest only through His providence.

The context for these deliberations is established by the closing words of the previous section in the book, where Solomon stated, “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” (Eccl 7:13–14). What is Solomon’s point? There are certain circumstances that God “has bent” (v. 13); He sends both “the day of prosperity” and “the day of adversity” to righteous men. But how then, are righteous men to respond? Solomon’s focus in 7:15–29 is now on that response, and his basic exhortation is simple: **Righteous man, resist pride, and know your limits.**

## I. There Are Crooked Things You Cannot Straighten (7:15–18)

The first segment of Solomon's instruction has been one of the most debated sections in the entire book. In particular, vv. 16–17 read, **"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?"** Of these words Walter Kaiser writes, "Few verses in Ecclesiastes are more susceptible to incorrect interpretations than 7:16–18" (*Coping with Change*, 137). Some of the proposed interpretations include:

- *The Cynic's Logic* – the Preacher here sets aside biblical faith and contemplates life independent of God; his words don't belong in the mouth of the one who fears God.
- *The Golden Mean* – the Preacher advocates moral moderation—aiming for balance between righteousness and wickedness. This view is particularly common among those who believe Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon or at any point around his time. Instead, it was written much later, in the era of the great Greek philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, and Zeno.
- *A Warning against Fanaticism* – the Preacher counsels his readers to avoid extremism in the pursuit of perfection, especially since striving too hard takes a toll physically, emotionally, and spiritually, to the extent that it can result in a person's "ruin" (v. 16).
- *A Warning against Self-Righteousness* – the Preacher warns about the temptation to see oneself as righteous and wise in one's "own eyes" (cf. Proverbs 3:7), to pass oneself off as more righteous than one genuinely is, and thus, to live a life of hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

Ultimately, the correct interpretation of verses 16–17 can only be achieved when they are interpreted in harmony with the two verses that surround them—verses 15 and 18: **"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 . . . 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."** When these verses are considered, the following structure appears:

- A. **A Disturbing Reality Observed (7:15).** In v. 15, Solomon makes an assertion based on an expansive investigation of life. What he saw was an exception to **"the law of retribution"** that was central to the Mosaic Law and to traditional wisdom (e.g., Deut 5:33; 30:17–18; Prov 10:27). Solomon observed that God has "bent" certain things (remember 7:13)—that He sends both "the day of prosperity" and "the day of adversity" upon the righteous man (remember v. 14)—to such an extent that sometimes, the righteous man dies an early death even while the wicked man lives on (v. 15). Wayne Bridle sums it up well: *"In spite of their righteous character, some men die young. And in spite of their wickedness, some evil men live long, prosperous lives. . . . Righteousness does not necessarily bring prosperity, and wickedness does not necessarily bring suffering and death"* ("Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15–18," 308–309). This is not an easy truth to stomach. It is problematic, as is echoed by the testimony of the psalmist Asaph in Psalm 73.
- B. **A Predictable Reaction Denounced (7:16–17).** Now we come to Solomon's difficult words, but they make better sense when viewed as a warning about how *not* to respond to the disturbing reality of v. 15. He writes, **"Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? (v. 16).** Solomon first tackles the problem of trying to *subvert* the reality of v. 15. Faced with the enigma of adversity, men can easily think, "If I just strive harder and do better, I can defy the exceptions, avert adversity, and extend my life. I need to figure out what's wrong with me and correct it, and then the adversity will end." Solomon thus admonishes those with a high view of their own ability, who place confidence in their own strength, and who determine to outrun death, by insisting that no matter how hard one tries, he cannot straighten what God has bent. In fact, he'll only make things worse, and his life will end in disappointment.

Solomon's second warning is against trying to *take advantage of* the reality of v. 15. He writes, **"Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time?" (v. 17).** In light of the inescapability of adversity, men can also easily fall into the trap of thinking, "Since the righteous can die young, and the wicked can live long, what does it matter? My sin won't kill me; it makes no difference. God is arbitrary. Let me at least live for pleasure." Thus, Solomon's counsel in v. 17 is for those with an

opportunistic, fatalistic view of the exceptions in life, who believe that one's moral choices don't matter. A plunge into recklessness will not turn out for the good, for eventually the law or retribution will catch up.

- C. **A Proper Response Prescribed (7:18).** Solomon invites his readers to approach the enigma of v. 15 differently than the two common responses he just described in vv. 16–17: **“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.”** Solomon wants his readers to grasp the dangers of both *self-confidence* (v. 16) and *fatalism* (v. 17). Both will lead to disaster. In their place, Solomon prescribes a different response: ***the fear of God***. Charles Bridges aptly defines this “fear of God” as “that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law” (*Exposition of Proverbs*, 3–4).

Therefore, in response to the reality that the righteous can suffer shocking adversity in life and sometimes even die untimely deaths, one is to “fear God” but putting complete confidence *in Him*. To fear God is to acknowledge that He is God, and we are not—that only He is free, and we have limits. To fear God is to refuse to try to subvert or take advantage of His mysterious providence, and instead to humble ourselves under His sovereign, wise, and upright purposes.

## II. There Is a Righteous Perfection You Cannot Claim (7:19–22)

Even though only *the fear of God*—not wisdom—can survive the enigma described in v. 15, Solomon does not write off wisdom’s usefulness. He begins the next segment of his teaching by briefly reminding his readers of wisdom’s enduring value. Indeed, **“wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city” (v. 19)**. Nonetheless, Solomon quickly returns to his emphasis on *limitations*. Here Solomon emphasizes that as beneficial as wisdom is, it cannot erase the stark reality of *total or universal depravity*: **“Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (v. 20)**. Solomon repeats here what is emphasized unambiguously throughout Scripture—that *there is no one innocent of sin* (e.g., Psalm 14:1, 3; 1 Kings 8:46; Romans 3:10).

To illustrate this to his readers, Solomon points to the sins of *the tongue*—one of the most widespread and destructive categories of sin known to man: **“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” (vv. 21–22)**. The apostle James points out this same reality (James 3:2ff). In essence, Solomon says, “Stop being offended when others slander you. You yourself have slandered countless times yourself.” There is no one who does good and never sins.

## III. There Are Transcendent Mysteries You Cannot Explain (7:23–26)

The third limitation that Solomon emphasizes relates to the ability to explain “mysteries.” Once again, he focuses on man’s propensity to want to pry back the curtain, peer into the darkness, and find a satisfactory explanation to God’s “bent” providence in his own life. Solomon describes how he himself sought for a time to subvert these limits, but he confesses now that the pursuit was a dead end: **“‘I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me” (v. 23)**. The unrevealed aspects of God’s will (particularly pertaining to the adversity of the righteous) are **“remote and exceedingly mysterious” (v. 24)**. He ends with a rhetorical question: **“Who can discover it?”** The answer is obvious. If Solomon can’t, no one can.

Even though Solomon “surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:30), he still sought *more*. The verbs **“to know,” “to investigate,” and “to seek” (v. 25)** emphasize his intellectual quest into and consideration of life’s enigmas from all perspectives. As one commentator observes, “The image conjured up for us is that of a merchant or accountant poring over the documents, trying to give an account of every item, perhaps to assign everything to one side or the other of the ledger and then to tally it all up in order to arrive at the balance” (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 271). Despite the striving, the effort was fruitless.

Like verses 16–17, 7:26 has been the source of considerable disagreement, specifically as it relates to the identity of **“the woman.”** It could refer to *a literal harlot*—the one Solomon warns his son about in Proverbs 5

and 7. But such an interpretation doesn't fit the context. More likely it refers to a *figurative harlot*—the personification of *folly* that Solomon describes in Proverbs 9:13–18. This fits Solomon's contextual contrast between "wisdom" and "folly." Ultimately, Solomon's efforts to solve life's enigmas brought him to the threshold of madness—to the doorstep of Madam Folly's home—and he barely escaped her snares. He learned there were limits to man's ability to explain life's adversities.

#### IV. There Is a Depraved Disposition You Cannot Deny (7:27–29)

Solomon brings his search for a wisdom that can answer all of life's mysteries to an end vv. 27–29. Although he does not find the knowledge that unlocks all of life's enigmas, he does arrive at one vital conclusion that is essential to humility: *God is righteous, and men are not*. Solomon states, **"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'** (vv. 27–28). The interplay in these two verses between what Solomon "has found" and what he "has not found" again highlights the limits of wisdom. To find a truly wise person among humanity is exceedingly difficult.

Why? The answer is found in the concluding verse, **"Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices"** (v. 29). Solomon reminds us once again of the opening chapters of Genesis. The futility that we experience in life is not by God's original design. He created man good and upright (cf. Gen 1:27, 31). It was man himself who chose his own way (Gen 3:6). In fact, there is a profound **play on words** in Ecclesiastes 7:29. In the previous verses, Solomon explained how he had dedicated himself "to seek wisdom and an explanation" (v. 25). He had put "one thing to another to find an explanation" (v. 27). He confessed "still seeking" even though he "had not found" (v. 28). But then he identifies the problem of humanity: "They have sought out many devices" (v. 29). The word for "devices" in v. 29 is related to the word "explanation" found in vv. 25 and 27. The fundamental problem of Adam and Eve, the fundamental problem of mankind, and the fundamental problem even of Solomon, was pride-fueled independence and the refusal to *trust God*. We all like sheep have gone astray—first and foremost, in our search for independence.

#### Hear the Preacher!

1. God's providential will is not a secret code that you can unlock with the right performance.
2. Fearing God is not an insurance policy against adversity or an untimely death.
3. Wisdom will provide many advantages in this world, but don't expect it to explain life's enigmas.
4. The fear of God—reverential faith—is not about having all the answers but trusting in His righteousness and wisdom, especially in adversity.
5. You need a Savior to atone for all your devices.

#### For Discussion

1. In 7:16–17, Solomon describes two *unacceptable* responses to the enigma of adversity suffered by the righteous (see 7:13–14, 15). In moments when you respond to adversity inappropriately, into which error do you fall—that of v. 16, or that of v. 17?
2. If God put a bend in the road and you had the opportunity to make it straight, would you?
3. Are you one who must always know the reasons *why* God sends certain circumstances your way? Are your prayers filled with constant questions? Do you harbor bitterness for His lack of answers to these questions?
4. Review Charles Bridges' definition of "the fear of God" (pg. 3 of these notes). Now in your own words, describe what it means to "fear God."
5. What are practical ways that a believer can cultivate the fear of God?
6. Sing through the hymn, "Whate'er My God Ordains Is Right" (*Hymns of Grace*, #66), and consider how its lyrics express some of the same truths about *trusting God* as Solomon does in Ecclesiastes 7:15–29.

**Audio, Video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** March 13, "Fear God, Honor the King" (Ecclesiastes 8:1–17)