

# Where Is the Balance?

The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect.

Two Christian men worked in a corporate office in which many other employees worked as well. These two men openly acknowledged their Christian faith when asked. One believer was quite vocal about his faith. He talked often about the gospel with other employees. In fact, he spent so much time talking about his faith that he frequently fell behind on job schedules or overlooked important design considerations on his assigned business projects.

The other Christian was meticulous in every detail of his job. He often toiled long hours for days on end to complete unnecessary tasks. When asked why he did this, he boasted that it was his Christian duty to produce impeccable work. Even his casual conversations with others revolved around job-related topics. He mentioned the gospel or his faith only when asked specifically about them.

Both men may have been in need of further wisdom in their endeavors. Each needed to find a better balance in his life. The first believer admirably embraced the Christ-given mission for believers to share the gospel with others. But he failed to realize that his lax and incomplete work record negatively impacted his efforts to share the gospel. The second believer displayed the biblical ideal of doing one's work as unto the Lord. But he failed to realize that his workaholic approach negatively impacted other important life commitments, such as to his family and his Lord.

In this session's Bible passage, we will examine what Solomon learned about avoiding extremes and finding balance in life. The session emphasizes that the wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ECCLESIASTES 7:1-8:17

Solomon had lived an auspicious life. The early years of his reign were a time of peace and prosperity in Israel. As an additional blessing, God granted

Solomon the gift of great wisdom. His keen insight and wise judgments became legendary not only in Israel but also in faraway lands. Over time, however, Solomon began to engage in foolish behavior. His extravagant lifestyle no longer conformed to the terms of God's covenant.

Late in his reign, Solomon appears to have realized the futility of a foolish lifestyle. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, he wrote about the life lessons he had learned the hard way—by experience. One crucial lesson he learned was that God's perfect wisdom is the best guide for living in an imperfect world. Ecclesiastes 7:1-10 contains a list of wise sayings. These sayings were designed to stimulate the pursuit of wisdom rather than foolish living. In Ecclesiastes 7:11-14, Solomon reflected on the realities of prosperity and adversity in one's life. He concluded that a truly wise person finds security in God's sovereignty.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18 addresses the false idea that excessive religious activity makes a person righteous. The verses also warn that wicked behavior has tragic consequences. Fearing God is the real key to cultivating a godly lifestyle. God's people should be wise about their religious duties, taking them seriously without rejecting the enjoyment of good things God has provided for His covenant people.

In Ecclesiastes 7:19-22, Solomon acknowledged that all people sin. An awareness of one's sinfulness generates clarity and wisdom. This awareness enables people to appreciate one another despite our human frailties. Such wisdom is critical for human society to thrive as God intended. Solomon shared some of his conclusions in 7:23-29. He noted that many paths lead to foolish living. In contrast, wisdom's course is narrow and difficult to maintain.

Solomon urged submission to the government as the right thing to do (Eccl. 8:1-6). Living in a world where evil seems to be winning is challenging. The injustices of the world can generate doubt in the believer's mind. Solomon instructed God's people to persist in pleasing God (8:7-17).

## EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

### **ACCEPT IT** (Eccl. 7:11-14)

Solomon reminded God's people that the wise will accept whatever God allots for them, realizing that God's sovereign plan will ultimately prevail.

### **VERSE 11**

**Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun,**

Solomon returned to the advantage of **wisdom** over other assets. Here the comparison is to **an inheritance**. The term *inheritance* denotes wealth that heirs receive not necessarily from their labor but as a result of their relationship to a benefactor. Nevertheless, inherited wealth can give people certain advantages in life. Solomon concluded that having true *wisdom* is every bit as advantageous in life as receiving a large *inheritance*—if not more so. He explained his reasoning in the next verse.

## VERSE 12

**because wisdom is protection as silver is protection; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner.**

Solomon explained that **wisdom** provides **protection** just as **silver** (“money,” KJV; ESV; NIV) **is protection**. The Hebrew word rendered *protection* refers literally to a shadow or the shade of a large tree. The idea is that of being sheltered or protected from the blazing sun or pelting rain. Solomon acknowledged that having a lot of money can give people a certain level of protection against some of life’s dangers. For example, with enough money a person can build a house that provides literal shelter from the sun’s heat or the storm’s wind and rain.

On the other hand, *wisdom* has an added **advantage** (“excellency,” KJV) in that it **preserves the life of its owner**. Money can easily be wasted and lost through foolish living. Moreover, wealth in itself cannot guard against a rich person’s contracting a disease or having a fatal accident. By contrast, the person who has true wisdom can be a better steward of his or her wealth and can, through wise and healthy lifestyle habits, generally enjoy a longer life expectancy. This is not to suggest that wise Christians never get sick and die or never have fatal accidents. Ecclesiastes, like the Book of Proverbs, presents scenarios of both wisdom and foolishness that are typically true in human experience (life under the sun). And the overwhelming conclusion is that true wisdom produces better results than foolishness every time!

## VERSE 13

**Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked?**

Although Solomon cited the advantage that wisdom has over wealth, he did not deny that having possessions, including money, played a role in human life on earth. Neither did he change topics when he penned Ecclesiastes 7:13. Nevertheless, Bible scholars have understood this verse in various ways.

Some scholars have noted the similarity of this verse with Ecclesiastes 1:15 and with a line in an ancient Babylonian document. These scholars understand the verse to emphasize that human beings are destined to a life of endless effort without tangible results. Other scholars take the verse to emphasize that God allows affliction into people's lives in order to test them. A third view—in my judgment the most reasonable interpretation of the verse—emphasizes that human beings cannot overrule God's sovereignty and divine order in His creation. No amount of wealth and no level of earthly (human) wisdom can alter God's sovereign activity (**the work of God**).

#### VERSE 14

**In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that no one can discover anything that will come after him.**

A wise person knows how to respond to (and not overreact to) both good times and bad times. The words **in the day of prosperity be joyful** (“when times are good, be happy,” NIV) signify the appropriateness of graciously enjoying life's blessings. We do not have to feel guilty for receiving pay for good, honest work or for wisely investing our savings to build up a healthy retirement income. Certainly we should keep at the forefront of our minds that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17). And absolutely we should cultivate an attitude of generosity toward others who are in need (see Prov. 22:9; Acts 20:35). Both of these attitudes will only enhance one's joy *in the day of prosperity*.

Similarly, the wise believer responds in a balanced way **in the day of adversity** (“when times are bad,” NIV). The Hebrew word translated *adversity* literally means “evil”—but in this context it emphasizes more the idea of something harmful rather than something morally wicked. Solomon urged God's people to **consider** that **God has made the one** (prosperity) **as well as the other** (adversity). This teaching is consistent with Job's remarkable statement to his wife after having lost everything, including his health: “Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?” (Job 2:10). It corresponds as well with the apostle Paul's declaration in Philippians 4:12-13: “I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Traumatic change can occur suddenly without warning. History affirms this reality. On December 7, 1941, throughout the continental United States, people attended church, read newspapers, and went about their normal

Sunday morning routines, oblivious to the reality that Japanese bombers were winging their way toward Pearl Harbor. On that day, however, the United States was plunged into the bloody and difficult years of World War II. For all citizens, especially the families who committed young men and women as well as treasure to the cause of victory, those were days of much adversity. We may not understand why some adversity occurs, but we can trust God. Believers can be sure that God's plans for them are always best.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Inheritance" on pages 799–800 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In your view, how is wisdom as good as an inheritance? How do you distinguish between a time to accept your situation in life and a time to seek improvement?

## FIND BALANCE (Eccl. 7:15-18)

Solomon called for God's people to approach life with a wise realism, avoiding the extremes of moral self-righteousness on one hand or foolishness on the other hand. He emphasized that we should not view ourselves as being righteous apart from God.

### VERSE 15

**In my futile life I have seen everything: someone righteous perishes in spite of his righteousness, and someone wicked lives long in spite of his evil.**

Solomon had begun his reign in righteousness and zeal for the Lord God. When God gave him the privilege of asking for any gift, Solomon asked for wisdom to lead God's people (see 1 Kings 3:7-9). Later, he built and dedicated a magnificent temple to the Lord in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 6:37-38; 8:62-63). Eventually, though, Solomon drifted from his devotion to the Lord and failed to follow all of the Lord's commands. He acquired a large harem, marrying many royal women from the surrounding idolatrous nations. He loved some of these wives more than he loved the Lord, and he built temples for them that were dedicated to their pagan deities (see 1 Kings 11:1-6).

Since it was likely during his old age that Solomon wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes, we can see the damage that spiritual compromise had on his view of life. He now described his life experience as **my futile life**. The Hebrew term rendered *futile* ("vanity," KJV; "vain," ESV; "meaningless," NIV)

literally depicts the momentary vapor seen when a person exhales on a frosty morning. Thus, Solomon now viewed his life as brief and of no real substance.

Solomon went on to say that he had seen some things during his life that only added to his sense of futility. He had seen **someone righteous** perish **in spite of his righteousness**. Conversely, he had also seen **someone wicked** live a long life **in spite of his evil** (“wickedness, KJV; NIV). To fully appreciate Solomon’s point here, it should be understood in the context of Israelite theology as taught in the Mosaic law. In particular, Deuteronomy 28–30 presents the expected blessings of obedience and curses of disobedience. The passage culminates in 30:17-20 with these words: “But if your heart turns away and you do not listen and you are led astray to bow in worship to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish and will not prolong your days in the land you are entering to possess across the Jordan. I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the LORD your God sword to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Solomon had seen examples of a different reality occurring—righteous people dying young and wicked people living long. His own unfaithfulness, however, had twisted his understanding of God’s promises.

## VERSE 16

### **Don’t be excessively righteous, and don’t be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself?**

At first glance, Ecclesiastes 7:16 may seem troubling to believers. Why would the Scriptures teach us not to be **excessively righteous** (“righteous over much,” KJV) or **overly wise** (“too wise,” ESV)? It is important to employ sound hermeneutic principles when interpreting the Scriptures, particularly verses such as this one. Such principles include understanding a verse in its immediate context and then relating it to other similarly-themed passages that offer a fuller biblical understanding. Therefore, answering two important questions will yield helpful insight for an accurate understanding of this verse’s meaning. First, what is the context in which Solomon spoke? Second, what does the rest of Bible say on this matter?

According to the theology of Solomon’s time, righteousness was gained through compliance with the law. However, people struggled to comply perfectly with every nuance of the law. Solomon had learned through his own spiritual failures and frustrating investigations that perfection was impossible. Furthermore, living righteously did not always prevent suffering

or death. He thus concluded that hypocritical claims of perfect righteousness were empty boasts, not reality. The phrase *excessively righteous* refers, then, not to the pursuit through faith of a right relationship with God but to the futile efforts of legalistic self-righteousness. Righteousness by faith, not works, is borne out in the rest of Scripture in passages such as Proverbs 3:5-6, Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 3:22-26, and Ephesians 2:8-10—to name only a few.

The question **Why should you destroy yourself?** is rhetorical. It implies that pursuing unattainable goals as a means of saving oneself will end in failure and in the process produce more harm than good. Solomon was not giving people freedom to live in sin but rather was calling on people to be sensible in their relationship with God. The early Christian church reached a similar conclusion at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15:6-21). True righteousness can only be found through faith in Christ alone.

#### VERSE 17

**Don't be excessively wicked, and don't be foolish. Why should you die before your time?**

This verse focuses on the same truth as the previous verse but from the opposite angle. The words **don't be excessively wicked** should not be understood to imply that some sinning is OK as long as it isn't too much. The Hebrew word translated *wicked* refers to thoughts, words, or deeds that are contrary to God's nature and are thus injurious to the harmony of God's people.

Similarly, Solomon urged God's people not to **be foolish**. Note that he did not use a qualifying word such as *excessively* or "overly" with this term. Acting foolishly in any degree reveals intellectual and spiritual irrationality. Sadly, one foolish act can have a devastating result: **you might die before your time**. The human desire to live directs the believer to consider behavior that might lead to a premature death. Therefore, the paradox that Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 7:15 does not mean that when the wicked live a long life they have escaped punishment. Neither does a brief life necessarily imply that a person will have a lack of eternal rewards.

#### VERSE 18

**It is good that you grasp the one and do not let the other slip from your hand. For the one who fears God will end up with both of them.**

This verse was intended to clarify any misunderstanding created by the previous verses. The first sentence exhibits some of the characteristics found

in the synonymous parallelism of ancient Hebrew poetry. In this technique, the second line repeats the first line using synonyms. Hence, the verb **grasp** and the statement **do not let the other slip from your hand** have a common meaning. God's people are to take hold of His righteousness, not our excessive self-righteousness, and His wisdom, not worldly wisdom (see 7:16). The way to do this is made clear in the second part of verse 18: **the one who fears God will end up with both of them**. Fearing God involves recognizing God's presence and trusting in Him. Living by faith in God requires true wisdom and results in true righteousness.

Solomon admonished his readers to combine legitimate religion with enjoying the good things in life. Paul set forth an analogous admonition to the church in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:9-12). Believers are to live reasonable and balanced lives. While our individual assignments may vary, whenever possible Christians should live quiet lives characterized by godly love.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Why do you think Jesus confronted so boldly and harshly the Pharisees of His day—who were popularly considered to be among the most righteous members of first-century Jewish society? What are some dangers for believers today if they embrace extreme righteousness (self-righteousness)?

## ACKNOWLEDGE SIN (Eccl. 7:19-22)

Solomon explained that all humans are in need of God's wisdom since no one is perfect. He reminded God's people not to be overcome by every negative criticism others might make against them, knowing that they too have at times made unfair criticisms of others.

## VERSE 19

### **Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten rulers of a city.**

Here again it is crucial to understand this verse in the context of what Solomon said in the previous verses. Verses 16-18 focused on the obtaining of true righteousness and wisdom by fearing God. Verses 19-20 emphasize the universal sinful nature of humanity. The acquisition of true wisdom in this life does not fully eliminate sin; even **the wise person** can falter and commit sins—as Solomon knew all too well. Nevertheless, people must live in the real world. The phrase **ten rulers** (“mighty men” KJV) **of a city** refers



to men who exercise political and social control over others. Some scholars compare these rulers with the council of elders who later governed Greek cities. The thinking behind such an approach to governance emphasized that having multiple rulers provided better leadership than having a single ruler.

Of course, a multi-person council of leaders does not always guarantee better outcomes. A majority vote can sometimes be wrong. Consider, for example, the group of twelve scouts that Moses sent into the promised land (see Num. 13). Ten of the twelve scouts came back to recommend that the Israelites must not try to take the land because the walled cities were too strong. They displayed a lack of faith in God and thus made a decision that caused great harm to the entire Israelite congregation. Centuries after this debacle, Solomon reminded God's people that true wisdom was more valuable in life than being part of a faithless majority.

#### **VERSE 20**

**There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins.**

Genuine wisdom also precludes arrogance. This verse reminds us that despite personal achievement or human commendation, the wise person is still a sinner (see Rom. 3:23). In Romans 3:10-18, Paul drew from several Old Testament verses, including Ecclesiastes 7:20, to demonstrate that both Gentiles and Jews are sinners in God's sight. Even a wise man can fall into sin. Solomon should have heeded his own warning here. He imposed forced labor on the people of Israel (see 1 Kings. 9:15-23). When he died, this practice led to a civil war and the division of the kingdom (see 1 Kings 12:3-4).

#### **VERSE 21**

**Don't pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you,**

In Ecclesiastes 7:21-22, Solomon utilized a single illustration to emphasize that everyone sins, thereby rejecting a leader's potential smugness. The Bible frequently illustrates the sinful nature of humanity by focusing on human speech. In fact, according to James 3:1-12, the tongue (as representing the ability to speak) is simultaneously an extremely sinful organ and the most difficult part of the human body to control. There are so many ways to sin when we speak.

At times, people gossip (see Prov. 18:8; 26:22). Here Solomon warned against paying too much attention to **everything people say** about us. Instead of hearing complements, we may hear condemnation. The complaints may even arise within our own families! Everyone speaks rashly on occasion

(see Prov. 12:18). God’s wisdom keeps us on course by instructing us to make allowances for those who speak unkindly of us. Likewise, it enables us not to speak in anger but rather consider how God wants us to respond.

In the context of discussing leadership, wise leaders listen to God more than to popular opinion. Leaders who seek to appease everyone and please the masses are often doomed to help no one. Some successful leaders might imagine they are righteous apart from God’s grace. They may not deliberately depart from sound doctrine, but they listen too attentively to the praise of other people and eventually become conceited. In Solomon’s own case, his sensual cravings caused him to listen to his foreign wives instead of God (see 1 Kings. 11:1-13). However, genuine righteousness is unattainable without trusting in God.

## **VERSE 22**

### **for in your heart you know that many times you yourself have cursed others.**

The verb rendered **cursed** means “to speak with the intent of lowering someone’s status.” The term certainly includes faultfinding but cannot be limited to that. Wise people do not obsess over those who complain about them, realizing that they themselves have done their share of complaining about others. They are no better than the person who made them objects of scorn. So they are not in a position to correct those they hear that are complaining about them.

In summary, human society is composed of sinful people, because all people are sinners. Consequently, human society needs wise leaders to govern us. In personal relationships, people must accept that everyone is a sinner and so accept each other for who that person is in Christ. Human acceptance, however, is not sufficient. All people are sinners and, therefore, are in need of God’s forgiveness, grace, and wisdom through faith in Jesus Christ.

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## **EXPLORE FURTHER**

Memorize Ecclesiastes 7:20. How can believers properly distinguish between the need to regularly confess their sins to God but reject unwarranted negative criticism other people might give them? How do you respond to the promise in 1 John 1:9 that God is faithful to forgive and cleanse believers who confess their sins?