

Ecclesiastes 7:23-29

The Final Conclusion of the Preacher's Investigation

A. The Sum of Things Sought

The Teacher has searched for "all this" (i.e. all that was discussed in the previous outlines) through wisdom (cf. 1:13). Here he clearly refers to human actions, the works that are done under the sun (1:14), and his conclusion is that everywhere folly (sin) wins.

This is a painful discovery, even though he knows that God triumphs over and in human folly. Where does the evil and injustice in history come from? What is the purpose of everything which happens and is done? The Teacher is again concerned with the purpose of history: which should be redemptive history. He is concerned with backgrounds, connections and relationships – actually with what he calls "eternity" in chapter 3:11. The Teacher has searched for the scheme of things in history, for the final answer to the last question: where does evil come from and why has God included it in his counsel? He has searched everything through wisdom, thus using the light of the revelation of the Word. He must admit that he has not been successful (cf. 3:11b). Here revelation called him to a stop, a call to which he submits. Whoever has discovered the last secret has become God, does not need God anymore and can no longer be called to faith in the Incomprehensible One (cf. Job 36:26). Job also sought for the scheme of things in his sufferings. He did not receive the final answer, but God appeared to him in his majestic holiness. This revelation healed him.

In this outline we are continually reminded of the book of Job. The Teacher already said that a man cannot contend with God, who is stronger than he is (6:10, cf. Job 9), and that he cannot find out God's secrets (7:24, cf. Job 11:7,8). In this connection Job 28 is significant as well. It states that perfect wisdom, which can see through everything, cannot be discovered by man. *That* wisdom is with God, and he says to man: "The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding." (Job 28:28) Note that in Ecclesiastes the theme of the fear of the Lord is also central. The Teacher comes to the same conclusion as Job: Wisdom in the full sense of the word (that which can give a final answer to the last questions) remained far from him (vv. 23, 24). The question remains - where does all folly (which is wickedness) come from (v. 25)? The Teacher continues to seek the answer by the light of revelation.

B. The Origin of Evil Discovered

Even though The Teacher has not found the final answer, he has discovered something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is a snare and a trap. Since The Teacher has begun an investigation about the cause and place of evil in history, we may assume that he started at the beginning (i.e. Genesis 1-3), and v. 29 definitely points back to the beginning. The woman of v. 26 is, in the first place Eve, who fell into transgression through temptation (2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:14). She caught Adam in her net, and in Adam she caught the whole human race. This woman is more bitter than death

because she is actually the mother and instigator of death. This is not in conflict with Romans 5:12, where Adam is named.

Now The Teacher also understands why sin is so general and must take on a cunning form. Sin still sneaks through history as the *femme fatale* (cf. Proverbs 9:12). In this connection, you can think also of the image of the whore presented by the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea 1 and 3, etc.). She signifies the apostate church. This image is maintained in the New Testament from Matthew (12:39 "adulterous generation") to Revelation (see 2:9, "synagogue of Satan"; 2:14,20, "Jezebel"; 3:9; and chapters 17 and 18). We see here unfaithful Christendom associating with the apostate political and cultural world power in the image of a woman who embraces her victims.

The Teacher has discovered the universality and the stirring power of sin, and then he says: "If it pleases God,¹ men will escape her" (v. 26). It is no wonder then, that there is so much folly. It is even more a wonder of God's pleasure that there are still people who are not snared in the woman's traps. Whoever realizes this, will live in profound dependence on this God, guarding himself against revolutionary agitation and also against spiritual adultery. In the beginning God created men upright, but men have sought out many schemes [RSV: devices] to justify their sins or to deny their responsibility. The power of the evil one cannot be stopped: the cause of evil is in man himself.

C. One in a Thousand Found

The Teacher does not say that "the" woman is worse than "the" man, but that sin has been brought into the world through a woman (1 Timothy 2:14). Thereby the whole human race (men and women) became corrupt. Then The Teacher hunted for real men and women who were worthy of their name (Genesis 1:26,27, "in our image, in our likeness"). The result is deplorable for men and women: he found only one real person among a thousand, and that one was not a woman. This is a reference to Job 33:23. The Teacher knew the book of Job and studied it in his investigation. The text mentioned refers to an intercessor, one among a thousand. Thus, it refers to Christ.

It is remarkable that in the book of Job (which originates in the same school as Ecclesiastes) the figure of the Mediator is sketched quite sharply (see 9:33, arbitrator; 16:19, witness, advocate; 17:3, pledge; 33:23, angel, mediator; 33:24, the Mediator who has paid the ransom). It is the temple that preaches the necessity of this ransom (reconciliation through atonement) and that depicts the fact of reconciliation symbolically and also guarantees it. Remember the central place which the temple has in Ecclesiastes. The entire book is inspired by the revelation of the temple.

In chapter 7:28 there is a direct reference to the Messiah. This one is Wisdom in Person (cf. Job 28; Proverbs 8). Whoever has found him, has no more need of devices. The reference to the Messiah might still be vague, but it clearly is about a Person who exceeds mankind in all his humanity (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 5 and 6). Life has a messianic future! The investigation has not been completely negative, even though The

¹ *Ed. Note:* The author's translation of this text differs from the NIV and RSV.

Teacher did not find the scheme of things. In the Messiah he has found the God of Abraham and David.

Questions

1. Young people sometimes say: "I will believe in God when I understand everything." What do you think of this? What do John 17:3 and Hebrews 11:1 mean in this respect?

For clarification: in chapter 7:23 we find the words "wisdom" and "wise" The Teacher has examined everything with the help of God's wisdom (revealed in the Scriptures). With this revealed wisdom he set out to obtain the greater wisdom, that is, the wisdom which sees through everything and which leaves no unanswered questions. He could not find that wisdom, because it is only found with God.

2. Of what importance is this part of Scripture for the doctrine of the depravity of man?
3. It is stated here that only God's good pleasure can save us. Can this be said to people who live in sin? Does this not make people passive so that they say: "Then I had better wait for God's good pleasure to save me."
4. Can you say that a sinner is saved as soon as he really knows that his salvation depends on God's good pleasure?
5. Name a few of the "many schemes" referred to by The Teacher, starting at Genesis 3. Can you also find them referred to in Lord's Days 2, 3 and 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism?
6. Would the title: "The Bitter Disappointment of The Teacher" be a proper title for the main theme of this outline?
7. The word "found" is often mentioned in this passage. Where has The Teacher found everything – in experience or in revelation?

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