

Reality and Redemption Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

If you're new, we're studying the book of Ecclesiastes.

- The Preacher is reflecting on life under the sun, **and in this text he talks more about the broken nature of the world which points us to our need for Jesus.**
- It's not an easy text. Greidanus, "This is one of those texts that causes preachers to pace in their studies asking 'what does it mean' and 'how do I preach it?'"
 - Most guys that I've followed did skip it!
 - Many sermons at about this point in Eccl seem to fizzle out.
 - **But let's not fizzle, let's sizzle.**
- Last week's passage and this week's passage both include a variety of topics and phrases from the first three chapters of Genesis: *naming, thorn bushes, beginning, work of God, good, cursing, man, woman*, the *results of the fall*, and concludes with "God made man upright..."
- So we are to **read this text in view of the whole redemptive story of Scripture.**
- **We live in a fallen world, but we have a redeemer! We have one who will reverse the curse and bring a new creation. [Pray]**

Have you ever looked at curved glass?

- It distorts your view of things, right?
- Perhaps you're riding a train, or your looking into a broken mirror ... your neck is extra-long ... your forehead extremely big... your chin goes forever low. (*Why the long face?*)
- A friend of mine says when he rides a particular train in London that the window curves around at eye level, and if he can turn his head a certain way, the glass makes him look bald!
 - He passes the time doing this little trick.
- I've had similar experiences looking into windows at certain angle, where it makes me look like I have hair! (when someone is sitting near me).
 - I used to have nice wavy hair... before my hair went on Spring break!
- Or perhaps, you've been to the carnival and they have the mirrors that make you look like you have gigantic muscles?

But these experiences do not reflect reality.

Ecclesiastes has no curved glass.

The preacher forces us to look **at life exactly the way it is.**

There's no funny business here – it's the harsh realities of life in a fallen world.

The world is under the curse, and consequently we see tsunamis, tornados, cancer, Global viruses, miscarriages, infertility, pain, broken dreams, broken vows, unstable jobs, orphans, blown tires, broken legs, leaky faucets, monthly bills, failed adoptions, chronic back pain, severed relationships, racism, bee stings, and abortions. And the death of loved ones.

That's life in a fallen world.

Ecclesiastes acknowledges the reality of life, and this close look into reality shows us why we need Christ's redeeming grace.

Here's what this passage helps us come face to face with:

- (1) The Death of the Righteous (15)
- (2) The Path of Real Godliness (16-18)
- (3) The Problem of Sin (19-28)
- (4) The Grace of Redemption (29)

#1: The Death of the Righteous (7:15)

In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, Wesley says, "Life is pain. Anybody that says different is selling something."

- Christianity is not trying to sell you something.
- It tells you the truth: **life does not always seem fair.**
- Life is filled with trouble and grief.

15: He declares, "I have seen everything" – as we say, "I have seen it all!"

- His observations include the fact that the **righteous** do not always prosper.
- **Righteous (simply defined): "The person who obeys God's Word."**
 - **The example of righteousness is Jesus.**
- The righteous do not always prosper in this life.
- In fact, sometimes they suffer and *even die young*.
- The length of your days is not always dependent on your spirituality.
- **Sometimes the wicked prosper:** "Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!" (Ps 37:7)

We don't believe in Karma, where **you get what you deserve.**

- Some functionally operate by it, even if they say that they don't believe it.
- If something bad happens, they assume they must have done something wrong.
- Or if something good happened, then they must have done something good.
- But not necessarily: Recall Job!
 - The most righteous man on earth suffers tremendously.
 - His terrible counselors suggested it was because he did something bad.
- Sometimes you will suffer even though you've been faithful.
 - **There are many stories of children and teenagers who are full of faith and are filled with integrity but have in a hospital with horrible illnesses.**
- If life is going well, don't assume you've earned it, but rather thank God for his grace.
- If life is going poorly, don't assume that God is punishing you. That may or may not be the case.

A. Some righteous people die too young (15b)

- There are many examples that probably come to mind (friends, family).
- There are examples in church history of great leaders (M'Cheyne).

- There are biblical examples: Abel, Naboth, Stephen, James.
- But the greatest example is the Lord Jesus, who died in his early thirties.

When we see a righteous man or woman die, young it is very sad.

We know to be absent in the body is to be present w/t Lord but we still grieve, don't we?

But as Christians, we don't grieve as those without hope. We cling to God's grace.

Consider the Scottish theologian Thomas Boston.

- He was a prolific writer as well as a faithful pastor of one church for twenty-five years
- But what stands out most is his perseverance through terribly sad sufferings.
- Ryken notes that he was "a melancholy man, prone to seasons of discouragement in the Christian life. He was often in poor health, even though he never missed his turn in the pulpit.
- His wife suffered from chronic illness of the body and perhaps also the mind. But perhaps the couple's greatest trial was the death of their children: **they lost six of their ten babies.**
- **He goes on, "After suffering such ... loss, many people would be tempted to accuse God of wrongdoing, or to abandon their faith, or at least to drop out of ministry for a while. But that is not what Thomas Boston did. He believed in the goodness as well as in the sovereignty of God. So rather than turning away from the Lord in his time of trial, he turned toward the Lord for help and comfort...."**
- One of the last things he prepared for publication before he died was a sermon on Ecclesiastes 7:13 called *The Crook in the Lot*.
- **He learned to trust in God's sovereignty and goodness in the midst of a broken and crooked world, and so must we.**
 - o That is the life of faith, isn't it?
 - o To trust in God when you don't have the answers?
 - o You will probably never have the answers, but you can trust in God's character: He is both sovereign and good.
 - o **Can you say like Job, "the Lord gives, the Lord takes away..." Blessed be...**
 - o **In the highlands and the heartache; in the shadow and in the sunlight..."**

B. Some wicked people live long (15c)

- Some prolong their lives in "evildoing."
- We think the wicked should die young, and that the godly should live full of days.
- This is certainly the case **some times.**
- Being foolish and doing evil all the time will get many killed early in life.
- But Qoheleth is saying, **there are exceptions.**

It's frustrating, it's sad, it's grievous.

A few years back, UNC was playing UK in the final 8, and the elders were trying to see me grow in sanctification so they scheduled an elders meeting during the game! I tried my best to ignore the score because I was recording it.... No phones, no computers, no radio on the way home... I parked the car in the garage, and was opening the door to go inside, when Joshua (the one kid who watches UK with me) – who was playing the Wii in the garage said to me, "Sad Papa."

- It totally deflated me.
- I watched the recording, and Luke Maye hit that final shot... I was indeed *a sad papa*.

Many things in life make us sad, and the death of the righteous is certainly one of them.

- But it's important to remember that while the wicked may live long and prosper sometimes, **their future is *not* bright.**
- Qoheleth is thinking just about this life – but this life is ***not*** all there is.
- We should live with **Psalm 73** always on our minds ... “then I discerned their end.”

Does it profit to be righteous? Yes!

- But it's not insurance that you won't die young. It doesn't mean you won't suffer.
- But it will pay off for eternity.
- We may be reviled and persecuted in this life; but we will be rewarded later! (**Mt 5:11-12**)

#2: The Path of Real Godliness (7:16-18)

James says there is **“true religion”** and there is **“religion that is worthless”** (Jam 1:26-27)

The Teacher wants us to know what **real godliness is and isn't.**

He says it's about **revering God, trusting God,** not being a self-righteous Pharisee.

16-17: Don't be **“overly righteous”** and don't be **“overly wicked.”** What!

- **“I like this church. We can all be just a little bit wicked”**
- **No! He is not advocating “wickedness in moderation”**

**He is saying the wicked person doesn't profit;
and the Pharisee doesn't profit.**

17: **“overly wicked.”** If you are overly wicked/foolish, **you may very well die young.**

- This verse is connected with **v 15** where Qoheleth says that the wicked **can** live a long, healthy life; **but here is the balance:** ***you should think twice before believing that wickedness gives an advantage; that it's the better path.***
- It's not. You may die young.
- **Think of the mobster, the drug lord, the gang member... All day, they think about doing evil.**
- Don't run with that crowd...

“overly righteous” The person who adds his/her rules to God's Word, and thinks these extra-biblical rules are equally authoritative.

**The Righteous obey God's Word;
The overly righteous add to God's word.**

- The overly-righteous person adds more rules to Scripture.
 - They create their own religion when they do that. Even though they may look very religious.
 - This involves trusting in obeying one's self-made religious system rather than in God's grace.
 - Kids who grow up in this often rebel all together against the real faith.
- **There's a difference in “righteous” and “overly righteous”**
 - The adjective **“overly”** is important.

“Why should you destroy yourself?”

- Do not think that rigorous, religious, self-righteousness actions will guard you against tragedy or that they will save you.
- Luther comes to mind. Tried everything...
- Don't wear yourself out thinking that your ultra-strict behavior is tying God's hands!
- Don't wear yourself out trusting in your own works/good behavior.
- Think of the person who keeps all the rules ... they are often the ones who get mad at God when things don't go their way. They think God owes them. He doesn't.

18: So what should we do: **Fear God**

“**Take hold of this**” and “**from that** withhold not your hand” — he is referring to his counsel in verses 16-17.

- He is saying “get this” — and walk between these extremes: fear God.
- Avoid self-righteousness and avoid wickedness.

Fearing God means...

- Stand in awe of his majesty.
- Depend on him.
- Walk in his word.
- Stand in awe of his forgiveness.

Don't go the route of **irreligious wickedness.**

Don't go the route of **religious self-righteousness.**

Take the narrow path: Stick to Jesus. Follow him and you'll avoid these extremes.

An illustration of this verse is the story of two sons in Luke 15

- One is irreligious – **he's overly wicked and leaves everything before coming home smelling like Cognac and pigs...**
- One is smug self-righteous guy – **“I've never broken any rules.”**
 - He's a religious score keeper.
 - He can't rejoice that his brother has come home.
 - He's condescending and smug.
 - He's angry at his Father's compassion because Pharisees don't like grace.
- Both need salvation.

Jesus is the picture of godliness: He was neither wicked nor a Pharisee.

What does it look like to humbly walk before God?

Look to Jesus. Grab hold of him in faith and follow him.

#3: The Problem of Sin (7:19-28)

We spend a lot of time trying to figure out the problem with the world, here it is.

Have you seen *Murder on the Orient Express*? There's a murder on the train. The Detective is trying to solve the mystery, and so he investigates everyone on the train (Like 12 people?). What does he find (spoiler!)? He discovers that everyone is in on it.

What is the big problem in the world? Management? Political party? This and that.

The problem is Sin. And we're all in on it.

- **Solomon now probes into the darkest mystery and deepest problem of humanity: the depravity of the human heart.**
- In one way or the other **all problems come back to this one.**

19: Wisdom is good. We should **pursue it**. It gives you “**strength**” – the ability to be faithful.

- “**Ten rulers**” is an expression of great strength.
- **A husband may say his wife is a “perfect ten.”** She’s super beautiful and charming, etc.
- **Wisdom is better than super-strong rulers; it is super-duper strong.**
- **It provides security and protection.**
- **It can guide your thinking, and govern your speech.**

But while wisdom may enable us to be faithful; it doesn't mean we will be perfect.

Even the wise are still sinners...

20: This is a humbling verse for everyone, wise and foolish.

- **Solomon highlights sins of omission** (we don't do what we should do); and sins of **commission** (we do what we shouldn't do).
- **If you are familiar with the book of Romans, then this verse ought to sound familiar to you:**
- “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10)
- The **phrase *ouk estin dikaios*** (none is righteous, Rom 3.10) is identical to the Greek version of the OT in **Eccl 7:20**
- Paul very likely was alluding to this verse, when he was quoting a series of texts to argue that we are sinful and guilty before God.

The point here is that even the wise our sinners; even the godly can act ungodly.

- **Even those who have been in ministry for forty years fall short.**
- **We shouldn't be surprised if leaders fail us, for they too our sinners.**
- **Proverbs 20:9:** Who can say, “I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin”?” Answer: No one.
- **Solomon is not looking at life through a carnival mirror: it's just real talk.**

This is not very popular is it?

- **It's one thing to say we are made in the image of God today. Many people are cool with that. They're special and they like to hear that – and they do need to hear that.**
- **But, we must also say, we are sinners before God, in need of God.**
- **Not everyone likes that description of humanity.**

In order to prove the point, notice, Qoheleth gives us an example [read 21-22].

21: He says you should know that sometimes people close to you (“servant” – and we may add family, friends, coworkers) will sin against you with their words.

- **They may slander you.**

- They may gossip about you.
- They may curse you.
- In that sin list in Romans 3, Paul lists many references to speech.
- The doctrine of sin expressed through speech is one of the easier doctrines **to prove!**

So he says, “**do not take to heart the things people say.**”

- You will never have peace if you are out to try to tame everyone’s tongue.
- You can’t tame it because it’s untamable.

22: He adds, remember you have done the same thing!

- Why? Because our **hearts** are corrupt (Mk 7).

23-24: Transitional verses, which speaks to his desire to make sense of the world and sinful humanity. But he confesses his own limitations.

- God alone is perfectly wise.
- God alone is perfectly righteous.
- And in the gospel, we find ultimate wisdom and we find a righteousness that is given, not earned, received by faith.

25-26: **By way of example, we see an how sin and temptation works....**

26: He says that the adulteress tempts and traps men. (We also affirm that men can be predators also, but this is a dude’s experience).

- He may be thinking of her as a personification of folly, or as an actual temptress.
- But I think it’s best to stay in Eccl 7 and with Solomon’s life.

The Preacher is talking **about his own experiences.**

- If Solomon wrote this, or if this a reflection on Solomon’s life at least, then we know that **Solomon was indeed led into sin through sexual temptation.**
- So he is saying, the **wise person flees from such temptation.**

The warning is general enough to apply to a number of situations from adulterous relationships to internet pornography.

- Don’t cave into the temptation but realize that this seductive image or person is trying to lure your heart into destruction!

26b: The wise person stays away from her: “**the one who pleases God escapes her.**”

- **Joseph and Potiphar’s wife as an example. “I will not sin against my God”**
- Prior to Gen 39 is Gen 38, one of the most scandalous chapters in the Bible.
- Tamar seduces Judah, and foolish Judah gives in.
- Joseph doesn’t follow after his foolish older brother, but rather resists the adulteress again and again.

How do you respond to temptress/tempter? How do you respond to Potiphar’s wife?

- Run!!! Don’t be taken by her!

- People are actually plotting to get you to sin!
- Behind it all is the evil one, who has many schemes.
- We must flee and escape. (1 Cor 6:18ff) (Feugo: Harrison Ford)

27: Now he speaks about humanity in general.

- He wants to know what the sinfulness of man adds up to.

28: He says something shocking...

- He says wisdom is rare in men (all the women said, "Amen") – **one in a thousand!**
- But he says it's even **rarer in women! What!**
- Is Solomon a sexist?
- **Is he just a depressed bachelor? Did he just have his heart broken? Is he a chauvinist?**
- **Was he listening to country music while drinking Johnny Walker?**

However we interpret this statement, **remember what he just said in verse 20: There is not a righteous man on earth! So even this mysterious wise person is a sinner!**

- He may be adding an exaggerated twist to the Proverb (**hyperbole**).
- Or he could be referring to **the seductress** in the previous verses.
- Or he could be referring to **his own experience, as the guy who had a godless harem.**
- Remember Solomon said, **"An excellent wife who can find?" In a thousand tries, he never found even one precious jewel" (O'donnell).**

Not all the women in the world are bad, for Solomon says **in 9:9**, "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love."

- The Bible praises godly women like the single women in **Luke 8**, who supported Jesus during his earthly ministry; like the **Proverbs 31 lady; or Ruth or Esther.**
- The fact that the Solomon never knew any of these women reflects on his life.
- He chased idolatrous women when he was told not to.
- Ryken: **"The Preacher king who wrote Ecclesiastes did not know any women like that, which is what a man gets for trying to love a thousand godless women."**

- At any rate, you get the point: **wisdom is rare.**

Even the best men and women are sinners saved by grace...

#4: The Grace of Redemption (7:29)

29: His conclusion on the whole human race.

- There is no point in arguing about who is more or less righteous than the other.
- We're all sinners.
- Sin is the great equalizer.

This verse is important for a number of reasons.

- It teaches us about **creation** and **fall**,
- And since we have the whole Bible, we can add **redemption** and **new creation**.

Creation: “God made us upright. We were righteous before the fall.

- “man” here is the word Adam – it means the father of us all.
- He was perfectly righteous.

Fall: “they have sought out many schemes”

- Sin entered the world and the scheming began.
- You read of it in the very next chapter of the Bible as one brother plots the murder of the other (Gen 4).
- Paul says, “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” (Rom 5.12)

Redemption: Fortunately, we have more than just the first seven chapters of Ecclesiastes!

- David’s greatest son was not Solomon but Jesus.
 - Jesus, unlike the unrighteous all earth, never sinned!
 - He was the embodiment of wisdom!
 - He never committed a sin with the forbidden woman.
 - Then he died on behalf of those who did – he died for the wicked, the unwise, the self-righteous, for those led astray by temptation again and again.
- The Bible teaches that Adam was not the last Adam.
 - A Second Adam, Jesus Christ, came to save sinners.
 - He came to crush the head of Satan, that great schemer, and to give us redemption.
 - Through Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins; we have a new heart; we have the righteousness of God given to us.
- “**Redeeming grace for Adam’s helpless race**” has been provided!

¹⁷ For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:17-19)

- What do we do about our problem of sin?
- We repent and trust in Christ for forgiveness; for justification; for right standing with God; and eternal life.

New Creation:

Jesus came to deal with our sin, to raise us by the Spirit to new life, and he will come again to judge the world in righteousness.

Jesus will reverse the curse.

- He will transform this pain-filled world, and wipe away the tears from our faces;

- He will transform this sad, sinful, and scheming world, into a happy, holy, and harmonious world!
- Maranatha.

John Newton's memorable words summarizes this chapter well:

"My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner — and that Christ is a great Savior!"

Great sinner: reality.

Great Savior: redemption.

Praise God, Christ grace is greater than our sin.