

God Made Man Upright? What Happened?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 7.*

Memory Text: “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (*Ecclesiastes 7:29*).

In reference to women in Paris feeding birds with pieces of bread “a bit chewed and soggy,” the poet Rainer Rilke wrote: “It does them good to think that their saliva is getting out into the world a little, that the small birds will fly off with the taste of it in their mouths, even though a moment later they naturally forget it again.”

Talk about *hebel*. What a sad example of human beings seeking for meaning and purpose in the wrong place. As humans, we do seek for meaning, for purpose, for direction, and sometimes in some strange ways, too. Here we are, in this world, with so many variables, so many options, so many paths to choose from. How do we know which ones are right?

This week we will study Ecclesiastes 7. The first 14 verses read like Proverbs, short pithy little sayings about morality, life, inequity, injustice, wisdom, and so forth. Though not always easy to understand, they are filled with the kind of wisdom we expect from the man whose wisdom even Jesus referred to. The rest of the chapter sounds more like Ecclesiastes—the older, bitter Solomon who, even in his angst, still has plenty of wisdom to share.

This chapter, like the whole book, deals with more questions about life. Taken with the Bible as a whole, Ecclesiastes 7 shows that the right answers can be found only in the God who has created us, redeemed us, and thus has given us the meaning and purpose that so many often seek in such useless and unsatisfactory places.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 24.*

A Good Name

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth” (*Eccles. 7:1*).

The original Hebrew here has a play on words that you can’t see in translation. The word for “name” (*shm*) is very close to the word for “ointment” or oil (*shmn*). It’s one of those linguistic and poetic devices that, while maybe not full of deep and hidden meaning, gave the original language a force and beauty that, unfortunately, is lost in translation.

At first glance this verse, especially the last part, seems like more of Solomon’s pessimism: better to not have been born than to live and see all the evil done under the sun; better to have died in childbirth than to live, and so forth. Ecclesiastes 7:1, however, seems to be saying something else. The key, perhaps, is in the first part of the verse.

What’s the basic message that Solomon is saying in the first half of Ecclesiastes 7:1? See also *Prov. 22:1; Dan. 6:5; 1 Tim. 3:2, 10*.

This part is obvious, the value of a good reputation. What comes next in the text easily fits in. Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre argued that a person’s life is basically defined by that person’s death, in the sense that at death it’s finished. No more changes, no more potential, no more growth. You’re nothing more than what you were when you died.

In a sense, that’s correct. Our opportunities to get a good name, to have a good character, and 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 death.

Thus, in a sense, this verse is really about priorities. A good name will last; an evil, wicked person will be here and gone, perhaps like the fragrance of ointment. How important then that we are careful with our time, that we prioritize our actions. What things do we do that will have a lasting, even eternal, impact for good, in contrast to the things that will one day be long gone and forgotten? Certainly something worth thinking about.

What are you doing with your own time? If you had to stand before God and give an account for the past 24 hours of your time, how would you fare?

House of Feasting, House of Mourning

The Baptists have a saying: “He has just enough religion to make himself miserable.” Everyone, probably, has seen those types. Perhaps they were the ones Jesus referred to in Matthew 6:16, those who walked around with “a sad countenance” in order to show everyone just how holy they were.

Yet, a quick reading of Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 could give one the impression that this attitude is what religion should be about. It’s better to be mourning than feasting, better to be sorrowing than laughing, and so forth. How does all that fit in with the whole concept of joy in the Lord, of rejoicing in Christ (*Lev. 23:40, Pss. 5:11, 149:2, Phil. 4:4, 1 Thess. 5:16*)?

If you read these verses in Ecclesiastes 7 carefully, there’s a hint in them that helps put all this in perspective.

Look carefully at verse 2, the last few phrases. What point is Solomon making here that helps us understand his basic message in verses 2-6?

In a sense, Solomon is repeating the idea touched on in yesterday’s lesson. No matter how much feasting you do, in the end there’s always mourning because, in the end, we all die. The wise understand this. They understand the gravity of the human situation and that feasting and laughter, while they have their place, need to be understood in the larger context of life as a whole. Our lives don’t end in a feast; they end in mourning. Our lives don’t end in laughter; they end in sadness. Fools go along, oblivious to the end that ultimately awaits them. One day, instead of laughter, there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Read Luke 12:41-48. In what ways is that giving the same message talked about above?

As Christians, how do we find the right balance? After all, the great controversy is a serious thing. It is, literally, a matter of not just life but eternal life. How do we balance this important truth with the fact that we are to rejoice in the Lord? Or are these ideas not contradictory at all? Bring your answer to class.

Patience and Pride

We've already looked at the first six verses of Ecclesiastes 7. Today we'll finish this first section, which is composed of short proverblike sayings.

Read Ecclesiastes 7:7-14. What points is Solomon making? Which ones speak clearest to you, personally; that is, which touch you in a sensitive area?

There's a lot of wisdom to choose from packed in here. Verse 7, for instance, about a bribe corrupting the heart, touches on a key spiritual point: One compromise leads to another. It's saying not that a corrupt heart takes a bribe but that a bribe corrupts the heart. What a powerful warning to us all about what sin does to the soul.

Look at verse 9. What point is being made there? What do these other texts add to that message? *Matt. 5:22; 18:21, 22; Rom. 12:19-21.*

Look at verse 12. How is wisdom a protection? How does wisdom preserve life? *See also Prov. 1:7, 9:10, Col. 1:28, James 3:13-18.*

How do you understand the meaning of verse 14? *See Phil. 4:11-13.*

How well are you doing in these areas? What things need to be changed in your life? Anger, compromise, lack of trust? How crucial to get on your knees before the Lord and seek the things He freely offers through Jesus.

Our Fallen Natures—Part One

Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-21. Which of the verses below best describe the basic message in there?

(a) 1 Cor. 13:13

(b) Gal. 6:2

(c) Rom. 3:10

Solomon here paints a fairly negative picture of humanity. Though one could be tempted just to chalk it up to more of his basic pessimism, it's not so simple.

At the beginning of the Enlightenment, in seventeenth-century Europe, humans began bursting at the seams with new knowledge. Amid this new understanding of the world was the great hope in human perfection. Sure, the world has been bad, and people have been bad, but now that we are gaining new knowledge and a greater understanding of the world, ignorance will be defeated, and humanity will improve and move steadily toward the path of moral perfection.

Things so progressed that by the beginning of the twentieth century people believed that through the discoveries of science and through new technology humanity would soon learn to conquer all the things that had caused it so much trouble. We would, through our machines, devices, and inventions, overcome disease, overcome natural calamities, overcome hatred and war.

Think about events over the past century. How well did science fulfill the grand hopes that people had for it? *See also Matthew 24.*

Things didn't turn out quite as expected, did they? Though we gained new knowledge, our sinful human natures got the best of us, and so much of that knowledge and new power gained has been a source of evil and suffering. Power and knowledge in and of themselves aren't necessarily good or bad. It's what people do with them. The ruler of a powerful country has a lot of power. He can use that power to build houses or bomb them. What we need isn't so much new knowledge or power but hearts molded in the image and character of God; otherwise, knowledge and power can be used for evil.

All of us, to one degree or another, have some knowledge and some power. How are you using it? For good, for God's glory? Or are you exploiting it for less-than-honorable purposes? Be honest with yourself, no matter how painful.

Our Fallen Natures—Part Two

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-27, Solomon utters a litany of human woe.

Read verse 15. What is Solomon complaining about here? How valid is this complaint?

This verse, however, isn't the first time he has talked about this. What does he say in Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17 that helps us understand what is going on here?

Perhaps most striking are his words in Ecclesiastes 7:20, which sound very close to Paul in Romans 3:10 (“There is none righteous, no, not one”) or John in 1 John 1:10 (“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”). Though Christians are often derided for their “pessimistic” and “negative” views of humanity, all one has to do is look at the world, both its history and its present condition, to get verification for its teaching about the sinful state of humanity. You might need faith to believe in a lot of what Christianity teaches, but the fallen nature of humanity isn't one.

Read verse 26. What in Solomon's background would have caused him to say this? *1 Kings 11:1-4*.

Though Solomon is obviously pointing to certain kind of women (*compare with Prov. 18:22*), the important message goes far beyond gender: Be careful of anyone whom the devil can use to ensnare you and turn you away from the Lord.

Perhaps the most striking verse in this chapter is the last one, verse 29. How quickly it captures the human condition. God made us holy, and we have become unholy. Solomon's life, in a sense, could be used as an example of this principle. Sure, he was never sinless, but he started out on the right track. The Hebrew word translated “upright” is a common word for “straight” or “right” and is often used to describe human actions (*Deut. 6:18; 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 18:3; Job 1:1, 8*). However “upright” he was at the start, he eventually wandered away.

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

Further 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*.

“True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principle.

“ ‘Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.’ ‘The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright’ (Proverbs 4:7; 15:2). True education imparts this wisdom. It teaches the best use not only of one but of all our powers and acquirements. Thus it covers the whole circle of obligation—to ourselves, to the world, and to God.

“Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 225.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers for Monday’s study.
- ❷ Talk about the Ellen G. White quote above. Notice specifically the first paragraph. How does it fit in with some of the things that we have studied this week? Why does character matter, especially among those who have a lot of power?
- ❸ The lesson touched upon the question of influence and how the wives of Solomon led him astray. The question of influence and peer pressure is especially crucial for young people, many of whom 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 provide them with better alternatives?
- ❹ As a class, read aloud the Rilke quote from Sabbath afternoon. 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 been given with those who seek meaning in the most meaningless of things?

Never Alone: Part 1

by SELINA MWAKIPUNDA

Saturday morning I walked into the dean's office at the government school I attended in Tanzania. I signed my name in a book on the desk, and the monitor noted the time beside my name. I walked out of the building and through the school gate. I knew I would be punished for leaving campus, but I had to go to church, no matter what awaited me when I returned.

I heard singing and sprinted to the Adventist church. I slipped into a pew and sang along. My heart filled with joy.

Earlier that year I had met some Adventist girls in the dormitory at school. Their lives radiated peace and love, and I wanted to know what made them so different from me. They offered to study the Bible with me so I could learn how to live closer to God. I was raised in a Christian home, and I welcomed the Bible studies. When I learned about the Sabbath, God's wonderful gift of time to His children, I was amazed that I had never heard of this before. It made so much sense to me.

I told my parents what I had learned about the Sabbath, expecting them to share my joy. But my father thought that Adventists were a sect, and he ordered me to stay away from them. He told the dean at school not to let me leave the campus on Saturday, hoping it would end my association with Adventists.

But I had found something beautiful, and I was not ready to give it up. The dean ordered me to sign her book every three hours on Saturday to be sure I did not go to church. She threatened me and gave me extra work to try to force me to obey my father's wishes. But I had found something I could not let go, and when I missed the twelve o'clock sign-in, the dean demanded to know where I had been. It never occurred to me to lie, so I told her I had been in church.

The dean gave me some garden tools and ordered me to go work in the school's large garden. I took the tools and told her I would work in the garden on Sunday, for I did not want to break the Sabbath. Her look told me I was in trouble.

(Continued next week)



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