

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 7

The Contrast of Wisdom and Folly

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. 2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. 5 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. 6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity. 7 Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. 8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. 9 Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools. 10 Say not, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. 11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. 12 For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. 13 Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? 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 man may not find out anything that will be after him. 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. 16 Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? 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. 19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. 20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. 21 Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. 22 Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. 23 All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. 24 That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? 25 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. 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. 27 Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— 28 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. 29 See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

At first glance it seems that Solomon’s tone is more pessimistic than ever. In one poetic verse after another he praises death, mourning, sorrow, and rebuke as being preferable to life, feasting, laughter and pleasure. As we look more closely, what he is doing becomes apparent. In effect, the king is saying, “If you want to live life as it should be lived, you must face it realistically, as it has become in this sinful world.” (PBC)

7:1-13 Common thread in these verses is that, in all of life's ups and downs, the wise person will trust that God works things out for good (Rm 8:28). (TLSB)

7:1 *a good name* – In the book of Proverbs Solomon also speaks of the value of a good reputation: “A good name is more desirable than riches” (22:1). In comparing one's name or reputation to perfume, Solomon is not just pointing out how pleasing a good name is. He is also making a play on the Hebrew words for name (shem) and perfume, or oil (shemen). This type of play on words is common in Hebrew poetry, much as in English. Solomon uses the same expression in the Song of Songs: “Your name is like perfume” (Song of Songs 1:3). (PBC)

better than precious ointment – Expensive possessions do not make up for a bad reputation, referred to as a stench (Gn 34:30; Ex 5:21). (TLSB)

day of death. The Christian has ample reason to say this (2Co 5:1–10; Php 1:21–23). But the Teacher's point is valid, as explained in vv. 2–6, namely, that happy times generally teach us less than hard times. (CSB)

Unusually pessimistic proverb grouped with two other comparative proverbs. Each uses repetition and similar sounds, which perhaps led Solomon to group them. (TLSB)

For the Christian, of course, death is the gate to Paradise. But even from a worldly standpoint, considering life's many sorrows, it would be better not to be than to be. (PBC)

7:2 *house of mourning* – The end of all men is seen in the house of mourning. God is continually opening to the living the house of mourning, that they may enter and consider what awaits them. The heart of the wise willingly dwells there. It is only the foolish who seek by noisy mirth to exclude from their minds all thoughts of death and judgment to come. (CB)

Solomon tells why it is better to visit a funeral parlor than a banquet hall. To examine death makes us realize how frail and brief life is. It also moves us to think about the cause of death. (PBC)

lay it to heart – He will meditate there on the vanity of life, and be thus led to prepare himself for death. (CB)

The living may consider what will come at the end of their lives. Death teaches them to spend their lives well. (TLSB)

7:3 *sorrow is better than laughter* – It is better to enter into life's sorrow than to try to run away from it. We should share in the grief of others. This was the way of our Savior. (PBC)

Rather than take shortcomings and failures in a lighthearted or even mocking way, one who is sorrowful over shortcomings and sins will find comfort and forgiveness from God. (TLSB)

At times troubles become so pressing that even the most foolish individual can no longer avoid life's serious side. Pain, remarked C.S. Lewis, is God's “megaphone.” Trouble may prove a priceless blessing, if in his need a person comes to rely on God. Sometimes entire societies are shaken out of their complacency. In our trouble age many people are searching for spiritual values. (PBC)

7:4 Ambrose: “He shall be saved in the future who has wept [tears of repentance] most in this age” (NPNF 2 10:352). (TLSB)

7:5 *to hear the rebuke of the wise* – This is another thing which is better than mirth and flattery. (CB)

Even though criticism may hurt and bring sadness, it better than false flattery. (PBC)

song of fools – “Fools” is the label Solomon gives to people who don’t want to face life as it is. A fool is of no help to himself or to others. Instead of dealing with evil and trying to correct it, he’ll joke about it or heap empty words of praise on the wrongdoer. (PBC)

7:6 *crackling of thorns* – Their flame is noisy and fierce but soon over. (CB)

Thorns placed in a fire burn rapidly and make a lot of noise. The quick flash of heat does not burn long enough to cook a meal. (TLSB)

The making of a fire of thorns might give off a loud and crackling sound, but never last long. (PBC)

laughter of the fools – The enjoyment of those who make earthly pleasure their chief good is turbulent and short-lived, and ends in darkness and sorrow. (CB)

Even though correction may not be pleasant, it is preferred over someone making light of a situation (Ps 141:5). (TLSB)

7:7 *bribe*. See Mt 28:11–15; Lk 22:4–6. (CSB)

The temptation to cheat others, or to give or take bribes, can be the downfall of any man or woman. (PBC)

7:8 *end of a thing* – The successful accomplishment requires patience and perseverance. We must wait until an undertaking is through before we can speak confidently of it. (CB)

patient in spirit than the proud in spirit – A finished task is better than one left incomplete and therefore useless. Solomon is saying, “Don’t go jumping from one project to the next in the hope of instant success.” (PBC)

The patient person demonstrates confidence in God’s working things for our good (Heb 11). Luther: “Perseverance crowns the work; wait for the end. It is not how you begin that matters, but how you follow through” (AE 15:116). (TLSB)

The proud are properly contrasted with the patient, since pride is the root of anger. (CB)

7:9 *angry*. See, e.g., Pr 16:32; 17:14; 1Co 13:4–5. (CSB)

We human beings tend to become irritated when our plans don’t work out. This is another mark of the fool. The wise man understands that God is in control. We must entrust our work to Him and await His time.

One who lashes out at injustices or hardships has likely forgotten God's promises to help in such times, and so rejects God's wisdom. (TLSB)

7:10 *why were the former days better* – The Preacher forbids a complaining spirit, which is always contrasting the evils of the present with the good of the past. This is a work of impatience and folly. (CB)

Whether we are referring to the days of our childhood or when our grandparents were young or some other century, such comparisons are not wise. Why not? Simply because the old days were not better. Since the Fall, the days have always been evil. In some ways our age may be better. For instance, while today's mass media have helped spread many ungodly ideas, they have also helped Christians to share the gospel. (PBC)

not from wisdom – Wisdom lies in understanding God and how He works in our lives, knowing that He works things for good for all who love Him (Rm 8:28). (TLSB)

7:11 *wisdom is good* – The marginal reading, “as good as an inheritance,” seems to contain the true idea, which the following verse confirms. (CB)

“Wisdom is as good as an inheritance.” (TLSB)

Both wisdom and inheritance are good. Both benefit people who live on earth. (PBC)

7:12 *wisdom is like the protection of money* – Luth: “He who sees and hears much has a great opportunity for sorrow and indignation, because he sees and experiences the things that bring injury to the heart.... Solomon is not speaking about foolish men, who do not care at all about wisdom and human affairs, but about the best of men, those who want to help human affairs, men such as those in public office and in the management of households. For those who administer public or private business come to experience the fraud and perfidy of men. This fact has frightened many men away from public office.... Christians should be exhorted to live in the very midst of the crowd, to marry, to govern their household, etc. Moreover, when their efforts are hindered by the malice of men, they should bear it patiently and not cease their good works. Do not desert the battlefield but stick it out” (AE 15:105–6). (TLSB)

preserves the life. The Hebrew for this expression can also mean “gives life” or “renews life” (see Pr 3:13–18; 13:14). (CSB)

Money in the bank or in an insurance policy provides shelter from financial disaster when there is sickness or death in a family. But wisdom has advantage over money. It preserves the life of its possessor. Here one might think of the advantage of a good education or knowledge of some trade. The person who possesses the right skills is able to find a job and make a living. (PBC)

Or, “better than the protection of money.” This points us toward the wisdom God provides in His Word (Pr 8:35). (TLSB)

7:13 Jacob is a good example; God made him limp after the encounter at Jabbok (Gn 32:22–32). God also renamed him Israel and changed him from a schemer to a patriarch. (TLSB)

consider the work of God – This pertains to His sovereign ordering of human affairs. (CB)

Who can make straight ...? Not fatalism, but a reminder of who is God. Man cannot change what God determines (see note on 1:15). (CSB)

To fret ourselves on account of those evils which God has made irremediable, is both foolish and wicked. They should be borne, as part of the discipline which He has laid upon us as sinners, for our spiritual good. (CB)

7:14 *God has made the one* [bad times] (CSB)

All days belong to the Lord. Even from the evil that happens to us, God can work something good (Gn 50:20). (TLSB)

as well as the other [good times]. Cf. Ro 8:28–29. (CSB)

It is wisdom, then, to accept what God sends. He sends bad times as well as good. When life is pleasant we can be happy and thankful, recognizing even temporary blessings as gifts from a loving God. When troubles come we can accept them as well, trusting that they, too, are for our good. We can go even further than accepting our troubles. We can rejoice in them. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we ^c also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:1-4). “²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:2-3). (PBC)

We have no way of knowing how long the good or bad times will last. Only the almighty God knows. And He “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His Will” (Ephesians 1:11), namely, His plan of salvation through Christ. In good and bad times alike He simply wants us to trust Him. (PBC)

may not find out anything that will be after him – God has so mingled prosperity and adversity, that no man can find out what awaits him in the future of this life. (CB)

The Bible defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Solomon is urging faith. We need faith because it often seems as if God’s goodness and justice are nowhere to be found in this world. (PBC)

7:15 *vain life* – When the Teacher speaks of his “meaningless life” we should remember everything behind that word “meaningless.” Life is fleeting, like a breath. In our short lives we lack the time and the perspective to see the entire pictures of God’s eternal plans. Consequently, it frequently appears that God has lost control. Like seems topsy-turvy. It troubled Job in his suffering. It bothers the Psalmist Asaph a great deal, when he wrote Psalm 73. ¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵ They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. ⁷ From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. ⁸ They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. ⁹ Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. ¹⁰

Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. ¹¹ They say, “How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?” ¹² This is what the wicked are like— always carefree, they increase in wealth. ¹³ Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed your children. ¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me ¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. ¹⁸ Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. ¹⁹ How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! ²⁰ As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. ²¹ When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, ²² I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. ²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.”

righteous man who perishes. Righteousness is no sure protection against hard times or an early death. (CSB)

7:16-17 Luther: “Forget about the highest law; measure yourself by your own foot and sing, ‘Know thyself.’ Then you will find in your own breast a lengthy catalog of vices, and you will say: ‘Look, I myself am still unrighteous, and yet I am tolerated by God and am not banished by people. Then why am I so carried away with fury that I harshly require of others what I do not achieve myself?’ This is what it means to be ‘righteous overmuch’ ” (AE 15:122). (TLSB)

7:16 *not overly righteous.* If true righteousness and wisdom do not necessarily prevent ruin, then extreme, legalistic righteousness and wisdom will surely not help. (CSB)

Good example would be the Pharisees, who could not recognize their need for repentance. (TLSB)

Following his observations about injustice, Solomon’s next remark might appear somewhat cynical. To be sure, the unrighteous do flourish in the world. But before getting too upset about it, we should look at our own lives and say, “If God would have punished me for everything I’ve done, I’d be much worse off than I am.” There are more than enough wicked and foolish deed in our past to keep us from being “overrighteous” or “overwise.” (PBC)

Adding our own “wisdom” to God’s can also distort the truth and lead to our ruin. (TLSB)

7:17 *not ... overwicked.* Extreme wickedness is even more foolhardy. (CSB)

Be restrained from doing evil things, but remember you will still sin. (TLSB)

Some might foolishly conclude that because the world is so wicked anyway, they may as well indulge themselves. (PBC)

7:18 *good...take hold* – That is, God’s counsel. (CB)

the one ... the other. The God-fearing person will avoid both extremes (legalism and libertinism) and lead a balanced—truly righteous and wise—life. (CSB)

The wise person will admit the tendency to be self-righteous as well as the inability to stop sinning. Such a person will find relief in the forgiveness God offers. (TLSB)

The idea is that of taking the middle road between two extremes. We come to know this proper way as we regularly study the Scriptures and then apply them in the hard school of experience. (PBC)

7:19 *wise man than ten rulers* – The person who has wisdom makes a good ruler. He avoids extremes and is able to balance justice with compassion. In his early years as king, Solomon had been such a ruler. Other kings and queens respected him because of his ability to rule wisely. Exceptionally wise rulers are a rare blessing to their cities and lands. We should often pray that God will give our leaders such wisdom. (PBC)

Having 10 proven warriors or administrators will not defend or govern a city as well as having one godly, wise person. (TLSB)

7:20 *not a righteous man on earth.* A sober Biblical truth (see Ro 3:10–20). (CSB)

Solomon also says this in his prayer dedicating the temple (2Ch 6:36). The OT shows that every person sins and needs a Savior (Rm 3:10–20). Those who find favor in God’s sight recognize His forgiveness and undeserved love. (TLSB)

The words of this verse occur elsewhere in Scripture. Solomon used almost the exact wording in his prayer at the dedication of the temple. “There is no one who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46). He then went on to ask God, “Forgive your people.” St. Paul paraphrases this verse in Romans 3:10, “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one.’” Paul proceeds to demonstrate man’s complete inability to save himself and his complete dependence on the grace of God. (PBC)

7:21 *do not take heart all the things that people say* – We should never go in search of uncharitable rumors concerning ourselves, but rather pass them by unheeded, remembering how often we have spoken uncharitably of others. (CB)

Syour servant cursing you – The servant may have cause to be angry at his master (cf v 9), and others may speak ill of him. But believers should look to God for a helpful assessment of their life. (TLSB)

7:22 *yourself have cursed* – The better people know you, the better they know your faults. Someone has observed, “No man is a hero to his valet.” (PBC)

7:23 *all this I have tested by wisdom* – This is what the Preacher has recorded of his search after good. He had found out that “all is vanity” but wisdom itself, that is, a comprehension of God’s works and ways, remains far from him. (CB)

With his shift in emphasis to life under God, it’s likely that he is speaking of godly wisdom. (PBC)

7:24 *that which has been is far off* – So are the works and ways of God. (CB)

In one sense, of course, this wisdom is not beyond people. True wisdom resides in God’s Word. According to Deuteronomy 30:11-14, God’s Word “is not too difficult...No, the word is very

near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.” God’s Word is as clear as a “lamp” and “light” (Psalm 119:105). (PBC)

7:25 *turned my heart to know* – Solomon is saying that we human beings will never exhaust all there is to know. Nobody reaches the point where he knows it all. Even if we get to know a tremendous amount of information, we still must learn to apply it practically. (PBC)

wickedness of folly – Abandoning God’s wisdom and love amounts to wickedness and stupidity. (TLSB)

7:26 Pr 7:6–27 goes into detail about a loose woman, comparing the threat and risk of adultery to idolatry. Cf Col 2:8; Jas 3:15. Avoiding the temptations of following our own designs comes only through God’s help. (TLSB)

woman whose heart is snares and nets – Most likely Solomon is describing a woman who does not keep a proper balance in her relationships. He speaks from experience. Luther offers these words on the passage, “Those who are wise in the Word of God run away from these snares. (PBC)

7:27 *Adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things.* This inductive method can never be complete, nor can we reliably interpret all that we manage to observe (3:11b). Human wisdom and understanding must always yield to revealed truth. (CSB)

7:28 Few people possess wisdom, fewer still pursue it, and even Solomon did not hold on to it. Christ embodied wisdom and called Himself greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42). (TLSB)

one man among a thousand – When he mentions one man in a thousand, maybe he is referring to some of the great leaders of God’s people – men like Abraham, Joseph, or Moses. (PBC)

woman among all these I have not found – A woman of true wisdom. (CB)

That is among the thousand. The reference seems to be to Solomon’s experience of the women who belonged to his royal establishment. Among such a thousand, selected for their personal charms, and many of them from among the heathen nations, nourished in idleness and luxury, and intriguing with each other for the monarch’s favor, no better result could have been expected. Here was not the place to find Ruths and Hannahs. (CB)

All humankind, whom Solomon weighed for uprightness and wisdom. Ironically, he chastened women for lacking wisdom, though he had foolishly chased after them! Cf 1Ki 11:1–4. (TLSB)

7:29 *God made mankind upright, but.* See Ge 3:1–6; Ro 5:12. (CSB)

Athanasius: “She [the human soul] is made to see God, and to be enlightened by Him; but of her own accord in God’s stead she has sought corruptible things and darkness” (NPNF 2 4:7). (TLSB)

schemes – Although in the beginning “God made mankind upright,” all of us have gone astray. We all have spent our time working on our own “schemes” rather than following God’s will. As in many other passages, the Apostle James reflects Solomon’s thoughts here. “When tempted no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, but each

one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed” (James 1:13-14). (PBC)

Chemnitz: “This is the same word which in Gen. 6:5 and 8:21 describes the evil figment of man’s imagination” (*LTh* 1:257). (TLSB)

Ch 7 Avoiding God’s wisdom is wickedness and folly, but finding such wisdom—as God gives it—preserves our life and gives us hope in the face of all frustrations. Other sources of wisdom offer little or no hope, certainly none in the face of God’s final judgment. The only way to acquire wisdom is in the revelation that God has given us of Himself. • Thank You, O God, that despite our inclination to folly and wickedness, You chose to reveal Your good and gracious will for us. The source of all wisdom is Your Son. By sending Him, You showed us infinite love and forgiveness, hope for now and eternity. Amen. (TLSB)