

Shall we go back to our verse there in Ecclesiastes 7 beginning at verse 15, as we continue with Solomon as he writes about life in the world "under the sun," apart from God as he, in his later years, turned to try to find some purpose in life and not have God included.

Like most of the poetic books that begin with the book of Job and they follow through to the Song of Solomon, they are intended to speak to your present-tense relationship with God. In other words, it's present tense not future - for the most part. It makes a presumption - the books do - that you are interested in walking with the Lord, and it tackles the tough questions in life. Why do the righteous suffer? How do I pray (in the book of Psalms)? The wisdom that I need for daily life. And then this book, which tackles so many of these roads that people can take. And this morning is no exception.

We're going to spend most of our time with verse 15 because that's the principle that Solomon is addressing. Everything that follows it is just kind of a substantiation of that truth. But Solomon, this morning, tackles another very difficult subject and that is - how can evil exist if God is good? Or how do you put evil and God together? And you could call these verses, and we've entitled this study "Let's Get Real" because Solomon wants to look with a real eye at what we are facing in the world; have some real answers for what we see. There are certainly many ways to approach life that aren't realistic approaches. Maybe you know someone who kind of lives in a fantasy world, an idealistic kind of life - almost a make believe. If you say to them, "Things are getting worse," they'll go, "Oh, no, they're fine." They just want to kind of just think it through rather than be honest with what they see.

I heard a story a while back of a golfer who was having difficulty golfing, and he went to see a psychologist. And the psychologist said, "I've got just the answer for you." He said, "What is it?" He said, "I want you to go out and play 18 holes of golf without a ball. I want you to imagine every shot. Just stand up there with your club, hit that ball, and go out and hit it again." And he said, "I'll do that." The next morning he got up, and he got on the first tee, and he got his driver out, and he swung at an imaginary ball. He said, "Two hundred and eighty yards right in the

fairway. I am on today!" (Laughing) He walked out to his ball and took out his six iron, hit it again - 15 feet from the cup. "Man, that is perfect!" Putted it in for a birdie. Went like that all day. Got to the 18th hole, saw a guy sitting there waiting to hit and realized he didn't have a ball either. (Laughing) He said, "Have you talked to Dr. Jones?" He said, "Oh, yeah, I saw him as well." He said, "How's that going?" He said, "I'm having a great day." He said, "Me too." He said, "Why don't we play the last hole together?" He said, "I'll bet you twenty bucks I win the hole." (Laughing) The guy said, "You're on!" First fellow gets up, and he wails on the ball. He goes, "Man, did you see that - just a little draw right in the middle of the fairway - 281 yards!" The guy said, "Good shot." He got up and hit, and he goes, "Man. I am just like 5" ahead of you." "Oh." So they walked out to the ball, and the guy said, "It's 151 yards. I'm hitting a seven iron." He hit the ball and goes, "Oh, that is perfect. Right up over the top of the flag, little backspin. "Oh, it's in the hole! I win!" The guy said, "No you don't!" He said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You hit my ball!" (Laughing) That's living in a fantasy world. And I'll tell you what - most golfers are far better in their minds than they are out on the course. I'm speaking from experience.

A lot of people live like that. They swing, and there's no ball. They're not engaged, they're not in contact, their minds aren't in the game, they're disconnected. They just live that way. Idealists. But that's not reality. Reality is far different, isn't it? There are folks who look at the world, and they become very cynical very quickly, and they develop a cynical attitude about life.

Ken Crockett wrote a book once, and it was called "I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint." It's a pretty good book, but one of the things he mentioned in there, he said, "You know, pessimists see a glass half full is completely empty. They're just never able to find any kind of hope." Well that's not realistic either. Something is missing there as well. It does seem Solomon, like all of us, begins life as an idealist. When we start living we have plans, don't we? And the minute you get old enough to think it through, you start to develop your dream - what I'm gonna be when I grow up, what my wife's gonna look like, where I'm gonna live, the car I'm gonna drive, the job I'm gonna have, and you've got it all laid out for you. By the time you're a teenager, most of the time you've got a concept of what you want, how your kids are gonna turn out. But then you realize that life isn't quite dreamlike. The idealism with which you grow up is really not the way life is at all, and so you come to reality, and life kind of beats you up some, and your kids don't quite turn out like you want, you didn't get the job you want, you're not driving the

car you want, you're not living in the neighborhood you wanted. And you've still got a long life to go. And you become pessimistic. You realize that life is hard, and it's not always fair, and how come this happened to me, and your whole life becomes kind of pessimistic in its outlook. Solomon gets older, and especially as he moves away from the Lord, he becomes extremely pessimistic about life. You've read it enough now. Everything stinks. Nothing amounts to anything. And because God has been set aside, "vanity" is his great word. Vanity. And unfortunately, until you meet the Lord and because folks won't come to the Lord, they can get stuck there and be shipwrecked there with the whole disillusionment of the world. They're just cynical, they're downtrodden, they're pessimistic, or they try to be idealistic in their outlook. But none of it is very realistic. They're out of balance.

I think when I got saved is when my life became optimistic. The world hadn't changed, but I had, and I had come to know the God who changes lives. And though I know where I'm headed, and I know what His promises are, I don't want to deny the reality of the place that we live. I think it was Charles Colson who wrote that life isn't a book. It isn't logical or sensible or orderly. Life's a mess. And most of the time your theology and relationship with God, you have to live out in the midst of the mess.

But notice what Solomon says in verse 15 as he starts. He says, "I have seen everything in my days of vanity." "Man, I have seen it all!" You've heard that expression before. It comes right here from verse 15. "I've seen it all. I've seen the sacred and the secular. I've seen the contradictions in life and the ups and the downs and the hopes and the dreams and the disappointments." But Solomon is willing here, as he began last week, to look at things realistically and to see things from God's perspective. But his frustration was, and the difficulty that he wanted to address, the issue of sin and evil and God because he says in the rest of verse 15, "There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness." "I've seen good people die way too young. I've seen rotten people live way too long - and get away with it." Now, that's not a new complaint. I'll bet you've had that thought, haven't you? Haven't you, at some point, said, "Lord, take that guy out?" (Laughing) "Bless me!" When Asaph was writing Psalm 73 he said in the first fifteen verses of the psalm, "Man, I almost gave up when I considered the prosperity of the wicked - no chains in their death, no sick days, they curse God and get away with it, they're rich beyond measure, they walk through this life condescending to everyone. It's not right! I about quit. I about gave up." And it frustrated him. But that's the short term view of life,

isn't it? He was looking at what happens between now and death. It's the short term. If you compare this to eternity, this is the short view. But in verse 17 of psalm 73, he said, "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I considered their end and that how, in a moment's time, when You rise up, their judgment is going to come without remedy." And then he took the long view, and he realized that it's where you end up that the issue is, and his outlook was vastly different.

Jesus in Luke 12 told the parable of that rich fool who had been so successful in the world that his only concern was, "What am I going to do with all the stuff I have?" And his conclusion was, "I'll just build some bigger barns, make some better investments, and then I'm gonna live the life of ease, man. I'm gonna put my feet up and go play golf with an imaginary ball." (Laughing) And the Lord said, "You're a fool. Tonight you die. And then whose shall it be that you're storing away?" But that's the fate of everyone who is rich in this life but is not rich towards God.

It is the inconsistency of seeing good people get the shaft and the absolute dirtbag skate through life that frustrates people. There's a theological term for it, by the way. The term is theodicy. It means to reconcile a powerful, good God with the existence of evil. And I think most people have wondered about it, have come to where they have to deal with it. If you share your faith with people, you'll invariably run into someone who says, "Now wait a minute. Why is there evil if God is so good? And if He's so powerful, why doesn't He just get rid of it? Why would He tolerate it for five minutes?" And they use that as an excuse to not believe in God and to set Him aside. So they become atheists. They look at an observable world, and they see evil clearly, and they say it's incompatible with a good and with a loving God. And so there must be no God, and they write that off - just by their experience. Now it's not a very intelligent argument because if you're going to make that argument, you have to define where good came from. If there's no God, if there's no moral absolute, how do you define good? It becomes a sliding scale of relativism based on the experiences of a culture that changes with the people and changes with the time. You become an existentialist. An existentialist is someone who defines life by the uniqueness and the isolation of their individual experience. You create your own reality, if you will, your own world view. And it changes from person to person. And folks do that in response to trying to figure out why is there evil, and how can there be a good God? Others become agnostic. It's a Greek word that means "I don't know." The word "gnosco" means "to know." You throw an "a" in front of it, it just negates it. So the word "agnostic" is "without knowledge" - can't know, they say. You ask them what they believe, and they

probably say, "Well, I really can't know." Now, by the way, the translation of "agnostic" in the Scriptures and a Latin book is the word "ignoramus." (Laughing) And I've never heard anyone claim to be that - but proudly use the agnostic term. And by definition, a true agnostic would not be satisfied with not knowing. He would want to go and find out, and, "If God exists, I want to find out." But the other side of agnosticism is that people tend to say, "Well since I don't know I'll just throw myself into the party life and get all I can out of the world because I see that that exists, and I don't want to miss out on that. And I'm not sure the other exists." Solomon did that, didn't he? And he became very pessimistic, very discouraged.

There are many folks who, looking at the world's evil and then trying to consider a good God - the God that we share and preach, become deists. Deism by definition reduces God to being the cause. He's like the great clockmaker in the sky who wound up the universe and then let go of it and then walked away. Really doesn't have any involvement with it anymore. He just got it started, and now He's really going to step back and watch it all unravel without any further involvement. And so deists, they don't need the Bible, and they don't need prophets, and they don't need the Word of God, and they don't need to worship because God doesn't reveal Himself beyond cause and effect. So there's no need for organized religion. George Washington was a deist. So was Benjamin Franklin. So was Thomas Jefferson. They identified themselves as Unitarians, which is kind of a non-Trinitarian form of Christianity that emphasizes rationality and skepticism. Deism, by the way, was birthed in the 17th-18th century during the Age of Enlightenment. Not very enlightened, but there you go.

So, there're a lot of responses that people make, and what you understand about evil in the world and the goodness of God makes a difference in how you live. Even amongst church people, we find spiritual idealists. I grew up as a Catholic, but when I got saved I was thrown in with a bunch of faith movement people. So I was into the "name it and claim it" guys for a year or two before I started reading my Bible. But the "name it and claim it" folks are spiritual idealists. They are willing to admit evil exists. However, if you have enough faith, it doesn't need to come near you. You don't need to be sick, you don't need to struggle, you don't need to have difficulty. Just "name it and claim it," you know? And you can have it. That's not realistic life, but it's the position that they take, and they believe that until the day that they die which I think violates their whole premise. You're dying. And then they started teaching, "Well you can die extremely healthy." And I'm

thinking, "How exactly does that work?" (Laughing) Isn't pretty much death the absence of extremely healthy? (Laughing) Men toiling with theodicy. I mean, Job's three friends did that. They came to Job, and they tried to simplify his evil with God, right? They said, "Well, we thought you were a good man, a holy man. Look how sick you are! You know, God punishes people that are wicked, and you must be very wicked because you're getting wailed on!" And that was their conclusion. "Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. You must be one bad person!" The spiritual idealist. We used to hear people teach that you could escape by confession. I'd say to a guy, "Hey, you don't look like you're feeling too well?" They'd go, "Oh brother, don't minister that negativity to me. Don't speak that into my life!" Really? "So I can say stuff is going to happen to you? You're a monkey's uncle!" (Laughing)

Solomon is willing to look at the world in a biblical realistic way, and it's a pretty straightforward view. We know there's evil in the world, don't we? And we know that there is a good God who has given us His Word to tell us that man is sinful, he has an enemy, foolishness grips his heart, hurtful things he will do, without help he will seek living in darkness to do the things he shouldn't do until God bails him out, comes to save him or to deliver him from himself.

He says in verse 16, as these reactions to what Solomon sees in the world, "Do not be overly righteous nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time?" Now, you read that, and I want you to be careful about **not misinterpreting** it. Solomon is not saying, "Don't go overboard in either direction," which is how it's usually taught. Don't sin too much, don't get too spiritually weird, go to church on the big holidays - you don't need to go every week, don't buy your own Bible - they'll lend you one, you don't have to get crazy. But look, these are reflexive verbs, and you have to stay in context in the Bible. Always be sure that you do that. Reflexive verbs. Literally Solomon is saying to the person in the world, "Don't act self righteous, and don't minimize your wickedness. In fact, you will read in the very next verse, "It is good that you hang onto that because if you fear the Lord, you'll escape those attitudes, you'll have wisdom" (verse 19), and "you'll realize that there is no one that does good." And that's his point. His warning is against presumptive kind of self-sufficiency. When you share the gospel with people, there are always people who will say to you things like, "I'm a pretty good guy. I do a lot of things well. Oh, I could do better, granted, but look, there're a lot of people far worse than I am." And so they exalt their self-righteousness while they minimize their sin. It's a

typical attitude in the world. And Solomon says it's a dangerous place to be because it's developed by looking at yourself, not at your sin. "I haven't sinned that much."

I remember my dad - when I first got saved, and I started to share with my dad, he used to say - he was like flabbergasted at grace. He'd say, "So you mean to tell me," and then he'd list some bad guy, "if he was to accept Jesus, he'd go to heaven? And if I don't do that, I'll go to hell?" And I'd go, "Yep. That's pretty much it right there, dad. You've got it. Now you're responsible for it." And then he'd tell me to shut up, and get out. (Laughing) Pretty much our relationship for years. But he eventually got saved, but his argument was always, "There're so many worse people off than me. If hell is filled with bad people, it's gonna be nearly full by the time I get there." That kind of attitude. Right? "And I'm a pretty good guy." That's the way that sin is addressed in the life of those in the world, and this position of self-righteousness and this excusing of personal sinfulness - that's not reality because you're not all that good, and you are that sinful.

So what do we do? He says in verse 18, "It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other." Grab hold of these two principles "for he who fears God will escape them all." This wiser than thou attitude, this "I'm more holy than you might think" is not reality. But if we fear the Lord, we will see things clearly. You know, you and I are called by Jesus to live in a wicked world - as lights. Right? As salt of the earth - to live in reality, to be real in our faith, to admit and to be honest with what we see and what we know. I've had people say to me, "Oh, it must be great working in the church with only Christians." (Laughing) It's not that great. You know, when I used to work in the world I could always go home and say to my wife, "Well, they're a bunch of unsaved people. What do you expect?" I can't say any of that now. (Laughing) You just go home and go, "Ohhh, it's disappointing." Because we're people, we're sinful - we need God's help. You have to work with folks. It's reality, isn't it? It'd be nice to move out of reality, but you shouldn't. Get real. Fear God. See things His way. Hang onto Him with both hands, for the world you see now is temporary, but eternity is coming. Fear God. It's one of Solomon's favorite expressions. He'll use it quite often. It means to reverence God or to obey the Lord or respond to Him - in view of the imbalances of life. "I've seen everything, especially the wickedness that seems to be perpetrated in the world where the righteous die young, and the wicked live forever, and there is an attitude of righteousness in the hearts of men and a minimization of sin. But look, if you want to get real, fear God. Come to terms with how God sees you."

Answer to Him, and stand up when He speaks. The only reason this is continuing is because God is a good God who wants all men to be saved.

He said, if you walk in that wisdom, it'll "strengthen the wise more than ten rulers of the city." It will make you stronger. It will help you to stand fast because after all, verse 20, "there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin." The key to understanding what we see in life is the pervasiveness of sin. The folks who want to write God off because there's sin are foolish. There is sin! No doubt. But there is also a very good God. Sin is the cause of evil. Every man is infected by sin. Isaiah said (chapter 53:6), "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way." Psychologists might call it behavioral disorder, and sociologists might point to the society in which we live, and minorities might call it racism. But what it really is, is sin - every time. It's sin. It's at the bottom, it's at the root level of what we see in the world. Get real. Get your eyes open. Look at things God's way. Sin has done this. Sin is the problem. And the only answer to sin is the blood of the Lamb and the work of God's Spirit in saving us so that we might escape the blindness of sin and have the wisdom of the knowledge of Him and get a new nature, get a new heart.

Now Solomon, in all of these concluding verses that follow, simply reminds us that if we know that it's sin that's the problem and the solution is fearing God and knowing God, then we'll live a very realistic life. We won't live in a bubble. We won't live pessimistically so or idealistically so or even too optimistically. We'll live realistically.

So he says this, in application of the imbalances of life and the claims of folks who don't know God, "Be wise. No one gets away from being a sinner. We're all sinners. There's not a just man on the earth." Then he says, "Remember this when you listen to people speak," verse 21, "Also do not take it to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you." If you want to be sure of the sinfulness of man, just listen to the way people talk. Backbite. What they say, how they say it. And, unfortunately, sometimes you're going to be the subject of that. "Not me." Oh, yeah, you.

But verse 22 says, also remember when you speak, "For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others." It's not just them. It's you. Paul said thirty years after being a Christians, Philippians 3, "I haven't gotten there yet, but I'm pressing on. Still got problems. Still got sin. Still got issues.

But I'm pressing on in the high calling of Christ." We usually say, "Oh, wretched driver that you are" rather than, "Oh, wretched man that I am." Spurgeon said to his Bible students, his pastoral students, "Have one blind eye and one deaf ear because you can't really stop people's tongues, and you can really only stop your ears from hearing them and then pay no attention when you hear it because an eavesdropper rarely hears good things about himself." Solomon says, "You just remember when you're out in the world, living realistically, that there are going to be people that will undercut you, and then there'll be folks that you'll try to do that well, and it's the same issue. It's sin. It's what we see around us. It's what causes the evil to fester. So don't take everything to heart that you hear. When your friends talk about you, when your employees talk about you, or when you've been the talker and not just the hearer, don't place too much value on it because it's sin." Be clear about it - it's sin. It's all about sin. That sin is the problem. It's the reason for evil. It's pervasive. How do we overcome it? Verse 20 says we can't do it on our own. Verse 18 says we fear the Lord, and His wisdom makes us strong.

He reminds us to remember it when we try to formulate our opinions. He writes in verse 23, "All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise'; but it was far from me. As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out? I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things, to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness." I couldn't do it. Solomon's goal was to find the meaning of life by his wisdom, but he admits here that it can't be done. Man is limited in his wisdom. "I'm at an end." And we learn very quickly, realistically, that wisdom about life doesn't necessarily come from observation or from investigation. It ultimately comes from spiritual revelation. God shows you that you're a sinful person, and for the first time in your life, you see things clearly. You come out of the bubble in which you used to live - when you're fine, everybody else was wicked; and you were right, and everybody else was wrong. If you pursue wisdom, you're stronger than ten cities. But that wisdom can only come as you fear the Lord.

Now, I remember there was a time, and maybe you do as well, that I was absolutely sure I knew everything. Pretty sure I was about 15. I knew my parents were stupid, (Laughing) and I was far smarter than they were. And I believed that with all of my heart. I would hang around my friends, talking about my parents - how stupid they were. "Yeah, my dad, he doesn't know nothing." And then I got older. And the older I got, the smarter they looked, and the dumber I looked. But there was a time that I thought I was smarter.

Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians in (1 Corinthians 8:2) said, "If you think you know anything, you really don't know anything yet." It's a great day when you learn you don't know it all, but seeing those who act like they do is pretty good proof of the sinfulness of man. And Solomon says, "Man, I've been looking around. I've been trying to get answers. I've been pursuing wisdom, and I realize that it's just foolishness. You want to be delivered - fear God."

He says in verse 26, remember that sin is the cause of our problems when it comes to relationships. He said, "And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters." (handcuffs, chains) "He who pleases God" - first fears God, now pleases God - "shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be trapped by her." Solomon's experience was that he had had many sexual and romantic involvements during his life. He had 700 wives by this time and 300 concubines. I don't know where he found time to write! (Laughing) At all. But I just feel so bad for the guy. He lines up wife #312 and says, "This is the one!" And it's not. Just turns to more - using the king to gain what they want. And he had a horrible experience, and he realized that the only way to find life was to please the Lord and not get caught up in the sins of this world - how it applies to relationships. You please the Lord, you won't fall for it. You want a solution? Do you not want to be disappointed? Then please the Lord. Because sin inhabits the relationship area as well.

Listen to his disappointment in verse 27. " 'Here is what I have found,' saith" (the kohaleth, the researcher) "the Preacher," 'adding one thing to the other to find out the reason, which my soul still seeks but I cannot find: one man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Truly, this only I have found; that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.' " He had great difficulty in his relationships finding one good friend - someone that would be faithful to him. I always think about Paul. He spends thirty-five years in ministry and then says of Timothy, "He's the only guy that sees things like I do." He worked with a lot of folks - didn't find a lot of folks he felt shared his heart for the people, for the Lord. And so, don't be too discouraged when people let you down. Why? Because sin has entered into life. Sin has affected all that we do and all that we say. "Maybe I find one guy as a friend in a thousand," and then he said of his marriages, "I haven't found one woman like that at all!" Poor man! But that's the way sin works, isn't it? Disappointment after disappointment. We are let down.

So what did he conclude? He said, "Well I found this, and this is the only thing I'm sure of. God didn't make us this way. God made us upright. God made us in His own image. God gave us an opportunity to live with Him. We sinned. Right? WE have many devices." To people who want to argue, "Well it's God's fault. If there's a God, He'd fix it." No, no, no. There IS a God. He made us. And since we have fallen, He's only come to redeem us. But we're the fallen, He's not. There's a good reality check. Get real, man. We've sinned. He saves, and one day He'll come to judge. But all men are sinners, and we live in a very sinful world to which we can react in many ways. We can deny it, we can hide from it, we can idealize it, we can apply shoddy theology to it, or we can face it - knowing sin is everywhere, and it affects everything. But if we fear the Lord, we can escape self-righteousness, self-denial. If we please the Lord, we cannot get caught up in the offers of the world for real life. And ultimately, when we walk out the door we can see in the world that God's intentions were far different than what we are experiencing today. And the gospel that we bring is to bring people away from the inevitability of the destruction that sin will bring, the many schemes that they follow. God made man upright, and God seeks to save man. Life is short. Death is sure. Sin the cause. Christ the cure.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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