

God Made Man Righteous (Holy)? What Happened?



SABBATH—FEBRUARY 17

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ecclesiastes 7.

MEMORY VERSE: “Here’s [here is] the only other thing I found. God made men honest. But they’ve [they have] made many evil plans” (Ecclesiastes 7:29, NIV).

THE POET RAINER RILKE WAS TALKING ABOUT WOMEN IN PARIS FEEDING BIRDS WITH PIECES OF BREAD THAT WERE “A BIT CHEWED AND SOGGY.” He wrote, “It does the women good to think that their saliva is getting out into the world a little. The small birds will fly off with the taste of it in their mouths. But a moment later, the birds will forget it again.”—Adapted.

What a sad example of humans trying to find meaning and purpose in the wrong place. As humans, we do look for meaning, purpose, and direction in life. Here we are, in this world, with so many choices and so many paths to choose from. How do we know which ones are right?

This week we will study Ecclesiastes 7. Verses 1-14 read like Proverbs, with short little sayings about morality,¹ life, injustice, wisdom, et cetera. These sayings are not always easy to understand. But they are filled with wisdom from the world’s wisest man. Jesus even spoke about Solomon’s wisdom. Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 sounds more like the older, bitter Solomon, who, even in his bitterness, still has plenty of wisdom to share.

Ecclesiastes 7 deals with more questions about life. With the whole Bible in mind, Ecclesiastes 7 shows that the right answers can be found only in God. He is the same God who has created us, saved us, and has given us meaning and purpose in life. Many people try to find meaning and purpose in useless and unsatisfactory places.

¹morality—the practice of doing what is good and right.

SUNDAY—FEBRUARY 18**A GOOD NAME (Ecclesiastes 7:1)**

At first look, Ecclesiastes 7:1 seems to show more of Solomon's bitterness. It is better to not have been born than to live and see all the evil done on this earth. It is better to have died in childbirth than to live, et cetera. But Ecclesiastes 7:1 seems to be saying something else. The key is in the first part of the verse.

What is the important message that Solomon is saying in the first half of Ecclesiastes 7:1? Also read Proverbs 22:1; Daniel 6:5; 1 Timothy 3:2, 10.

The value of a good reputation is clear. What comes next in the verse easily fits in. Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre argued that a person's life is described by that person's death. This means that life is finished at death. There will be no more changes, no more hope, no more growth. You are nothing more than what you were when you died.

In a way, that is correct. Our opportunities to get a good name, to have a good character, to be a positive influence in this world and for God's kingdom are over once we die. Character is formed here, not in the grave. Our chance for salvation is now, not after we die.



What do you want people to say about you when you die?

So in a way, Ecclesiastes 7:1 is really about making wise choices. A good name will last. An evil, wicked person will be here and gone, perhaps like the smell of perfume. How important then that we are careful with our time, that we prioritize² our actions. What things do we do that will have a lasting, even eternal,³ influence for good? Or do we choose to do the things that will one day be long gone and forgotten?

What are you doing with your time? If you had to stand before God and explain your actions for the past 24 hours, would you pass God's test?

²prioritize—to decide which things are most important.

³eternal—forever; without beginning or end; lasting forever.

MONDAY—FEBRUARY 19**HOUSE OF FEASTING, HOUSE OF MOURNING (Ecclesiastes 7:2-6)**

Some people say, “That person has just enough religion to make himself miserable [unhappy].” Everyone has seen those kinds of people. Perhaps they were the ones Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6:16. Those were the people who walked around with “a sad countenance [face]” in order to show everyone just how holy they were.

But a quick reading of Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 could make a person think that this attitude⁴ is what religion should be about. It is better to be mourning than feasting. It is better to be sad than laughing. How does all that fit in with the idea of joy in the Lord and being joyful in Christ (Leviticus 23:40; Psalm 5:11; Psalm 149:2; Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16)?

If you read Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 carefully, there is a hint that helps us better understand them.

What point is Solomon making in Ecclesiastes 7:2 that helps us understand his message in Ecclesiastes 7:2-6?

Solomon is repeating the idea touched on in yesterday’s lesson. No matter how much celebrating you do, there is always mourning, because we all die in the end. Wise people understand this. They understand the

seriousness of life. They understand that our lives do not end in a feast. They end in mourning. Our lives do not end in laughter. They end in sadness. Fools go along, not knowing of the end waiting for them. One day, instead of laughter, there will be “weeping and gnashing [grinding] of teeth.”

How does Luke 12:41-48 give this same message?

As Christians how do we find the right balance between feasting and mourning? After all, the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan) is a serious thing. It is a matter of eternal life. How do we balance this truth with the fact that we are to be joyful in the Lord?

TUESDAY—FEBRUARY 20**PATIENCE AND PRIDE (Ecclesiastes 7:7-14)**

We have already looked at Ecclesiastes 7:1-6. Today we will finish this first part, which includes short sayings that are like proverbs.

What points is Solomon making in Ecclesiastes 7:7-14? Which points touch you in a sensitive area?

There is a lot of wisdom in Ecclesiastes 7:7-14. Verse 7 speaks about a bribe making the heart dishonest. It

⁴attitude—how a person thinks and feels toward God, other people, or things.

touches on a key spiritual point: One compromise⁵ leads to another. It does not say that a corrupt (dishonest) heart takes a bribe. It says that a bribe makes the heart dishonest. What a powerful warning to us all about what sin does to the soul.

What point is Solomon making in Ecclesiastes 7:9? What do the following verses add to his message? Matthew 5:22; Matthew 18:21, 22; Romans 12:19-21.

How is wisdom a protection? Ecclesiastes 7:12. How does wisdom protect life? Also read Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 9:10, Colossians 1:28; James 3:13-18.



How can you plant peace like a seed (James 3:18)?

How do you understand Ecclesiastes 7:14? Also read Philippians 4:11-13.

How well are you doing in these areas? What things do you need to change? Anger, compromise, lack of trust? How important it is to get on your knees before God and look for the things He freely offers through Jesus.

WEDNESDAY—FEBRUARY 21

OUR SINFUL NATURES—PART ONE (Ecclesiastes 7:15-21)

Which of the following verses best describes the message of Ecclesiastes 7:15-21? (a) 1 Corinthians 13:13; (b) Galatians 6:2; (c) Romans 3:10.

Solomon paints a negative picture of people. We could just blame it on Solomon's negative attitude. But it is not so simple.

At the beginning of the Enlightenment,⁶ people were bursting with excitement about a new way of understanding the world. This new understanding was the great hope in human perfection. This new understanding said, Sure, the world has been bad. People have been bad. But now we are gaining new knowledge and a greater understanding of the world. We will defeat ignorance.⁷ Then people will improve and move steadily toward the path of moral⁸ perfection.

⁵compromise—willingness to give up a principle.

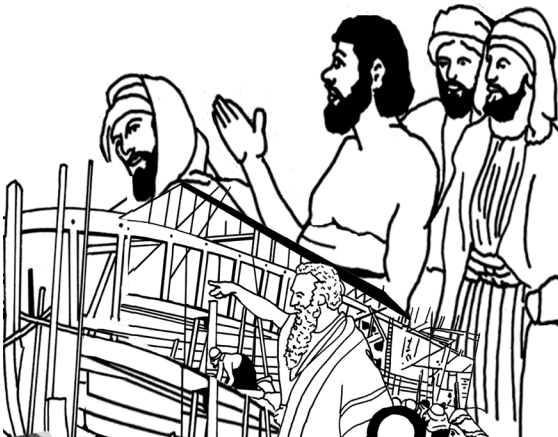
⁶the Enlightenment—a period in the seventeenth century when new knowledge and technology began to sprout (grow).

⁷ignorance—lack of knowledge.

⁸moral—having to do with knowing what is right and wrong.

Things improved so much that people believed new technology would soon help to conquer all the things that had caused the world so much trouble. People believed that through science and inventions, we would overcome disease, happenings of nature, and war.

Think about events⁹ over the past century. How well did science fulfill the great hopes people had for science? Also read Matthew 24.



The world is the same as it was when Noah built the ark.

Things did not turn out as expected. We gained new knowledge. But our sinful human natures were still in control. So much of that new knowledge and new power caused evil and suffering. Power and knowledge in themselves are not always good or bad. It is what people do with knowledge and power. The ruler of a powerful country has a lot of power. He or she can use that power to build houses

or to bomb houses. What we need is not new knowledge or power. We need hearts made in God's image (character). Then knowledge and power can be used for good.

All of us have some knowledge and some power. How are you using the knowledge and power you have?

THURSDAY—FEBRUARY 22

OUR SINFUL NATURES—PART TWO (Ecclesiastes 7:15-27)

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-27, Solomon lists many problems.

What is Solomon complaining about in Ecclesiastes 7:15? How fair is his complaint?

Ecclesiastes 7:15 is not the first time Solomon has talked about this problem. What does he say in Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17 that helps us understand what is going on here?

Perhaps most impressive are Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 7:20. They sound very close to Paul's words in Romans 3:10 ("There is none righteous [holy], no, not one."). Or to John's words in 1 John 1:10 ("If we say that we have not sinned, we make him [God] a liar, and his [God's] word is not in us."). Christians are often scolded for their "negative" views of people.

⁹events—things that happen.

But all one has to do is look at the world to see the sinful condition of people.

Read Ecclesiastes 7:26. What in Solomon’s background would have caused him to write this verse? 1 Kings 11:1-4.

Solomon is pointing to one kind of woman (contrast¹⁰ Proverbs 18:22). But the important message goes far beyond women or men. Be careful of anyone the devil can use to turn you away from God.

Perhaps the most impressive verse in chapter 7 is verse 29. How quickly verse 29 captures the human condition. God made us holy. But we have become unholy. Solomon’s life is an example of this. Solomon was not sinless. But he started out on the right track. The Hebrew word translated “upright” is a common word for “straight” or “right.” It is often used to describe human actions (Deuteronomy 6:18; 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 18:3; Job 1:1, 8). Solomon was “upright” from the start. But he slowly wandered away from God.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. Are you in the faith? How do you defend your answer?



Is Christ living in you?

FRIDAY—FEBRUARY 23

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 166; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 606; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 86; see also *Mind, Character, and Personality*, pp. 516–523; 545–554.

“True education does not overlook the value of scientific knowledge or reading and writing skills. But true education values power above information, goodness above power, character above brains. The world needs people of noble character more than people with great intelligence.¹¹ It needs people who let principle¹² control their actions.

¹⁰contrast—show how things are different.

¹¹intelligence—the ability to learn and understand and to solve problems.

¹²principle—a basic rule of life.

“ ‘Wisdom is best. So get wisdom.’ ‘The tongues of wise people use knowledge well.’ Proverbs 4:7, Proverbs 15:2, NIV. True education offers this wisdom. It teaches the best use of all our powers and abilities. Thus it covers the whole circle of responsibility to ourselves, to the world, and to God.

“Character building is the most important work God gives to humans. Never before was the study of character so important as now. Never was any one before us called to meet questions so important. Never before did young men and young women face dangers so great as they face today.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 225.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 As a class, go over your answers for Monday’s lesson.
- 2 Talk about Ellen G. White’s quote above. Notice the first paragraph.

How does it fit in with some of the things we have studied this week? Why is character important among people with lots of power?

3 This week’s lesson touched upon the question of influence and how the wives of Solomon led him astray. The questions of influence and peer pressure¹³ are very important for young people. Many of them have been seriously led astray by wrong friends. As a church, what can you do to help your young people avoid the wrong influences? What things can your church do to give them better choices?

4 As a class, read aloud Rainer Rilke’s quote from Sabbath’s lesson. What does it say to you about the human need for meaning and purpose? How does our faith answer these needs? Also, how can we better share what we have with people who try to find purpose in the most meaningless of things?

¹³peer pressure—pressures and influences from close friends.