



# Where Is the Balance?

The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect.

## ECCLESIASTES 7:11-22

**MEMORY VERSE:** ECCLESIASTES 7:20

**STUDY** Ecclesiastes 7:11-22, highlighting key words. Make a two-column chart noting the extremes in these verses. Read Ecclesiastes 7:20 in several translations and use a Bible concordance to discover similar New Testament verses.

**CREATE** a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 120–122. Focus on encouraging the group to recognize that all people are sinners, but through a relationship with Jesus Christ all people can be forgiven. Look for opportunities throughout the session to emphasize that God uses imperfect people.

**GATHER** the following items:

- Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)
- Chart paper and markers or white board markers

**Prepare to Display:**

- Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*)

**Make Copies of:**

- Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*)
- Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Wisdom Poetry*)

**CONSULT** the Explore the Bible website for ways of using a current news event to start and conclude the session ([goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras](http://goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras)).

**REINFORCE** the study by praying specifically for people in the group who are struggling with guilt. Reflect on your own life, considering your priorities and how they impact your relationship with Christ.

## KEY DOCTRINE

### Man

By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race (Rom. 1:21-23).

# FIRST THOUGHTS

We live on a fine line. If we think too lowly of ourselves, we see ourselves as being so broken we are not salvageable. If we think too highly of ourselves, we see no need for God or His forgiveness. We need to find balance to being broken by sin and yet still created in the image of God. Fortunately, God has not left us on our own to navigate our time “under the sun.” The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect which gives us balance in this life and hope for the future.

(In PSG, p. 100) **Why is acknowledging our sinfulness important for having a proper understanding of ourselves and our limits in this life?**

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## BIBLE SKILL

*Use a Bible concordance to compare how a word is used.*

In Ecclesiastes 7:14,24,26-29, Solomon repeatedly used the words “find” and “discover.” Look up the Hebrew word *matsa’* in a Bible concordance that includes Hebrew words and examine Old Testament passages that use the word. How does the use of this word in other passages help you gain a clearer understanding of why Solomon would have used the word in this passage?

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ECCLESIASTES 7:1–8:17

In Ecclesiastes 6:12 the Teacher asked: “For who knows what is good for anyone in life, in the few days of his futile life that he spends like a shadow?” He set out to answer this question in 7:1–8:17. This passage contains proverbs and practical wisdom for dealing with the ups and downs of life, and evocative depictions of both folly and wisdom. The person who is wise is able to evaluate what the better things in life are.

One of the things Ecclesiastes 7 makes clear is that humans are an enigma—hard to understand. In fact, Solomon was rarely able to make sense or fully understand the people he encountered. However, he was able to surmise that all humans are consumed with their own desires. Of all the people on earth, one might assume that those in authority (like kings) possess more wisdom than others. Solomon revealed that all people are essentially the same. The only difference with kings is their ability to do greater good or harm with the power they wield. In light of this futility, Solomon proclaimed that it is still possible to live a life of wisdom and do what is good.

As for God, Solomon reminds us that He is often slow to punish the wicked. Yet we should not assume that His patience is a sign of injustice. This might be difficult to believe when the wicked seem to prosper and to live long and relatively comfortable lives. One’s hope must remain in God’s sovereign providence and His justice because in the end all humans return to dust. Therefore, we are not to place our trust in the things of this world, namely, in money, power, or our own ideals. If all humans are subject to the same fate (death), then we must learn to fear God and hope in Him rather than the transient things of this life. Who is wise? It is the person

who heeds Solomon's counsel to fear God. As we have already seen, the fear of God is an attitude of submission to, respect for, and dependence on the Lord. The implication is that we must trust God rather than human resources, circumstances, or appearances. We do not always understand God's ways, but wisdom teaches us to trust His will.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**ACCEPT IT** (ECCL. 7:11-14)

### Verses 11-12

One of the recurring themes of Ecclesiastes is the idea that the fool lives life as if what's "under the sun" is all there is. In 7:7-10, Solomon dealt with what we might call escapist tendencies. First, he warned of the allure of money (v. 7). No amount of money will deliver a person from the difficulties of life. Positively, the Teacher exhorted readers to see difficult times as opportunities to grow in patience (v. 8). With the long view in mind, people are to guard themselves from explosions of anger, which is no way to escape difficulties (v. 9). Solomon also urged the reader to beware of nostalgia, that is, wishing for things as they used to be, which is no way to deal with the present (v. 10). To put it simply, the wise person is more measured and patient in spirit for the long haul. It is the height of wisdom to patiently trust in God. This type of wisdom is more valuable than any earthly riches (v. 11) and provides protection that is greater than wealth (v. 12).

Verses 11-12 espouse the high value and desirability of wisdom. The first part of verse 11 states that gaining **wisdom is as good as an inheritance**. They are similar in that both wisdom and an inheritance are passed on from one generation to another. Additionally, both have value. That which one inherits may have sentimental value or monetary value. In either case, an inheritance is meant to be a blessing to the one who receives it. Likewise, the one who receives wisdom is greatly blessed.

The first clause of verse 12 provides the Teacher's reasoning for saying wisdom is as good as an inheritance. It is because both wisdom and financial wealth provide **protection**. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Solomon had a significant monetary inheritance in mind in verse 11. The phrase **wisdom is protection** literally is "the shade of wisdom" in Hebrew. The idea of protection derives from the picture of one's being protected from the intensity of the sun's rays in the heat of the day. We understand how financial wealth provides protection in a financial crisis, but how does wisdom offer protection? The wisdom that others pass down provides a tried and true way of maneuvering through life. The Book of Proverbs is an example of this. Think about the wisdom that those who fear the Lord inherit from Him. The security of this godly wisdom is even greater because it not only provides security in this life but also in the life to come.

### VERSES 11-12

<sup>11</sup> Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, <sup>12</sup> because wisdom is protection as silver is protection; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner.

## VERSE 13

<sup>13</sup> Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked?

### Verse 13

**Who can straighten out what God has made crooked?** This is a rhetorical question expecting the emphatic answer: “Nobody can.” There is some debate about the precise implications of verse 13. (See also 1:15.) The idea of something being crooked in this context may be understood in the sense of “inexplicable” rather than a more ethical meaning like “wicked” or “corrupt.” In other words, there will always be times in life that remain enigmatic because God has chosen not to reveal His purposes completely or not to provide the answers to all of our questions. Once again, this teaches us to trust God’s sovereign hand.

## VERSE 14

<sup>14</sup> 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.

### Verse 14

Expounding on verse 13, the Teacher anticipated and answered the question his readers must have been asking: “If we are powerless to change the way God has made things and what He does, then what can we do?” Solomon’s answer contains two imperatives given in two circumstances. In the first instance, when you are experiencing good times, rejoice and enjoy God’s blessings. However, when you experience seasons of **adversity**, then you must **consider**.

Certainly, some days will be more difficult than others. There will be days of **prosperity** and joy. These good times are from the hand of God. There will also be days of adversity. This too is from the hand of God. It does not matter if you are a new Christian or a seasoned theologian; this is one of the most difficult truths of our existence.

Solomon reminds us that we do not know if prosperity or adversity awaits us. But we do know the One who knows what is to come. There are times that bring us to our knees in joy over God’s blessing, and there are times that bring us to our knees in sorrow and remind us that our only hope is found in God. There is a certain grace in both of these situations, that in these times we are reminded of our utter dependence on Him. Therefore, as we look to the future we can be still and know that He is God.

There are two common ways that people handle adversity. The first is denial, which is nothing more than an attempt to avoid or numb the pain of life. But this never works in the long run. The second way people tend to react to adversity is to try to conquer it. In this attempt, the idea is to rise above adversity, to man up, to push through as if it has no impact on us. But, if we are honest, this too never works in the long run.

## **Adversity can increase our dependency on God.**

The teacher suggested a third way to deal with adversity. The third way is to embrace it, to accept it, to sit in it. Why? Adversity can increase our dependency on God. The two truths of this passage can be stated concisely as praise God in our prosperity and trust God in our adversity. In the end, believers can be sure that God’s plans for them are the best.

**How does our inability to foresee what lies ahead in our lives force us to depend on and trust in God?**

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**FIND BALANCE** (ECCL. 7:15-18)

**Verses 15-18**

Verse 18 is the hinge point of this paragraph. In this verse, Solomon argued that wisdom and righteousness characterize the life of **the one who fears God**. However, the verses before may be some of the most complicated verses in the book. In 7:15, the Teacher noticed that a righteous person's life might end while he is living righteously. He also observed that a wicked person might experience an extended life in spite of his continual wickedness. The point the Teacher was making is that the length of a person's life does not depend on his or her spirituality. The Teacher made this point by posing a question to us: why do some upstanding people die way too young, while some wicked people live long lives and die at a very old age? This becomes a more poignant question when one understands the ancient Hebrew context in which the Teacher was asking it.

In Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:33, we read that righteous living (obedience to the word of God) prolongs a person's life, while the opposite (disobedience and wicked living) shortens an individual's life. What then do we do with this text in Ecclesiastes? The key is found in the words **excessively righteous**, and **overly wise** in verse 16 and **excessively wicked** and **foolish** in verse 17. Why would someone intentionally live *excessively wicked* or *foolish*? It may be logical, if under the sun is all there is, to live anyway you want—if this is the only life you have with no expectation of meeting your Maker. In fact, this is what often drives the most wicked people in the world. As Christians, we may not struggle with this as much.

What did the writer mean by *excessively righteous* or *overly wise*? In the Old Testament, a long life is paired with obedience to God's commands. So it is quite possible that some people were going to excessive lengths to live righteously in order to earn a long life.

On the surface, this doesn't seem so harmful. However, consider a child who sees the reward of another for doing a good deed and follows suit to receive the same reward. The issue is not obedience but the motivation behind it. The second child did not do a good deed out of love or concern for another, he or she did it in order to benefit himself or herself. This may be what the Teacher meant by *excessively righteous* and *overly wise*. It describes the person who is obedient to God's commands not out of love for God but to get something from God. This person thinks he or she can prolong life by engaging in some extreme forms of religious living. This person's actions were for his or her own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving God for His sake. In this way, careful obedience to

**VERSES 15-18**

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> Don't be excessively righteous, and don't be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

<sup>17</sup> Don't be excessively wicked, and don't be foolish. Why should you die before your time?

<sup>18</sup> 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.

God’s law may be exposed as a strategy to manipulate God. “I’ve done my duty; now I have my demands.”

What this text reminds us of is that Christians not only need to repent of wickedness but also repent of the wrong reasons for doing what is right. This is why the fear of God is so important. If we fear God—have a reverent respect for His holiness and a deep horror at the depth of our own sin—we will abhor wickedness. We will also abhor self-centered righteousness because it reveals that we are acting as our own savior in order to demand things of God.

***God is viewed as a vending machine to dispense one’s desires.***

People can even avoid Jesus as Savior by keeping all the moral laws. The person motivated to do good from a heart of self-centered righteousness tends to think: *God owes me answered prayers and a good life for all I’ve done.* God is viewed as a vending machine to dispense one’s desires.

However, ***the one who fears God*** avoids both extremes and lives a grace-balanced life. The one who fears God will be wise enough to know his or her own heart and to pursue righteousness for the right reasons—as a loving response to who God is.

In the end, this settles our hearts when it comes to questions like why some upstanding people die too young, while some wicked people live long lives and die at a very old age. If our purpose is to love God in response to His grace, we obey without making demands.

The questions raised by Ecclesiastes 7:15 end up being less important than doing good for the right reasons. Christians are called to live righteously—not to get what we want from God—but in response to what God has already given us, namely, grace we do not deserve. Solomon called for God’s people to live reasonable and balanced lives, avoiding the extremes of moral self-righteousness and foolishness. This emphasis reminds us that we should not view ourselves as being righteous apart from God.

**Why is it important that we not only repent of our wickedness, but also repent of our self-righteousness?**

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

### Verses 19-22

The Teacher surmised that wisdom found in the fear of God makes one stronger than the collective wise counsel of **ten rulers**. This is significant given the great value the biblical sages gave to having many counselors. (See Prov. 11:14.) Our fear of God and our faith in Him and what He has done in Christ saves us. Rulers attempt to curb sin, but only the wisdom of God through Christ can cleanse us of our sin.

Solomon and Paul were in agreement: “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). Recognizing we are all sinners (Eccl. 7:20) should impact how we understand ourselves and others. We must learn to deal with people as they are—as sinners like us. In verses 21-22, the Teacher provided an example of what this looks like. He advised that we should not take too seriously everything people say because we are probably going to hear someone say something insulting about us: **Don’t pay attention to everything people say**. We ourselves have said unkind things about others too. Taking issue with those who speak wrongly of us serves to justly accuse us of our own culpability in relationship to others.

The self-righteous (foolish) person takes counsel or criticism to heart because it is an attack on their worth and security. The humble (wise) person can accept counsel or criticism for what it is and implement what is useful and true in a constructive way because of his or her own admission of the need for growth.

It is interesting that Solomon’s example is of a **servant** doing the insulting. A person is much more likely to rebuke a subordinate than a superior. Nevertheless, it is wise to let it go. Just as we are sinners who have spoken unfair criticisms of others and are in need of God’s grace, so is everyone else. Since the perfect, holy, sinless God who is our Superior has shown mercy and grace to us who have willfully rebelled against Him and offended Him, then how can we refuse to show mercy and grace to others?

**How does our awareness of our own sinfulness make us increasingly willing to offer forgiveness and extend grace to others?**

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### VERSES 19-22

<sup>19</sup> Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten rulers of a city.

<sup>20</sup> There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins.

<sup>21</sup> Don’t pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, <sup>22</sup> for in your heart you know that many times you yourself have cursed others.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION

**RELATE:** Secure a game that requires balancing of some type (examples: stepping stones, Jenga®). As the group arrives, allow them to play the game.

**CONNECT:** After most have arrived, state: *In our lives today, balance is required to be successful in so many areas, whether in regard to our health, finances, or time. We need to recognize that many people are watching us to see how balanced our lives are because of our relationships with Christ.*

**ASK:** *Why is acknowledging our sinfulness important for having a proper understanding of ourselves and our limits in this life?* (PSG, p. 100)

**TRANSITION:** *In today's session, we will examine Solomon's words as he reflected on the need for balance in life and how we should look to God for help.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**CONTEXTUALIZE:** Reference **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*). Distribute **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Wisdom Poetry*), allowing the group to scan the handout for additional information on the wisdom poetry in the Bible. Remind the group that this study is a continuation of Solomon's reflections on the meaning of life.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Read aloud Ecclesiastes 6:12, indicating that the question posed in this verse is the foundation for the verses that will be examined in more detail in Ecclesiastes 7. Explain that many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written later in Solomon's life. It appears that he was evaluating his own life and considering how one should live in the face of his own mortality. In Ecclesiastes 7:1-10, Solomon said we are right to celebrate the birth of a child, but even more so we should celebrate a life lived for God. He proposed that accepting the wisdom that comes from God is the key to life.

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**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 7:11-14**, while the group listens for how these verses are connected to balance in our lives.

**ASK:** *How does God's wisdom produce the balance called for by Solomon?*

**EXPLAIN:** *Verses 11-12 indicate that both wisdom and financial wealth provide protection. Our world recognizes how wealth provides security but often fails to grasp how wisdom provides a road map for dealing with life's ups and downs. The wisdom that comes from God also led to God's provision of Jesus Christ as presented in 1 Corinthians 1:24.*

**DISCUSS:** *How does eternal life and eternity being secured through faith in Jesus point to the wisdom of God?*

**READ:** Lead the group to reread Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 for further evidence of the need for balance.



**HIGHLIGHT:** Guide the group to identify key words or phrases found in these verses. Using those key words or phrases, highlight that people who are wise will accept God's plan, recognizing that God's sovereign plan will ultimately prevail.

**ASK:** *Why might people find it so difficult at times to trust that God's ways are always best?* (PSG, p. 104)

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**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 7:15-18**, asking the group to listen for extremes that are identified in these verses. Instruct another volunteer to read Lamentations 3:38, also noting the extremes mentioned.

**GUIDE:** Use the paragraph under Verses 16-18 on page 105 of the PSG to explain the terms *legalism* and *asceticism*.

**ASK:** *How do the extremes in these verses relate to legalism and man's temptation to trust in his own righteousness and wisdom? What is the difference between being a religious fanatic and being completely devoted to God?* (PSG, p. 106)

**STATE:** *Solomon confirmed that true righteousness and wisdom comes to the one who fears God and honors Him daily.*

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**READ:** Invite someone to read aloud **Ecclesiastes 7:19-22**, as the group listens for a clear description of humanity's inability to be perfect and sinless before God.

**ANALYZE:** *How does being honest about our own sin open the door for us to gain perspective when dealing with other people? How does recognizing the tremendous mercy, grace, and forgiveness God has shown us empower us to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving to others?* (PSG, p. 107)

**PARAPHRASE:** Reread Ecclesiastes 7:20, asking each person to consider how they would paraphrase the verse in today's language. Distribute **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*), sharing that Ecclesiastes 7:20 is the memory verse for this session.

**TRANSITION:** *Solomon revealed that all people are sinners and in need of God's grace and wisdom. The wise person realizes that God offers wisdom and life to the imperfect through a relationship with Jesus Christ.*

## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

**LIST:** Lead the group to identify areas where people find it difficult to accept God's plans, recording the responses on a white board or chart paper.

**REFLECT:** Direct the group to review the list and consider their own lives, reflecting upon areas that might be out of balance. Ask: *What steps can you take to more fully trust Him in each area listed?* (PSG, p. 108)

**DISCUSS:** Guide the group to complete the third question set on PSG page 108: *Discuss as a group why it is wise and good to always remember that all people, including ourselves, are sinners. How does doing so bring honesty and perspective to the group as a whole? As a group, hold one another accountable for memorizing Ecclesiastes 7:20 this week.*

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking the Lord to reveal things in our lives that are out of balance. Pray that as He opens our eyes to areas that need to be addressed, that He will also guide us to align these things with His purposes and plans.

## OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

### MUSIC

As the group is arriving, enlist a volunteer to play either on the piano or a recording of “It Is Well With My Soul,” by Horatio Spafford and Philip Bliss. To begin the group time, share that Horatio Spafford wrote “It is Well with My Soul” after suffering multiple tragic events in his life: the death of a son, loss of investments due to fire, and the loss of four daughters when their ship sank crossing the Atlantic Ocean. While traveling on board a ship to join his wife who had survived the sinking ship, he penned the words to this famous hymn. Direct the group to reflect on the words of the hymn and what connections can be made to Ecclesiastes 7:14. To close the group time, ask each person to complete the following: *It is well with my soul because ...* and share their responses with the group.

### WORD STUDY

**Gather several Bible concordances.**

Divide the group into teams, matching the number of concordances. Direct each team to complete the Bible Skill on page 104 of the PSG. Guide them to examine how Solomon repeatedly used the words “find” and “discover” in Ecclesiastes 7:14,24,26-29. Using the concordances, look up the Hebrew word *matsa'* and note Old Testament passages that use the word. Discuss how the use of this word in other passages helps you gain a clearer understanding of why Solomon would have used the word in these verses in Ecclesiastes.

### ART/VISUAL

**Gather paper, pencils, and markers.**

Distribute paper to each person, guiding them to picture a tightrope walker high in the air. Lead them to sketch the circus performer. As a group, discuss distractions that might seriously affect the performer's balance and lead to disaster. Examples might include a loud scream, a flashing light, or a sneeze. Explain that in our lives we are looking for balance that comes from a focus on our relationship with Christ. Encourage the group to write or sketch on the paper around the tightrope walker distractions that individuals face today that can skew their balance. Allow time for each person to share with a partner.

### COMPARE

Use **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Wisdom Poetry*) to identify other verses in the Bible that are considered wisdom poetry. Assign different passages to volunteers, directing them to read their verses and identify short words of wisdom. After allowing them time to read and reflect, call for volunteers to share the wisdom they discovered in a short statement. Create a list of the statements on the board. Compare the list to Ecclesiastes 7:11-22. Encourage the group to reflect on ways their study can help them find balance throughout the coming week.