

One In A Thousand

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 October 16, 2024

One in a thousand. That is the odds of you flipping a coin 10 times and getting heads on every flip. It's also the odds of you catching a foul ball at a professional baseball game¹ and the odds of the egg you crack tomorrow morning having a double-yolk.²

The Teacher spent his life hunting for something much more significant than coin flips or foul balls. He was looking for someone who actually found meaning in life - someone who beat the system and was not only a good person, but also was able to enjoy their lives in a meaningful way, despite the difficulties, adversity, unfairness, and chance that all of us are subject to.

The odds of being that person? The Teacher says in *his* experience it's one in a thousand. Maybe. And he admits that *he* is not one of those people. His experiments have failed.

Tonight's passage is one of those eyebrow-raising sections of the book. We'll find ourselves thinking, "Excuse me?" after some of these verses.

One commentator notes: "*There is perhaps no book in the Bible that is the subject of more controversies than Ecclesiastes.*"³ Chapter 7 is a major contributor to those controversies. Scholars tell us that some of the grammar is difficult to parse, as is the Teacher's intent. But, on top of that, some of these verses *seem* to fly in the face of what the Bible teaches elsewhere.

So, let's buckle up and take a look.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 - ¹⁵ In my futile life I have seen everything: someone righteous perishes in spite of his righteousness, and someone wicked lives long in spite of his evil.

In verse 14 the Teacher tried to reassure us. He said, "God is in charge. The best thing you can do is trust Him and go along with His plan." But then he immediately acknowledges the reality that God-fearing people still suffer, sometimes unfairly. And some people who are doing life all wrong seem to escape any consequences.

Pastor Chuck Smith never smoked a cigarette in his life and then he died of lung cancer.⁴ We don't live in an ideal world, we live in a *fallen* world. And even though the Lord provides for us, cares for us, and walks with us, we still are impacted by the effects of the fall every single day of our lives.

¹ <https://blogs.fangraphs.com/odds-of-catching-a-foul-ball/>

² <https://www.peteandgerrys.com/blogs/field-notes/egg-yolks-two-for-the-price-of-one>

³ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation With Introduction And Commentary*

⁴ <https://www.godreports.com/2012/01/chuck-smith-interview-about-his-lung-cancer-he-will-keep-preaching-and-says-i-have-no-fears/>

The Teacher says "in my *futile* life." He acknowledges that much of his life has been a waste - a *hevel* life. In the days of his apostasy.⁵ It will help if we remember this assessment as we get to the final verses of the chapter.

Ecclesiastes 7:16 - ¹⁶ Don't be excessively righteous, and don't be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

Come again? Did he just say what I think he said? No. Remember: The Teacher is not speaking for a position of real faith in God, but from a secular position of trying to solve the problems of life with his own intellect, his own strength, his own will.

The righteousness here is *self*-righteousness. Derek Kidner writes, "[The Teacher] shuts out for a while any gleam of genuine faith, and introduces religion...only in the form of superstition."⁶ And we know he's not talking about *real*, heavenly righteousness because in a moment he's going to say "No one is actually righteous."

Self-righteousness cannot help you. It *blinds* you of your true condition and then *robs* you of joy in life. It breeds hypocrisy, a false sense of superiority. It is an inert medication for a deadly disease.

The Teacher is looking at someone who is trying to live a fanatically religious life, in the sense that they *do* all sorts of things that they think will put God in their debt so that He *has* to bless them or elevate them or exempt them from suffering. But that path, which looks so pious, really ends in ruin. Asceticism doesn't work. Phariseeism doesn't work. It doesn't work because it's just *play-acting*.⁷

Ecclesiastes 7:17 - ¹⁷ Don't be excessively wicked, and don't be foolish. Why should you die before your time?

The Teacher now swings to the *other* extreme. If being a goody-two-shoes, religious fanatic doesn't guarantee me a better life, might as well go all the way over to the other side and indulge myself. The Teacher says, "No, that's stupid. If you do that there's a good chance you'll kill yourself."

He's not saying you'll *definitely* die early - verse 15 made that point - but excessive vice, excessive worldliness does very often lead to an early death.

In these two verses, the Teacher has covered the philosophies of the vast majority of human beings. You have those who try to *earn* their life through self-imposed rules that they think will obligate God to do things for them. Then you have those who ignore their duty toward God. They dive into self-indulgence, feeding every urge whether it's good or not.

⁵ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*

⁶ Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance: The Message Of Ecclesiastes*

⁷ Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

And then in the middle you have people who think like the Teacher - people who want it both ways. One commentator writes, “*They know better than to live a life of total wickedness because deep down they believe that God will judge [them]. Yet secretly they suspect that trying to be holy will take the fun out of life. Generally speaking they try to be good, and they hope they are good enough to get by on the Day of Judgment. But their consciences are troubled too little by their sins. As long as they are not overly righteous or overly wicked, they are happy the way they are.*”⁸

Ecclesiastes 7:18 - ¹⁸ It is good that you grasp the one and do not let the other slip from your hand. For the one who fears God will end up with both of them.

So is Solomon saying “be a little good, but be a little bad?” That is the conclusion that *conventional* wisdom leads to. But when we fear the Lord, something *new* happens. Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of *true* wisdom⁹ - wisdom that leads to abundant life and eternal satisfaction.

When a person fears the Lord, they are able to *escape* the traps of self-righteousness and self-indulgence *and* they are able to get what the others failed to achieve. The self-righteous reaches for religion and casts off enjoyment. The self-indulgent person does the opposite. When a person fears God, they are able to live a life of *true* religion and *true* enjoyment.¹⁰ They are gifts God gives us freely as we walk with Him. Sanctification *and* satisfaction. Devoted *and* delighted.¹¹

Ecclesiastes 7:19 - ¹⁹ Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten rulers of a city.

Remember, the Teacher speaks from the level of *human* wisdom. That doesn’t mean these proverbs are wrong, just that they will not ultimately lead to the eternal guarantees we all long for.

Verse 19 encourages us to value wisdom over other traits in our leaders. More than success. More than strength. More than wealth. More than will. *Wisdom*, meaning thoughtful understanding, will benefit a city or a society most. That’s a good reminder for a country like ours where we have the privilege of *choosing* our leaders. Do you want a truly *strong* leader? Then pick a *wise* one.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 - ²⁰ There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins.

Even the Teacher in his secularism cannot help but preach this obvious truth. As we listen to his lecture, we can’t help but feel bad for the him. He’s the smartest person in the world. He’s the most accomplished, the most impressive, all the things. He’s *right* there, so close to the truths he really needs to grant him the hope and peace that he’s longing for. But, thus far, he *won’t* surrender himself to God. The Teacher recognizes that God is Judge over all the earth and is sovereign and that He has laws that we sin against. But the Teacher won’t give himself to the Lord. Not yet, anyway. And the result is that he is trapped in futility. He can’t shake the plague of unrighteousness.

⁸ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

⁹ Proverbs 9:10

¹⁰ Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

¹¹ See 1 Timothy 6:6, Psalm 37:4, Matthew 5:6

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 - ²¹ Don't pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, ²² for in your heart you know that many times you yourself have cursed others.

It's so easy for us to get upset about things people say or post or suggest. Social media really brings the worst out of us on that level. It thrives on aggravation. But listen: I'm not perfect. You're not perfect. Sometimes criticisms we hear are legitimate. And sometimes we misunderstand what was meant. Sometimes we hear things that were said in confidence. We can let it go.

In your version, this verse may say, "don't take it to heart." That was a good image for me. Our heart is a garden. What we plant there grows. If we plant these seeds of anger or resentment or bitterness, what kind of fruit do we think is going to come out? Be careful what you take to heart. Certain crops crowd out a lot of space and they produce nothing but rotten fruit.

Ecclesiastes 7:23 - ²³ I have tested all this by wisdom. I resolved, "I will be wise," but it was beyond me.

How could the wisest man on earth be so disappointed? We know why. It's because, in his old age, Solomon did not love the Lord.¹² That is why peace and satisfaction and rest and fulfillment and meaning was always just beyond his reach. And that's why the more he looked for good, the more he found bad not only in himself but also in others.

Ecclesiastes 7:24 - ²⁴ What exists is beyond reach and very deep. Who can discover it?

At the close of his life, Isaac Newton said, "*I have been paddling in the shallows of a great ocean of knowledge.*"¹³ A truly wise person is quick to recognize how much they don't know.

The Teacher had the practical but not the eternal - the rational but not the essential. After all this time, he had *no answer* to what life is *about*. The further he went, the further he felt from the goal.

Ecclesiastes 7:25 - ²⁵ I turned my thoughts to know, explore, and examine wisdom and an explanation for things, and to know that wickedness is stupidity and folly is madness.

He wants us to understand how meticulous he was in this pursuit. It wasn't just a hobby. He wasn't a weekend warrior. He dedicated himself to finding out the meaning of life, how to live a life that matters, how to have peace in his heart. What is the bottom line - what is the sum of all things?¹⁴

¹² 1 Kings 11:4

¹³ Ray Stedman *Ecclesiastes 1:1-18: The Search For Meaning*

¹⁴ David Hubbard *The Communicator's Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

Ecclesiastes 7:26 - ²⁶ And I find more bitter than death the woman who is a trap: her heart a net and her hands chains. The one who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner will be captured by her.

Some use the next three verses as evidence that the Teacher was a deplorable sexist, or that the Bible is a chauvinistic book. The words taken without context or consideration *are* controversial. But let's pause and remember what we know.

First, we *know* the Teacher isn't anti-woman. He will say in chapter 9 that one of the best things a man can do is enjoy the wife that he loves. We also know that, as a *person*, Solomon had a great love for women. And we know how he venerated women in his other writings. The book of Proverbs ends *not* with the portrait of a great man, but of an excellent woman.

We also know that the Teacher is detailing the results of his *personal* study. These are *his* findings from his own experience. And we know that Solomon's life was brought down to ruin because he surrounded himself and deeply attached his heart to pagan women who turned him away from the Lord.¹⁵ His relationships with them *did* become a net and chains, spiritually speaking.

Some scholars make a case that the Teacher is personifying folly as a woman in these verses the same way Solomon personified Wisdom and Folly as women in Proverbs. They also point out that there is a lot of reference to Genesis 1 through 3 in these verses.¹⁶

So, before modern ears are offended, we should consider the whole context. Philip Ryken writes, "*Taken as a whole, the Bible has as much (if not more) to say about sinful men than sinful women. Iniquity is an equal opportunity employer.*"¹⁷

As an application there are a couple of good warnings here. First, to the fellows: There *are* women out there who are a trap. Perhaps some of you are going to the computer and have what you think is a victimless relationship with an enticing woman or harem of women as you watch pornography, but you are actually being snared and chained. That's something you need to *escape* from.

But then, the second warning is the fact that *any* of us could be a trap to another person. God has an opinion about who you should marry or stay married to. When we don't follow Him, obey Him, and honor Him, we potentially become a dangerous trap to other people. And when we get into a marriage or extra-martial relationship that God wants to *rescue* us from or keep us from, the only result is misery. The Teacher is the *expert* on this and he is giving us firsthand testimony.

It's so easy for us to put ourselves in the victim's position, but we also need to acknowledge that we could also be the problem. Instead of causing problems because we're trying to please our own flesh or go our own way, we're called to please God. How does a person please God? Through

¹⁵ 1 Kings 11:1-3

¹⁶ Garrett, Kidner

¹⁷ Ryken

faith. By believing God's Word, by going God's way, by trusting that God has an opinion, discerning it and following in it. In this example, by *coupling* in faith.

Ecclesiastes 7:27-28 - ²⁷“Look,” says the Teacher, “I have discovered this by adding one thing to another to find out the explanation, ²⁸which my soul continually searches for but does not find: I found one person in a thousand, but none of those was a woman.

Again, this isn't sexism. A paraphrase of these verses is, “I have found very few people who please God—no one at all really.”¹⁸ There's a poetic parallelism happening here.

Isn't it interesting that his sample size is 1,000? How many wives and concubines did Solomon have? So, the Teacher says, “I looked all around at these people, trying to find someone who was upright, who had life figured out, and I found maybe one in a thousand.” Well, that ratio might improve if you didn't fill your court with pagans who hated the God of Israel!

Meanwhile, the world *is* generally full of people who are *not* going God's way - people captive in sin and stuck under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 7:29 - ²⁹Only see this: I have discovered that God made people upright, but they pursued many schemes.”

Schemes here can mean inventions or devices or downward path. It can mean people have gone after their own *explanation* of things.¹⁹ And this looks back to the fall of man in the Garden. God showed His way, man decided to go his own way. And Ecclesiastes is the result.

In ancient Babylonia there was a poem written that we call the Babylonian Theodicy. It was a piece of their wisdom literature. It's very possible that it was known to Solomon - the dates work out.

In that poem, we're told that the gods made humans the way they are today. It's not our fault that we lie and slander and steal and kill. Those things were *endowed* to us by our creators.

But here is the truth: God made us upright. Perfect. *We* broke the world. We invented the ruin around us because we are determined to take a downward path to ruin and death.

But God, out of His love and grace, didn't stop at being our Creator. He then went on to be our Savior and Redeemer and Advocate and Helper and Great Physician. And now, He invites us to join Him on the high road of heaven. The road that leads to life more abundantly. To joy and peace and purpose and satisfaction.

Today, we're invited to walk with Him. We talked about those one in a thousand odds. The truth is you can *be* the one in a thousand the Teacher talked about in these verses, not by *chance* but by

¹⁸ Thomas Constable *Notes On Ecclesiastes*

¹⁹ Constable

choice. You know the winning numbers. You can decide to *be* that person by believing God and walking with Him.

Have you seen the commercials where they have the old smokers who have to speak through that voice box hole in their throat? The point of those ads is simple: Don't be like these people!

Here's the Teacher saying, "My life is hevel. I'm totally dissatisfied and despondent. I still haven't found what I'm looking for. *Don't be like me!*" Instead, be one in a thousand. It's not odds, it's an *opportunity* God extends to every one of us. Have you taken Him up on it?