

Bad Things Happen to Good People

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[0 : 00] Please stand and join me as I read this passage. Starting in chapter 7, 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, so that men may not find out anything that will be after him.

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 evil doing.

Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.

Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand. For the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

Wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

[1 : 21] Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been is far off and deep, very deep. Who can find it out? I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

And I find something more bitter than death. The woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly but have not found.

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

[2 : 28] Who is like the wise and who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine and the hardness of his face is changed. I say, keep the king's command because of God's oath to him.

Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, What are you doing?

Whoever keeps the command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

For he does not know what it is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? No man has power to retain the spirit or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.

All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt. Then I saw the wicked buried.

[3 : 30] They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. And there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

I said that this also is vanity. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun, but to eat and drink and be joyful. For this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do ones I see sleep. Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

[4 : 46] However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. This is God's holy and authoritative word.

You may be seated. Not all people in the world are perfectionistic or live with fear of failure or abandonment that make them desperate to control the circumstances of their lives.

But all human beings, to varying degrees, all try to control the outcomes of their lives. Some people do that by micromanaging or maneuvering, manipulating others.

Some people do that by driving themselves really hard, working hard late into the night. Some people try to control the outcomes of their lives by cheating, taking shortcuts.

But no matter how hard we try, no matter how intricate our plans and how consistent our efforts to control the outcomes of our lives, in the end, it is Hevel, a mere breath, chasing after the wind.

[5 : 59] Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. These are the empirical, indisputable facts of life.

But we don't like that fact. And so every generation has new fads and new schemes to try to make the world work the way we think it should, to make our lives work the way we think it ought to.

But Ecclesiastes 7.14 to 8.17 reminds us that we cannot control life, but we should fear God and enjoy life knowing that He is in control.

That's the main point that I want to drive home this morning. We're going to first talk about how bad things happen to good people and vice versa, and how God works all things together for good. We concluded last week's passage with verse 14, and that serves as a transition and begins this passage.

We cannot control when the days of prosperity come or when the days of adversity come in our lives.

[7 : 14] We are not the master of the times of our lives. God is. God has made the one as well as the other, and it is not for humanity to find out what will come after, what will happen tomorrow.

Today's passage flows naturally from that thought. It says in 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 evil doing.

Chapter 8, verses 10 to 13, speak of the same theme of this unfair reality. It says in verse 12, that a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life.

It's the exact same word used in 7:15. Our sense of justice suggests that the wicked should die prematurely, that they should be punished somehow.

But no, they often prolong their lives. Chapter 8, verse 14 says the same thing in different words. There's a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked.

[8 : 19] And there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. There's a 1968 song written by Dick Holler entitled Abraham, Martin, and John, which is about Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy.

They're all leaders of significant social change here in our country, but were assassinated at a relatively young age. And each of the main verses feature one of the titular characters, but apart from the names, the verses are identical, and it goes like this.

Anybody here has seen my old friend Abraham? Can you tell me where he's gone? He freed a lot of people, but it seems the good they die young. I just looked around, and he was gone.

That refrain, the good they die young, captures the sentiment of Ecclesiastes 7.15. In contrast, consider Mao Zedong, the Chinese communist leader, responsible for the death of an estimated 40 to 80 million people through starvation, persecution, prison labor, mass executions.

But he himself died in peace at the ripe old age of 82. The preacher of Ecclesiastes observed this in his own time.

[9 : 45] He says in chapter 8, verses 10 to 11, Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is

vanity, because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily.

The heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. There were wicked people who went in and out of the holy place as if they were God-fearing, righteous people.

And they went in and out about the holy place with their heads held high, and they enjoyed a good reputation among the people in the city, but they were never punished for their wickedness in their lifetime.

They are now buried and forgotten so that their evil deeds will never be exposed and brought to justice. They will never be remembered as evildoers that they were.

They are now left to rest in peace. This is a vanity, the writer says. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

[10:54] Think of Pol Pot, the dictator and leader of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, which slaughtered about two million Cambodians in about four years.

Despite being put under house arrest toward the end of his life, he died in peace at the ripe old age of 77 before the planned trial for genocide at the Hag Ward, the war crimes tribunal could take place.

And because in this fallen and broken world, good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people, it's heivil, breath, futility, chasing after the wind to try to control the outcomes of our lives.

Chapter 7, verses 16 to 22, catalog the various ways that people try to ensure that good, only good things will happen to them. Some people do this by pursuing righteousness.

They think if I live rightly, if I'm an upstanding citizen, that good things will happen to me. While other people pursue wickedness. I'm going to cheat and get my way so that I could have a good life.

[12:00] But neither method, according to the preacher of Ecclesiastes, works. The preacher says in verses 16 and 17, Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? Neither being overly righteous or being overly wicked will ensure your health and wealth and success and happiness in life.

Neither being too wise nor being a fool will ensure your health and wealth and success and happiness in life. If your understanding, if this sounds to you like something your non-Christian relative would say, I'm fine with you being religious, okay?

Just don't be too religious. Everything in moderation. If that's how you're hearing the preacher, that's not what he's saying. The preacher is not saying here that it's possible to have too much righteousness or too much wisdom.

That's impossible. The Bible does not teach us to follow Christ in moderation. Jesus said in Mark 8, 34 to 35, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[13:16] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. In other words, you need to be willing to lay down your very life to follow Jesus.

That's not religion in moderation. The greatest commandment in the Bible is not to love God in moderation. It's to love God with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

It's for total commitment. Jesus didn't say, follow the scriptures in moderation, make sure you obey the really important commandments, and then don't sweat the details. Don't worry about the small commands.

No, when he is rebuking the Pharisees in Matthew 23, 23, 24, because these Pharisees were taking painstaking care to tie the smallest things that they had, the mint and the dill and the cumin.

They're tithing to God, giving a 10% of even the smallest spices that they have as an offering to God. But while they were doing that, they were neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness, that Jesus says.

[14:25] But Jesus does not rebuke the Pharisees for tithing the mint, the dill, and herb. He rebukes them for not keeping justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

He says, these things, the small things, you ought to have done without neglecting the others. The Pharisees' problem was not that they obeyed small things in the Bible.

Their problem was that they didn't obey the big things in the Bible. So be not overly righteous does not mean don't be too concerned about obeying God's word.

No, we should be very concerned about obeying the whole counsel of God in the scriptures. So then what in the world does it mean to be overly righteous or too wise?

I think one way we can be overly righteous is by requiring things of ourselves and of other people that go beyond the demands of scripture. Colossians 2, 20 to 23 comes to mind.

[15 : 24] If with Christ you die to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings.

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

There are many ways in which Christians have promoted rules that go beyond the bounds of scripture, saying do not handle, do not taste that, do not touch that.

This might be a little bit controversial. I hope it's not too controversial. One of those things is to say, don't drink alcohol, right?

Scripture often warns of the expensiveness of alcohol and the dangers, the intoxicating effects and the addictive nature of alcohol that it makes many people poppers and drunkards.

[16 : 28] I know enough people who struggle with alcohol that I don't take it lightly and I don't personally drink alcohol. With that said, getting drunk is condemned in scripture, but drinking alcohol is not condemned in scripture.

The abundance of wine is seen as a sign of God's blessing in Proverbs 3.10. Psalm 104.15 says that God has given wine as a good gift to gladden the heart of man. In fact, Jesus himself partook in wine, as we see in the Last Supper.

Similarly, some Christians broadly condemn dancing as sinful. It's true that dancing is sometimes associated with debauchery and lechery and idolatry in scripture.

For example, in Exodus 32, when the Israelites broke loose in idolatry around the golden calf and it says that they were eating and dancing and getting up to play, promiscuous play, and that they were dancing.

There is a kind of dancing that inflames our lusts and passions, and that kind of dancing is not good. But in other parts of scripture, dancing is seen as good when David rejoices when the ark of the Lord is being brought into the city and rejoices and dances before the Lord with abandon.

[17 : 45] When Miriam the prophetess and other women along with her join with tambourines and dancing to celebrate the Lord's deliverance at the Red Sea. If you want to be careful with dancing, that's all good, but you shouldn't say that dancing is sin and condemn others for it.

Maybe one more example. There are some Christians who would give me a hard time for reading fictional books and letting my kids read fantasy books like Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter because they're fictional and they involve witchcraft or sorcery or magic.

I think the sorcery that is condemned in scripture are ones that circumvent God, give people a way to access spiritual things apart from God, but I think that in some of these fantasy books, they're couched in, they're situated in a thoroughly biblical worldview where the good and the evil is very clear.

That's not a hill I'm going to die on, so don't worry. If you don't think we should read those things. I do want to qualify this because I think I have respect for people who say this, Christians who say these things because they're serious about their convictions and I agree with them even that nowadays the bigger issue is that Christians not exercising enough discernment and self-control about what they consume.

I do think that's a bigger problem nowadays than being overly righteous. However, it is possible to be overly righteous or too wise when it comes to these things.

[19 : 20] Some of you, I think depending on how you grew up, I'm sure you can come up with a long list of man-made rules that were enforced in your house as you were growing up. this might be another way.

You might be over-righteous. Are you wracked by paralyzing anxiety or pathological guilt about moral issues, spiritual issues? All those around you think that you are faithful, you're obeying God, but you're deeply worried about being punished by God or going to hell and you're excessively concerned that you're sinning when in fact you're not sinning.

Maybe you engage in compulsive rituals to make yourself feel like you have control over these things and you feel like you have to confess every little tiny thing because otherwise you think something bad is going to happen to you.

Don't be overly righteous. And you don't have to be a religious person to deal with these problems. Over-righteousness is not the exclusive purview of religious people.

For example, diet and exercise regimens can be good for your health, but there are people who are over-righteous in their observance of these regimens.

[20 : 35] And they think that their strict adherence to them will ensure health and longevity. Here's another example. Working hard and studying hard in school.

Yes, that's a wise and good thing to do, but there are parents and students who are over-righteous and too wise in these things, almost turning academic excellence into an idol.

Similarly, wise financial stewardship is a good thing, it's a righteous thing, but it's possible to be over-zealous and too wise in your saving and investing and growing money. As wide-ranging as these examples are, they all have a common underlying theme.

They are all attempts to control the outcomes of your life, to ensure health and wealth and success. but the preacher says in verse 16, be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Over-righteousness does not guarantee good outcomes in life.

[21 : 44] There are righteous people who get what the wicked deserve, and there are wicked people who get what the righteous deserve. In fact, over-righteousness can be self-destructive, says the preacher. You can wear yourself down and sabotage your own life through over-righteousness.

But does this mean that the wicked are better off than the righteous? Will pursuing a life of wickedness guarantee better outcomes in life?

Of course not. The preacher says in verse 17, be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? Once again, the preacher does not mean that we should be moderately wicked.

Don't be overly wicked, just be moderately wicked. That's not what he's saying. In the same way he wasn't saying be moderately righteous. We should not be wicked at all. But the preacher is using the parallel structure to teach us that people on both ends of the spectrum are trying in vain to control the outcomes of their lives.

People who engage in over-wickedness, like the people who engage in over-righteousness, do so to ensure their well-being, their happiness, but it's ultimately futile. They lie on their resumes and cheat on their taxes to enhance their future prospects and to secure their wealth.

[23 : 00] They steal and rape and murder in order to acquire what they want but cannot rightly have. They pay bribes to people in high places in exchange for various favors, to get a promotion from a boss, to get a judge to turn a blind eye to their crimes.

These are all attempts by the wicked to prolong their lives. But the preacher warns in 7:17, be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

Seeking to control your life through wickedness doesn't work either. No matter how wise or industrious we are in our righteousness or wickedness, we cannot control life. Of course, it's still better to live with wisdom and righteousness than to not.

Verse 19 qualifies what the preacher has been saying. Wisdom gives strength to the wise men, more than 10 rulers who are in a city. Yes, wisdom is precious, more precious than power and control.

However, the main point of the preacher in this passage still stands. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. No matter how righteous we are, we are not righteous enough and we can't control what other people do to us or say about us.

[24 : 13] It says in chapter 7 verses 20 to 22, surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say lest you hear your servant cursing you.

Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. Don't pay attention over much to what other people say about you, whether that's in the form of likes and reposts on TikTok or Instagram or X or people in person gossiping about you behind your back.

Of course, this doesn't justify gossip in any way, but don't lose sleep over what people are saying about you because you know in your heart that you have also spoken ill of people in the past.

Instead of trying to police or control what other people are saying about you, let it be, knowing that surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins, not even you or me.

Moving on to chapter 8, the preacher gives us yet another example of how life is heavy, a mere breath. We can't grasp control of it. He begins first with the benefits of wisdom in verse 1.

[25 : 24] Who is like the wise and who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine and the hardness of his face is changed. This brings to mind wise men in scripture like Joseph and Daniel who had the gift to interpret things, visions and dreams, prophecies.

They served effectively in the royal courts of Egypt and Babylon respectively and attained high ranks and prestige because of their wisdom and the ability to interpret things. And the counsel of the wise is valuable.

Proverbs 25, 15 says, with patience, a ruler may be persuaded and a soft tongue will break a bone. However, the preacher of Ecclesiastes turns this proverb on its head as he characteristically does and he says, yes, it is true that a wise counselor can change the king's mind sometimes.

Other times, he says, even giving counsel to the king is heavy. He says in verses 2 to 3, I say, keep the king's command because of God's oath to him.

Be not hasty to go from his presence. This is similar to Ecclesiastes 10, verse 4, which says, if the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.

[26 : 42] The exhortation is to do what the king says and if the king opposes your counsel and is angry with you, stay calm and stay put because if you try to exit too hastily, his anger might be kindled and you might be worse off.

Verses 3 to 4 continue, do not take your stand in the evil cause for he does whatever he pleases for the word of the king is supreme and who may say to him, what are you doing? The word translated evil cause in verse 3 is literally bad word and so it's being contrasted with the king's word in verse 4. Your bad word versus the king's word. For the word of the king is supreme and who may say to him, what are you doing? In other words, no one can question or challenge what the king decrees because he has supreme authority.

So then, do not take your stand in an evil cause means don't take your stand in, not in a moral evil cause, but don't take your stand in a doomed cause, a bad cause, a cause that the king will oppose. The New International Version of the Bible captures this well. It says, do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause for he will do whatever he pleases.

[27 : 56] Since the king's word is supreme, who can say to him, what are you doing? Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. So he's saying, don't oppose the king when it's not the right time and place and then you will be spared the harm that might come to you from his wrath.

Do what the king says. It's the typical realism and pragmatism of Ecclesiastes. The preacher is not telling all wise men and all wise counselors to be yes men, but he is telling them to be shrewd in what they say and when they say it.

He says in verse five that the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way for there's a time and a way for everything. But even when you know the time and the way to speak, it says man's trouble lies heavy on him.

Verse six. And why is this so? Verse seven tells us, for he does not know what is to be for who can tell him how it will be. Even the wisest of counselors who know the right time to speak and how to speak does not always know how the king will respond, cannot control how the king will respond. Verse eight again employs the metaphor of wind to describe this futility. No man has power to retain the spirit or literally no man has the power to retain the wind or power over the day of death.

[29 : 24] There is no discharge from war nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. No one can override the king's word. If he says you're going to war, then you are going to war.

There is no discharge from war and you will die there. This is reminiscent of first Kings 22 when Ahab, king of Israel, plans to go to war against Syria and prophet Micaiah warns him, you're going to lose.

God is against you. You're going to lose the battle. In fact, you are going to die yourself. But then the king Ahab dismisses prophet Micaiah saying, you only say bad things. You never say good things.

And then he goes to war anyway and leading to the death of many people in Israel, including his own death. That's an example of Ecclesiastes 8, 3 to 4.

The word of the king is supreme. Who can say to him, what are you doing? This is why the preacher concludes in verse 9, all this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun when man had power over man to his hurt.

[30 : 28] A monarch having absolute power over his subjects to their hurt is another example of the hevel of this world. Rulers having power over their subjects to their hurt is another example of the futility of life here.

How bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That's the main point of this passage and there's a key word that threads the entire passage together and it's the word find.

It occurs 17 times total in the book of Ecclesiastes and 12 of those are found in these two chapters, chapter 7, chapter 8. Remember how the passage began in chapter 7, 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 so that men may not find out anything that will be after him.

Why has God subjected the creation to futility? Why has God ordained that good things happen even to bad people and bad things happen even to good people? So that, he says, men may not find out anything that will be after him.

[31 : 36] If everything that happens in life is according to neat rules and patterns and it's predictable, then humanity would be able to figure it out and game the system. But that would further fuel human pride, arrogance, self-righteousness.

The vanity and the futility and the transience of life here under the sun in this fallen world is meant to humble us before God and make us fear him and to defer to his sovereign rule.

Relentlessly, if you've been with us in this series in Ecclesiastes, the preacher is relentless in hammering home this point that we cannot figure out this life. Chapter 7, verse 23 to 24, all this I have tested by wisdom.

I said I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which has been is far off and deep, very deep. Who can find it out?

No one. The conclusion at the end echoes the same point. Ecclesiastes 8, 17, then I saw all the work of God that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

[32 : 47] However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. If you meet a wise philosopher claiming to have figured out life, this is how life works.

You do what I tell you and your life will be good and perfect. They don't know what they're talking about. Solomon, the greatest philosopher to have ever lived, obviously not counting Jesus who is the wisdom of God incarnate, says that you cannot.

You cannot find it out. And what's the intended effect of understanding that life is but a breath? How do we live in such a world where bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people?

The same twin answer is given throughout Ecclesiastes. One, fear God. Two, enjoy life. He says in 7, 18, it is good that you should take hold of this and from that withhold not your hand for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

The one who fears God will come out from both being overly righteous and being overly wicked. When we recognize that we finally cannot figure out and control our outcomes, we surrender to God his sovereignty and entrust our lives to him rather than trying to be masters of our own fate and captains of our own souls.

[34 : 11] And here's what you do when you're at a low point in life and when your life is full of suffering and sorrows and you start to wonder, God, are you really here? God, are you really in control?

Please look at chapter 7, verse 15 with me and contrast it with chapter 8, verse 12 to 13. In 7:15, the preacher shares his observation, what he has seen.

He says, in my vain life, I have seen everything. There's a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there's a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing. The preacher is a good scientist.

He makes careful observations about life, how it works, and he has concluded that life doesn't follow the rules. A wicked man prolongs his life in his evil doing, but contrast that with chapter 8, verses 12 to 13.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him.

[35 : 17] But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow because he does not fear before God. Notice that these are two seemingly contradictory statements.

on the one hand, he says that the things do go well for the wicked sometimes. They prolong their life. He has seen it, but then now he says that they will not prolong their days like a shadow because they do not fear before God.

So what's the deal? Which one is true? 7.15 is the preacher's observation of life, what he has seen. Chapter 8, verses 12 to 13 is the preacher's declaration of faith, what he knows and believes to be true despite everything that he sees.

He says, though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him.

Yes, your life is full of futility. Yes, your life is full of suffering in this fallen world and it doesn't make sense. we walk by faith and not by sight and believe as Paul says in Romans 8.28 and we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.

[36 : 41] We might not see it. It might not seem like everything is going according to plan the way it's supposed to work out for good but we know this to be true because that is what we believe.

We believe in the sovereignty of God and in the goodness of God. Everything in life will ultimately tend to his glory and to our good, the good of his people. Maybe not good as we imagine it but good according to his purposes when we are justified, sanctified, and glorified.

So that's the first effect that this passage should have on us. We're not going to find resolution to this tension in this life but we will find the resolution to this tension in eternity and at the final judgment when Jesus Christ returns.

And so the first effect that this should have on us is to make us to fear God and submit to him and to his sovereignty. And here's the second effect that it should have. Enjoy life.

It says in verse 15, and I command joy for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

[37 : 51] As the preacher said early in chapter 5 verses 19 to 20, the person who learns to enjoy the gifts and the blessings of God, the simple pleasures of life, will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

Enjoy a delicious barbecue. Enjoy a juicy bite into that red delicious apple. enjoy a game of frisbee out in the green field in the sun or in the rain.

Enjoy the fall foliage of beautiful New England. Enjoy the laughter and companionship of your friends and significant others. Enjoy the silliness of your children. These simple gifts of life are intended by God to be a comfort and a joy to us in the midst of a fallen and broken world that doesn't work as it's supposed to.

And both of these main commands in this passage find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, which brings me to the most difficult section of this passage, which maybe you guys thought I would skip, but I'm not going to skip it.

Look at chapter 7 verses 25 to 29 with me. Again, the key word find occurs seven times in these five verses. I turn my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

[39 : 18] And I find something more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. It's a lot of back and forth, right?

I found and I have not found, I have found, I have not found. And the preacher is saying he explored wisdom and folly to try to find the scheme of things. The word scheme means device or plan or explanation, and it comes from the verb to think or to account.

This is the preacher's attempt to make sense of life, to gain wisdom that will finally explain all the mysteries of life. And then he, what he finds in the end is disappointing, to say the least. He says in verse 26, and I find something more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. The Bible often personifies wisdom and folly as two women. [40 : 33] If you were with us in our series through the book of Proverbs, you have seen this repeatedly. In chapter 9 of Proverbs, for example, he contrasts lady wisdom with lady folly.

And Proverbs 5 depicts lady folly, the woman folly, as a classic literary character, the femme fatale, the attractive, seductive woman who brings ruin and destruction to all who engage with her. So the preacher is not here speaking of all women, and I don't think he's even speaking of a specific individual woman. I've read some commentators who said he's talking about his wife. I think that's definitely not true.

I think he's speaking here of woman folly, whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. In his exploration of wisdom and folly, the preacher did not find lady wisdom from the deep places of God, wisdom that will explain all these mysteries and inequalities in life. But you know what he did find? He found lady folly. She was not hard to find. And then again, in verses 27 to 29, the preacher tells us what he found.

[41 : 43] But ironically, he didn't find much. Verses 27 to 29 has a chiasmic structure. Verse 27, mirrors, is almost identical to verse 29. They both begin with, behold, this is what I found.

Or see, this alone I found. Both speak of trying to find out the scheme of things or many schemes. The effect of this structure is to sandwich verse 28, which stands alone in the middle. And that device is intended to highlight, emphasize what's in the middle, verse 28. And this is the point that he's driving home. Not that he found something, but that he actually didn't find something. Which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

Many commentators and critics of the Bible have pointed to this verse as an unmistakable example of misogyny. That here he's saying that one in a thousand you could find a righteous man or a wise man, but zero in a thousand have I found.

[42 : 49] That's how some people interpret it. But I beg to differ. I wrestled with this verse for a long time, prayed God to help me to understand it, and he brought to mind an obscure thing that I learned one day in a class, in my Hebrew class in seminary that I hadn't thought about in a long time, and that's this Hebrew rhetorical device called graded numerical parallelism.

I'm sorry, that sounds really geeky, but stick with me for a little bit. There are whole journal articles dedicated to this rhetorical device. By using increasing or decreasing numbers in parallel poetic fashion, Hebrew authors create a sense of escalation and tension which serves to heighten the emotion and to drive that progressive point home.

So I'm going to give you some examples to prove to you that I'm not making this up. Amos 1-2. God repeatedly uses graded numerical parallelism when he speaks of his judgment eight times or so to highlight the many sins of the nations.

It says in Amos 1-3, for three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not revoke the punishment. Is God pronouncing judgment upon Damascus because of three sins or four? Did God lose count? No, the point of it is that it's not the exact numbering, the precise number of it, but the progression of it. Damascus has multiplied sins, which is why God will not relent in his judgment.

[44 : 17] That's the point. Proverbs 6, 16-19 says this, there are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.

Does God hate six things or seven things? Once again, the point is not the precise number, but the progression of it, the escalation of it, that the earth is full of sins that the Lord despises.

Job 5-19, Job's friend Eliphaz says to him, he will deliver you from six troubles. In seven, no evil shall touch you. We know that Eliphaz is wrong to think that Job was being punished because of his wickedness, but this is a good example of graded numerical parallelism.

He's not saying that God's only going to deliver you from six or at most seven troubles and then you're done with eight. There's no more. He's saying, no, six, seven, more and more, that God's going to deliver you from all troubles if you're righteous.

That's what he's promising to his friend Job. In Ecclesiastes 7-28, the graded numbers decrease rather than increase because a point is not that there are some upright people, but that there are

none.

[45 : 32] The point of the graded numerical parallelism is not that the preacher found somebody, but that he found nobody. The number comparison goes down from one in a thousand to zero in a thousand.

Why? Because that's the direction of the preacher's escalating point. His point is that it's nearly impossible, indeed, outrightly impossible to find a righteous person or a wise person.

This isn't meant to be a contrast between males and females. It's meant to be parallel comparison, like all the other examples of graded numerical parallelism in the Bible.

He's not talking about the relative moral superiority of man, but lumping men and women together to say that in the totality of humanity, none is righteous, no, not one.

In fact, that's exactly what he said in the preceding verse in chapter 7, verse 20. Surely, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Not a single righteous man or woman on earth who does good and never sins.

[46 : 35] Paul may be paraphrasing this exact verse in Romans 3, 10 to 12 when he writes, none is righteous, no, not one. No one does good, not even one.

So what's, so finding an upright person is like finding a needle in a haystack. You're not gonna find it. It's like looking for one in a thousand.

Nay, zero in a thousand. We know that that's the point that he's making because he tells us that that's the point he's making in his summary conclusion in verse 29.

See, this alone I found. What did he find? That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. Man is singular, but they is plural because the word man is not the word for males, but it's the generic word for humanity.

And they have sought out many schemes. All we, like have sheep gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way. Instead of living according to God's will for our lives, we have all pursued our own selfish ends.

[47 : 46] This is why our righteousness will never be enough. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. If you think that you can ensure a good future for yourself or that you can attain salvation even, eternal life and entrance into the kingdom of God on your righteousness, then you are gravely mistaken.

Our credentials are not good enough to enter the kingdom of God. Our righteousness is not enough for us to be justified in the heavenly courtroom. We need somebody else's righteousness.

We need the righteousness of Christ. After paraphrasing Ecclesiastes 7.20 in Romans 3, he goes on to say this in verses 21-25, but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

We need the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We need to receive the righteousness of God as a gift that is the only way that we can be justified because on the cross, Jesus took our place so that we can take his place.

[49 : 19] He absorbed the just wrath of God so that we can be recipients of the Lord's favor and mercy and pleasure. Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for our sake so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That's in the end how we ensure good outcome, ultimate outcome, salvation, eternal life, not your righteousness or mine, but the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

So let's cling to that alone as our hope as we go. Let me pray. Let me pray. Father, no one is righteous.

No one does good, not even one. That is all of us. So thank you that you do not punish us as our sins deserve, but in your mercy, in your great love, you sent your only son, Jesus, as the atoning sacrifice, our redeemer and savior.

And we thank you and we worship you. Lord, help us to forsake all vain attempts to control the outcomes of our lives. instead help us to put all our faith and hope in the righteousness of Jesus Christ for us.

[50 : 52] So that clothed with the righteousness of Christ, we might live life in confidence with the fear of God and with joy. Help us to do that, God, in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen.