

Grace for the Day

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

Ecclesiastes – Devotional (Day 15 – 21)

By Rev. Peter Eng

Day 15

Finding the Highway

Ecclesiastes 7:1-6

"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure."

During a funeral wake, thoughts are sober. The tomfoolery of partying is no longer appropriate. Those who try to import jokes into a funeral do so only to raise the ire of the bereaved. In many Chinese funerals, especially for those who have died at a ripe old age, there is no mourning. This is with the understanding of all parties involved that the deceased has lived to a ripe old age, and there is no reason for grief. (This must be strange to Westerners.) Under normal circumstances, the family would be hurting badly and there can be no good jokes in a funeral. Jokes are the "song of fools, the crackling of thorns burning under a pot."

I have conducted many funerals and the most painful ones are those when parents mourn for their children. We see people cut down in their prime and ask why they need to go while we stay behind. We ask questions related to

where we will go, how we have spent our time, and how we will be remembered after we are gone. Funerals tell us that "death is the destiny of every man; the living should take heart."

Unless a person has a morbid slant, nobody enjoys a funeral. The Bible is not asking us to enjoy funerals. The point is simply that funerals are the instruments through which we are forced to look at our destiny—the grave.

This life has a timeline. We begin at birth and end at the grave. The NT saint can sometimes become complacent, thinking that he has all eternity. We are reminded that as NT saints, we are also called upon to redeem our time. What this means is that between the two points of birth and death, we try to move in a straight line towards our God-given goal.

We may enjoy an aimless saunter after dinner. But life can be enjoyed only when we move in the straightest possible line towards our goal. Divergences may seem pleasurable, but they are empty and meaningless. Divergences from our goals take away our enjoyment of life.

That: When the goal is in sight, we run a straight course.

Day 16**Avoiding the Byways**

Ecclesiastes 7:7-14

(See Ecclesiastes — Some Challenging Passages)

"Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?"

When I first started driving, I was flabbergasted by the way people gave me road directions. They tell me that I am to go straight until I come to a junction and make a turn there. I took them literally and went straight only to find a dead end. It took me a while to learn that in driving nomenclature, to go straight means to follow the road even when the road turns! Straight does not mean driving through a field.

When the LORD has made the crooked straight or the straight crooked, no one can change that. To keep to the highway of life, and to reach for the goal God has given us does not imply that we know the future, for "a man cannot discover anything about his future." When we speak of staying on the highway of God's will, it may be like Moses who followed the bend on the road to spend forty years as a shepherd before he led Israel. In God's plan that was straight, but it does not appear that way to human beings. So how do we know we are on God's highway? By avoiding the byways!

The first warning is that we should not yield to either oppression or

bribes. The person who is normally wise can behave like a fool when he is oppressed. When we start to yield to those who pervert the course of justice and take it sitting down, we begin to lose our bearings on right and wrong. We do whatever is most convenient. And the price we pay for compromising is ultimately greater than what we stand to lose if we were to resist oppression. In the same way, the one who accepts bribes also loses his moral bearings.

The next three warnings are against impatience, a hot temper, and discontentment. The one who is impatient for immediate results often trades small instant thrills for final success. The one who is hot tempered is predictable and another can engineer his fall because his character is known. And the one who is always harping on the "good old days" is simply one who has forgotten the bad and remembered only the good, in a spirit of discontentment.

That: God's highway for me is that I obey Him.

Day 17**Avoid Extremes**

Ecclesiastes 7:15-22

*(See Ecclesiastes — Some Challenging Passages)**"Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise...."*

I know a few brothers who are righteous. They strive to be consistent, and I respect them for their unstinting efforts to be consistent. While they may not succeed all the time, I feel that they take God seriously. But absolute consistency is so difficult.

For instance, I urge people not to do their marketing or shopping on Sundays. Why? The missionary who works among restaurant owners will tell you why. We give restaurateurs strong motivation not to even consider Jesus Christ because they make the most money on Sundays. We cannot both invite a person to spend Sunday worshipping God and give him work on Sunday so that he will not worship God.

Gentle reader, forgive me for my inconsistency. Spare me the horsewhip if you find it in you to do so, for a person asked me, "How do I get to church on Sunday? I don't have a car, and I make the bus driver and the taxi driver work when I go to church." I have no answer.

I am not sure at which point a person becomes overrighteous. Perhaps you will agree with me that the pastor who tries to get everybody to car pool, who says that we can neither eat out nor cook at home, but we have to eat overnight food, or that absolutely no house work may be done, would be

considered overrighteous. He is right in that the LORD's day is for us to put aside work and focus on God. But an overrighteous leader will have only himself to lead; and to kick.

The Bible does not at any point give us license to sin. But God recognizes that in this grossly imperfect world, we just cannot ever get our whole act together. We can never pretend that wrong is right. But we can be harsher on ourselves and those around us than God would be. God does not always "repay us according to our iniquities" (Psa 103:10).

Perhaps a good example of this is found in this episode:

(Naaman said) "...your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also — when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this."

"Go in peace," Elisha said.

(2 Kings 5:17-19)

"He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psa 103:14). We do well to remember that too.

Thot: When I fail to keep God's law, I appeal to his grace.

Day 18**The Dark Side**

Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:1

"So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly."

If we seek understanding, it is not enough that we know only things that are good and right. The Teacher, in his search for understanding, sees the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. He had to know some of the key points along which people stumble. He shares four of these with us.

There is the person who is trapped by the woman who ensnares. She is alluring and desirable, but her heart and hands opened in welcome are like a net to the unsuspecting victim. The one who lives his life to please God will naturally escape her (7:26).

Another folly is pride in knowledge. The process of gathering data, of adding one thing upon another yields knowledge, but the teacher testifies that such a method (inductive method) does not deliver us absolute truth (7:27-28a).

The third is the scarcity of understanding. (Please note that the word "upright" is supplied by the NIV translators and not found in the original Hebrew.) He found one man

among a thousand who had understanding, but in his search, women who have understanding are even rarer. The teacher is deliberately subjective here. He says that such was his own observation in his search. He was not asserting his search as a universal truth (inductive method). He was only responsible for honestly telling us what he discovered. And his conclusion should not come as a surprise to us because the women then are largely confined to the home, with little opportunity to interact on philosophical matters. But these should not detract us from the main point, which is to say: *understanding is scarce.*

The fourth point is that God made man upright, and man's woeful condition is of his own making. But the one who has acquired the skill of righteous living (wisdom), has a brightened face.

That: Half of wisdom is to avoid folly.

Day 19**Under Dictatorship**

Ecclesiastes 8:2-9

"There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt."

While many in the western world enjoy much political and personal freedom, the majority of the world's population live under authoritarian or totalitarian control. They often live from day to day in fear of what the authorities may do to them. Can we enjoy life under such circumstances? The teacher says, "Yes." He counsels prudence when living under dictatorship.

First we need to realize that there is a spiritual dimension to any political situation. The person who has pledged loyalty to the king has done it in God's presence. Even if the king does not deserve loyalty, that person owes it to God to keep his oath of loyalty.

In the case of despotic kings, there is a tendency to employ any means to get rid of the wicked king. By employing the methods of the world, we risk dying for nothing. The wise in heart knows "the proper time and procedure." Even if the king makes his life a heavy burden, the wisest thing for him to do is to enjoy life within the limits the king permits him to move.

Many ask, if we do not implement change, who will? Yet we are told

that no man knows the future. As one has no power over the wind, neither the king nor the oppressed has power over his own life. The believer enjoys life despite all things because he has the assurance that "wickedness will not release those who practice it." The oppressed may be bullied by the king, but the wicked king is a slave to evil, ever seeking satisfaction, but never finding it.

Strange though it may sound to those who hold western values of freedom, the Teacher tells us that enjoying life is not conditioned by any political or personal freedom. A believer in China was sentenced to process human waste into fertilizer (manually). He testified that those were the most enjoyable years of his life. There was nobody around and he finally got the opportunity to sing praises to God as loudly as he wanted to.

That: If circumstances rob us of joy, it is because we allow it.

Day 20**Faith Takes Over**

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

"Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God."

Can we really enjoy life though the wicked seem to do well, and the righteous seem to fail? Can we enjoy life when standing up for what is good and right has only penalized us? Can God be real when the wicked go unpunished, and the righteous suffer? Find your answer here from the Teacher.

We need to say that the general principles of cause and effect do not always fall in place before our eyes. God is sovereign and just. He has said he will punish the wicked, but the when and how are up to him. If he chooses to let us see the wicked punished, it should bring fear in our hearts that God is holy and will not tolerate sin. But if we respond in glee, we sin. It is better for us not to witness justice. The Teacher has all confidence that "it will go better with God-fearing men." The Teacher's knowledge of the sovereignty and justice of God was sufficient to sustain him. Even if we do not see the wicked receiving just retribution in this life, they will receive it when they meet God.

Another point we need to note is that we know too little of the LORD'S grand scheme of things. We are told that the life of the wicked will not lengthen like a shadow. This seems to indicate that there is a long life reward for the righteous, which is God's special blessing in addition to what was originally assigned to them (in human terms). This is seen in the life of King Hezekiah who was afraid to die. His plea resulted in God lengthening his life by 15 years. Of course, in God's ultimate plan, it was all provided for.

We need to realize that the promise of blessing from God is not in comparison to another person. We relate directly to God. Long life, prosperity, a secure and happy family, freedom from war and hunger are all contributing factors to enjoying life. But the person who fears God lives in close touch with God. He knows when he has received a blessing from God, and enjoys life to the full.

Thot: The fear of the Lord handles the frustrations in the world.

Day 21**This Story**

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

"It is now that God favors what you do."

We all die. That is reality. Whether we are good or evil, man or beast, we die and decay. The humble existence as a live dog is better than the proud past of a dead lion. The Teacher, in his limited knowledge of eternal life focuses on *how to enjoy life now*. This is good because the Christian life is abundant, and is to be enjoyed *now* as well as when we see Christ. Too many people think of the Christian life as a series of miseries we suffer now so that we get a better future.

The time to enjoy food and drink is now. The time to live an upright dignified life (clothed in white and head anointed with oil) is now. Life is transient, enjoy the relationship we have with our spouses. There will come a time when desires diminish. Enjoy our work. Do it wholeheartedly. The time to all this is now. This should be the story of our life.

We know well enough that disasters can come without warning and without pity. If we do not learn to enjoy life now, when will we learn? The good LORD gave us senses to relate to the world around us, and to enjoy the things he stocked in this world. The truly balanced Christian life is one that enjoys the present and the future.

Puritans have a bad name. But the real puritans, not the sour-pusses of a later era, were people who believed in enjoying life within the natural and

spiritual perimeters God gives us. There was a case of a man who refused intimacy with his wife. His wife complained to the church elders who counseled the man to change. When he refused to change, they started disciplinary action against him!

When we think of the future that is unknown (even for us in the NT age, we know very little), we find that many of the negative emotions which possess us can be shed. Life is no more a struggle in an arena for mere existence. It is a pleasure cruise that will soon end.

Thot: Don't harp over what we do not have, sing about what we do have

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.