



The Balance and Behavior of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 7:15-8:1

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Stephen Davey

Johann Sebastian Bach composed wonderful music for the church — and the world, for that matter. He composed over 200 cantatas for the church, choral works for the church on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and he composed songs for his 20 children, teaching them biblical truth.

Bach lived from 1685-1750, and, as you can imagine, a large number of original documents have been preserved over the years, most of them original musical compositions.

But one document has survived all these years that Bach never intended to publish. These are the notes he made in his Bible.

More than likely seen by his wife, Anna, and their children, Bach had a 3-volume German Bible — published in 1681. We would call it a Study Bible today, because it included commentary and sermons from Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation 100 years earlier.

Bach was, in fact, a Lutheran — a follower of the reformation and a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

The pages of Bach's Bible, as it has come to be known, are heavily marked in Bach's handwriting; full of added notes and personal comments from Bach, as he worked his way through scripture, aided by the notes and sermons of Martin Luther. Many of the verses throughout the 3-volume set are underlined.

What I found interesting in an article I read on this subject is the fact that the Book of Ecclesiastes is the most marked up book in Bach's Bible. And Ecclesiastes chapter 7, where we are today, has more verses underlined and notated than any other chapter in his Bible.

One of his biographers summarized that this was due to the fact that Bach wanted to have a godly reputation that would bring glory to God.

And chapter 7, verse 1 opens with the statement that a good name — a godly reputation — is better and more valuable than expensive perfume.

Bach would often complete a piece of music and then write in Latin on the front page, “Soli Deo Gloria,” which means “to the glory of God alone.”

Then in verse 2 and 3 of chapter 7, the statement that sorrow is a better teacher than laughter — the end of life is better than the beginning of life — all the way to verse 13, that only God knows why life had difficult twists and turns and ups and downs — but God is in control.

Bach evidently was deeply consoled by these truths, having buried 10 of his 20 children before they reached adulthood.

Life depended on trusting that God was in control; life depended on walking and trusting in the Lord.

There were times when Bach was having difficulty with a piece of music and he would write in the margin, ‘Jesu Juva’ — Jesus help me.

Those would be great captions or titles for any believer to live by: Jesus help me; to God alone be the glory, and all along the way — Jesus help me.

It doesn’t get any better than that.

For almost 70 years now, Solomon has come to define life along these same lines.

For years, he lived for his own glory and never really thought he needed God’s help.

But now, here in chapter 7, Solomon transitions to bring God clearly into the picture.

We are in verse 15 and once again, he’s going to say something that he’s already said for the 11th time.

Solomon says:

*In my vain (or fleeting) life, I
have seen everything.*

Ecclesiastes 7:15a

Our modern English version of what Solomon is saying is, “I’ve been there, I’ve done that, and I’ve seen everything!”

And he launches into a series of observations and proverbs that take us through to chapter 8 verse 1.

And the common theme tying it together are the repeated references to wisdom.

And do we ever need the balance in life that wisdom provides! Especially when life often does not make any sense.

Notice verse 15 again;

*There is a righteous man
who perishes in his
righteousness, and there is
a wicked man who prolongs
his life in his evildoing.*

Ecclesiastes 7:15b

I don't get it! Godly people die young and wicked people live a long time.

That does not seem to follow the way it should be! I thought God promised the Old Testament saints that if they walked with God, they would live a long time.



Are there times when you want to question God? When things don't seem right, or that God is making things happen the way they should? How do you continue trusting Him during those moments?

Even in the New Testament, Paul wrote, in Ephesians 6, "Children, obey your parents ... that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" (Ephesians 6:1a, 3).

That verse used to terrify me! I mean, if that verse came true, I never would have made it through middle school!

These are general principles that point out the fact avoiding a life of sin and rebellion may very well save you from early death.

I remember filling out an application years ago for life insurance. And they asked me all kinds of questions: do you drink, smoke, take drugs, etc. etc. Why? Because generally speaking, if you don't do those things, you are going to live longer — which is good news for life insurance companies.

This is just a general rule.

But sometimes, life doesn't seem to play by the rules.

There are people who eat plenty of fiber, drink 32 ounces of water a day, take their vitamin supplements and go to the doctor for that annual physical (which by the way, is never mentioned in the Bible). They do all that plus never miss church or Sunday school and do absolutely everything they should do for God and then, they die young.

On the other hand, Solomon observes, there are people who effectively destroy their bodies and hate God and live as wickedly as they possibly can, and they seem to live forever.

Solomon is essentially saying that life does not always seem to play by the rules. And without an understanding of God's sovereignty, as he pointed out earlier in **verse 14**, you might end up with the wrong conclusion.

Now Solomon moves on to mention two extreme ways of approaching life, and this is perhaps one of the most misunderstood passages in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Notice verse 16:

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.

Ecclesiastes 7:16-18

At first glance, it might appear that Solomon is telling you not to get carried away with trying to live a holy life or trying to live a wicked life — but to be somewhere in the middle.

You know, don't try to be *too* good and don't try to be *too* bad; too much religion or too many parties will lead you to an early grave.

By the way, that happens to be the plan of salvation for many people I've talked to over the years. I'm not all that perfect, but I'm not all that bad either. I've walked somewhere in the middle road and I'm sure God will be okay with me.

That plan of salvation has nothing to do with Jesus; it has everything to do with you.

And that also has nothing to do with walking in wisdom. God isn't suggesting here, through Solomon, that we do not try to be too good, and try to avoid being too bad while we're at it.

In the Hebrew text, verse 16 carries the idea of reflexive action. Solomon is actually referring here to two self-centered extremes. One is total wickedness and the other is total self-righteousness. **Verse 16** can be understood to read, "*Don't go around claiming to be righteous and don't go*

around making yourself out to be so wise."

We might say it like this: "Don't strut around acting like you are some kind of spiritual giant."

One author writing on this text commented: "These sanctimonious saints are eager to impart to you lesser mortals their knowledge of scripture; their quite times are always anointed; their marriages are rapturous; their children are superior; God evidently speaks audibly to them and they are eager to tell you what God told them; their applications of the Bible for any situation are bullet-proof. Just ask them. The New Testament refers to these self-righteous saints as immature Christians – but don't tell them that – it won't go well."

Solomon isn't telling us here in **verse 16** to only be slightly spiritual. No, he's telling us not to present ourselves as having arrived.

Did you notice the danger at the end of **verse 16**? You are not going to build anything up in life — you are only going to destroy and discourage life and those around you.

He's also telling us that it is dangerous to make a name for being entirely wicked. Don't be a fool, he says here in **verse 17**, — that's a destructive path as well.

So, walk with God and godly wisdom will protect you from both extremes: self-righteousness and wickedness.

Solomon says, I've seen it all, and let me show you the value of wisdom.

Notice verse 19:

Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

Ecclesiastes 7:19

One wise person in town is worth more than 10 rulers, or political leaders; one paraphrase translates it "10 mayors."

You could paraphrase this to read: One wise person is more valuable in their community than 10 unwise politicians.

Is that a verse for an election year or what?

Now what Solomon does is launch into rapid fire proverbs and principles and essentially shows us the behavior patterns of wisdom.

Wisdom rejects the pursuit of perfectionism

Notice verse 20,

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

Ecclesiastes 7:20

Solomon isn't being cynical here. The verb for doing good means, continually — without interruption does good and never ever sins.

Solomon understands that you might come to the conclusion that if you avoid

the extremes of selfish wickedness and self-righteousness, that you can arrive at sinless perfection.

And Solomon makes it clear that there is no one — even among those following after God — who will arrive, in this lifetime, at sinless perfection.

That's why the gospel is good news. Jesus Christ, the righteous, sinless Son of God died on behalf of your sinfulness and mine.



Are you a perfectionist? How do you shift your focus away from that, and back onto Jesus as the only perfect person who has ever lived? Do you find that truth to be freeing in your own life?

If we could make it to a state of sinless perfection, then Jesus did not need to die.

Wisdom is when you understand your sinfulness in light of Christ's forgiveness. Perfection in holiness will not be achieved in this life, but it is our great longing to be like Christ.

We want to go one day without sin — that's our faltering, stumbling goal — but just remember that because of Jesus, sinless perfection is our future glory, when we are perfected in holiness in the presence of Christ.

Wisdom refuses to be paralyzed by painful criticism

Notice verse 21:

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.

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22

The word here for cursed can mean to dishonor, or to slight, or to make light of.

That household servant — in our culture that would be another employee or classmate or somebody in the neighborhood — word gets back to you, or perhaps you're around the corner and you hear their comment about you, and it's critical; it's condescending; it might even be crude or cruel.

Simply put — it hurts.



What is a time when you have been hurt by criticism? Did you take that criticism to heart, and let it consume you, or did you put those words in their proper perspective?

There isn't anyone in this auditorium who hasn't felt the sting of those words.

And for those of you out front, the chances are higher simply because there are more people who will have an opinion and a few words about what they think about you.

If you're a parent, you are going to be reviewed every so often.

If you're a boss over employees, they'll be saying things about you.

Maybe you've already discovered that one of the rules of leadership is that everything is your fault.

The problem with being a leader is you are never sure if you're being followed or chased. Sometimes it can be both.

I love what one author wrote when he said that the key to be a good leader is keeping people who don't like you away from those who are still undecided.

Now what's interesting here is that **Solomon doesn't say**, "If you hear someone slighting or criticizing you, don't worry about it because it probably isn't true."

No, it might be true — notice verse 21 again:

Do not take to heart all the things that people say.

Ecclesiastes 7:21a

In other words, "Some of it might be true." It might be an invitation from God to repent — to change. Sometimes when we hear criticism we need to go to God and ask him, "Is it true?"

And then ask Him to live in such a way to prove it untrue.

By the way, this wise advice works both ways. Don't believe all the nice things people say about you either.

Compliments can be as dangerous as criticisms.

My father used to tell us growing up, that a compliment was like perfume — you can smell it, just don't swallow it."

Howard Hendricks used to tell us in seminary, more than once, "Men, never believe the press reports — never believe them." And then he went on to say, "Don't go back to the lobby after the church service and make everybody walk past you and shake your hand and say nice things they probably don't mean. Do you know what that is back there — that's the glorification of the worm ceremony."

Which is why, to this day, I don't go to the back of the auditorium after the service.

Solomon essentially says here, "Take criticism with a grain of salt."

Don't be thrown into a disheartened pity party. Keep going. Change if you need to, learn from it, live so that it isn't true and grow from it.

But then notice that Solomon goes on to add some really wise realism to our pity part.

Look at verse 22 again:

Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.

Ecclesiastes 7:22

You know who you are! You have done the same thing many times before!

Take their criticism with a grain of salt and remember your own faults.

One man wrote, "I never worry about people who say bad things about me because I know a lot more stuff about me than they do and it's worse than they think!"

Walking with balance and wisdom allows you to work through these issues:

Wisdom rejects the pursuit of perfectionism.

Wisdom refuses to be paralyzed by painful criticism.

Wisdom recognizes the limitations of intellectualism

Notice verse 23:

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?"

Ecclesiastes 7:23-24

According to the Bible, wisdom is a gift from God — it emanates from a relationship with God (James 1:5).

Wisdom cannot be manufactured by human beings.

Notice further in verse 25;

*I turned my heart to know
and to search out and to
seek wisdom and the
scheme (or explanation) of
things, and to know the
wickedness of folly and the
foolishness that is madness.*

Ecclesiastes 7:25

In other words, “I set my heart and mind on figuring out the human race and who I am and why we do the things we do.

And I didn’t get very far!

Life is mysterious and we really can’t fully understand ourselves much less how the world operates around us. We are simply under the limitation of our own fallen intellectual capacity.

Even the most brilliant admit to their limitation.



Do you ever try to figure things out on your own, trusting in your own intellect? When you do that, how does God humble you?

I think often of Isaac Newton, the brilliant physicist of the 17th century. He solved the laws of motion and universal gravity by the age of 24. He invented calculus,

discovered the laws of the tides and was the first to discover that light was composed of all the colors of the spectrum.

For 200 years, his mathematical formulas and equations controlled scientific thought; he was the first scientist to be knighted by the crown.

Newton was a creationist and committed believer. In his later years he wrote, “I have only discovered the edges of God’s ways. There is a great ocean of knowledge and I have but been paddling in the shallows.”

I’ve only been paddling around in the shallow water of this immense ocean of all there is to know and is known only by our Creator God.

Wisdom recognizes the limitations of intellectualism.

Wisdom resists the invitations of hedonism.

Hedonism is a world view — a way of life — that says, “The pursuit of pleasure is the greatest pursuit of life.”

You happen to live in a world totally convinced that hedonism is the way to live, and it will invite you to a hundred different diversions.

Now notice verse 26:

*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 (explanation) 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.

Ecclesiastes 7:26-29

Now this is not the passage you should put on your wedding invitation.

Don't misunderstand Solomon to be rating women as less trustworthy than men, because he could not find one woman worth trusting among a thousand, but he found one man who had his back.

In other passages, Solomon speaks highly of women, especially in the Book of Proverbs. He even personifies wisdom as a woman in chapters 1, 8 and 9.

Solomon is actually describing a prostitute here — a woman who is a sexual trap. He's describing the same woman in Proverbs chapter 7 who catches the naïve man.

What Solomon is essentially saying is that he went looking for love; he went looking for support; he went looking for

companionship. And he found one friend among men, but none among women.



What do you look for pleasure in? Are there any idols in your life, distracting you from God?

And with that statement, you need to understand the significance of the number 1,000.

Solomon married or had in his royal harem a total of 1,000 women.

He looked for love and lasting pleasure in life from 1,000 women and found none satisfactory.

You see, now as a 70-year-old man, he comes to the conclusion that there isn't one woman in his entire palace grounds that did anything but turn his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:1-8).

They didn't satisfy anything. Pursuing pleasure robbed him of true pleasure, in the relationship and company of one woman — a wife he will describe in Proverbs 31 and he will say of her: ***in her the heart of her husband does safely trust (Proverbs 31:11)***

The truth is, Solomon was looking in all the wrong places and he was looking in all the wrong ways.

Hedonism is always going to be a dead end.

Listen to a young woman who wrote in her testimony: “I hungered in life for love. I went from one relationship after another. I woke up one morning lying in bed with a man I had met the night before. And as I looked over at him sleeping there, I felt the most intense loneliness I had ever experienced. I realized that my sin was creating and compounding rather than relieving the emptiness and loneliness in my life. I went on to pursue what I knew about the gospel — I found forgiveness and a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and what I had been searching for in men, I have found in Him.”

Solomon wraps up his comments by giving us three added benefits to the balance and behavior of wisdom.

Chapter 8 verse 1 finishes off this theme:

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing (or matter)? A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

Ecclesiastes 8:1

Three added benefits – quickly:

1. Wisdom will help you live uniquely.

Who is like the wise?

Ecclesiastes 8:1a

That’s like asking, “Where are they?!” Listen, you have no idea how rare you will become — like that one person in that town compared to 10 political leaders.

How rare are you, when you walk with the balance and behavior of wisdom.

2. Wisdom will help you make decisions correctly.

Who knows the interpretation (solution, reason) of a thing?

Ecclesiastes 8:1b

That word for interpretation can be translated “solution or reason.” Who’s got a solution, a reason, some discernment here?

Life is filled with riddles, and a wise person goes to God, thinks through it biblically, prays through it carefully.

3. Wisdom will help you live more graciously.

A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

Ecclesiastes 8:1c

Imagine that! Wisdom is going to show up on your face; it will mellow your disposition; it shows up in your

relationships and improve your demeanor.

It shows up in your attitude and softens your temperament.

Is it any wonder that Solomon would state it as a matter of life and death in his Proverbs when he writes, **Getting wisdom is better than getting gold (Proverbs 16:16).**

Get wisdom, do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. I love this — **The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom! (Proverbs 4:5-7).**

In other words, the very first step in getting wisdom is wanting to get the wisdom of God.



Do you want wisdom? If you had it, would you use it? Ask God today to give you wisdom, to direct your paths, and see what he can do in your life today!

It's a matter of life and death.

- Left to ourselves we'll pursue perfectionism — I'll just try to be perfect.
- We'll become paralyzed by dishonor and criticism — I'll never be good enough;

- We'll become proud in our knowledge and intellectualism — I'll prove how smart I am;
- We'll get wasted in the emptiness of hedonism — I'll never find what I'm looking for in life.

Wisdom will draw you to the Creator of wisdom, the giver of wisdom, and this word of God's wisdom, which points to the gospel of wisdom:

- Jesus alone is perfect;
- Jesus took all the world's dishonor upon Himself;
- Jesus is all knowing, brilliant God;
- Jesus will forgive your sin and accept you into His family forever.

Two testimonies and I'm through.

John Newton, the redeemed slave trader, once wild and wicked, came to Christ during a terrible storm in the Atlantic, remembered his mother's prayers and trusted in Christ for forgiveness.

He would write Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

He would write a lesser known hymn which became his expanded testimony:

"In evil long I took delight, unawed by shame or fear;

Until a new object met my sight
and stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree in agony and blood,

Who fixed His languid eyes on me

as near His cross I stood.

Sure, never till my latest breath shall I forget that look.

It seemed to charge me with His death,

though not a word He spoke,

A second look He gave, which said, "I freely all forgive; My blood was for thy ransom paid,

I died that you might live."

Reminds me of another poet; I mentioned him earlier today. As an old man, nearing his death, Johann Sebastian Bach had become totally blind and entirely

dependent upon his family and friends to write for him.

As he neared the end of his life, the very last song he composes – a chorus we would call it – gives us a brief glimpse into his lifelong walk with the balance and behavior of wisdom.

Some of these final lyrics he composed read:

"Before your throne I now appear,

Turn not your gracious face

From me, a poor sinner.

Confer on me this blessed end,

Lord, that I may see you eternally.

Amen, amen."

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