

# 7

## *Ecclesiastes 7: 15-18* *The Dilemma of Life under the Sun*

---

Text: Ecclesiastes 7: 15-18.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 7: 1-18.

Singing:

Psalm 73: 1, 2

Psalm 73: 5.

Psalm 89: 19, 20.

Psalm 138: 4.

Psalm 85: 3, 4.

### **Theme and points:**

*The LORD teaches us to deal with the great dilemma of life under the sun: things do not always go as they should. We will note:*

- 1) the dilemma presented*
- 2) the dilemma pondered*
- 3) the dilemma punctured*

# *Ecclesiastes 7: 15–18*

## *The Dilemma of Life under the Sun*

*In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise –why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked and do not be a fool – why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.*

Something is bothering the Preacher. Actually, it has been bugging him for a while already, and he has made references to it but then passed it by. Yet it keeps resurfacing; it will not go away.

You can have that sometimes. Things may be going relatively well, but deep down there is something bothering you. It comes out now and then in a side remark, but sooner or later it comes out in full force.

What is bothering the Preacher? It is the same thing that often bugs us. In this life under the sun—remember the Preacher’s theme- there is so much injustice being done and permitted. One of the hardest things in life is to see the guilty go free and the innocent condemned.

### **So much injustice**

In chapters 3 and 4 he has already mentioned it. 3:16: “in the place of justice –wickedness was there...” The halls of justice are corrupt. 4: 1: “I saw the tears of the oppressed-and they have no comforter...” In chapter 5, we are told not be surprised at the fact that justice and rights are denied: corruption is in many places a way of life. Bribery exists everywhere. And now in our text: a righteous man perishes in his righteousness, but a wicked man lives long in his wickedness. How can that be?

*The LORD teaches us to deal with the great dilemma of life under the sun: things do not always go, as they should. We will note:*

- 1) the dilemma presented*
- 2) the dilemma pondered*
- 3) the dilemma punctured*

Initially I was not sure if the word “dilemma” properly covered the contents of the entire text. I had my own little dilemma here, so to speak. A dilemma occurs when two truths which actually exclude one another come to stand side by side, as if that is the way it should be.

### **What is the dilemma?**

What is the dilemma here? What two things are set side by side which actually cannot exist together? It is either the one or the other, but not both. The Preacher starts out with these words: “In this meaningless life of mine, I have seen both of these...” and then follows what he has observed in life. “This meaningless life” means that he is still working out the main theme that everything under the sun—apart from God- is vanity.

What has he observed? The next words give us the answer. He has seen “a righteous man perishing in his righteousness.” This means that despite this man’s being righteous, loving, and serving God and his neighbor also, he perishes. “In his righteousness” means that the righteousness which the man maintained was not really of any benefit to him. Actually, it killed him.

We have to see this “perishing” as indicating that the man did not die an easy death. He just went under totally. When we look ahead to 7: 30 (at the expression “dying before your time”) and also note that the wicked man is “living long” (7: 15), we may also conclude that this righteous man had a difficult and short life.

The righteous man had a difficult and short life. I will get back to this later, for that is not the way it is supposed to be. But, to make things worse, we notice that there is “a wicked man living long in his wickedness.” This wicked man does not keep God’s commandments. He lives for himself and therefore also has no qualms about plundering his neighbors. You would expect that he has a short life as a committed sinner, but the difficult fact is that he lives long in his wickedness. He does not ever in his long life let go of evil. The man is enjoying his evil life immensely and he receives much time to do so.

### **Such things should not happen...**

This is a dilemma in this sense: such things should not happen. The *righteous* should have a long and prosperous life. The *wicked* should be cut off from the land of the living, because their lives are abhorrent to God.

The world seems to understand the widespread truth of this fact. Perhaps you have heard the saying “Only the good die young.” There is the refrain in the 1970’s Dion hit “Abraham, Martin, and John” that goes like

this: “it seems the good they die young”. But that is not the way it is supposed to be.

The dilemma is deepened when we keep in mind, as does the Preacher, that nothing happens by chance. Consider 7: 14: “When times are good, be happy, but when times are bad, consider God has made the one as well as the other.” Life does not happen by circumstance, but by the decree and power of God. All things are from above, also good and bad times. It is *God* who cuts short the life of the righteous and lengthens the days of the wicked.

### **The problem of Asaph**

There you have the depth of the problem, voiced more often by the saints. In Psalm 73, we find the problem of Asaph. I referred to it earlier. He, too, saw that the ungodly prospered while the righteous perished. Asaph starts out by stating the promise that “surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” But Asaph did not see that; instead he saw the prosperity of the wicked. And he thinks, “Surely in vain, I have kept my heart pure.”

There is the word “vanity” again. To try to understand this dilemma, he admits, is *oppressive* to him. It is something that he cannot properly understand, and it becomes a burden for him. What sense is there in serving the LORD, if He does not keep his promises? And the dilemma deepens: should I join the wicked, and forsake the Lord and his church? The grass always looks greener on the other side. It does not seem to make a stitch of difference whether I serve the Lord or not. Not serving God even seems to be more beneficial in this life.

What is so refreshing here is that the Bible does not cover up these apparent dilemmas. It is a difficult question. To state the dilemma is one thing, however, to ponder and resolve it is another. For what is to be concluded from this?

### **Some very wrong statements?**

In 7: 15-16 the Preacher now comes with some advice in this matter. Actually, it is not advice, but it is in the imperative; it is a command. “Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise. And do not be overwicked.”

This is an unexpected flow of thought. You would expect him to say, “Well, even though the wicked seem to have a better life, in fact they don’t.” But pondering this dilemma, he comes with some very strong statements, seemingly also opposite to each other, and if lifted out of their context, also wrong statements.

“Do not be overrighteous or overwise.” What does that mean? Can we really be overrighteous? Is it not mostly true that we are not righteous enough? This word here does not mean “righteous” in the legal, forensic sense that we are righteous by faith alone. We know that the righteousness of Christ is ours fully by true faith (cf. Romans 5:1). What he means here is that we should watch out for the danger that we think *we have to set everything straight* in this life, in society, family, school, and church, or in whatever other area.

### **Fanaticism**

You have people like that. They will set things straight. They always know better. They have the wisdom, so to speak. They are ready to step in and offer their counsel. And they will force things, if they have to. Everything must go according to their formula, or they will be up in arms. What the Preacher means here is the *fanaticism* that can sometimes grip those who think they alone know the way.

The result is that they do not build anything up, but as the text says, they destroy themselves. Fanatics quickly lose their credibility and eventually their following. They sometimes even estrange their loved ones because they alone know how it is supposed to be and everyone else is always wrong.

### **The other side**

Is there another side to this dilemma? Do not be overwicked and do not be a fool? What is this? I thought we may *never* be wicked. But again we are not looking at being wicked or a fool in the legal sense, as a disobedient person or an unforgiven sinner before God. The expression “overwicked” means here that we do not say, “Since it makes little difference whether we are righteous or wicked, let’s do what we please.” Overwicked means that we *deliberately* follow a sinful way because that is advantageous. Bend the rules. Break the law. First here and there, and then everywhere. Start living like those who are wicked. Get caught up in a wrong life style and with wrong friends as if it does not make a difference.

The outcome could be that we “die before our time.” How can we die before our time? It means here to die *before* the normally expected span of time. Wickedness has a way of sucking you under until you perish, long before the average time of life expectancy. Wickedness does not lengthen life, but often shortens it.

## ***A little bit wicked?***

May we then be a little bit wicked? This cannot be the sense. But the reality is that we are sinners. See 7: 20: “There is not a righteous man who does what is right and never sins.” We’re all sinners, and wickedness lies within us and is around us. Do not give in to wickedness. True, we may not be able to escape it altogether, but letting wickedness *control* us is another matter. “Over”wicked means that we would even go farther than unbelievers. From friends of God, we become enemies of him and his church. Some of the Lord’s greatest enemies come up out of the church.

Don’t ever say, “Since it doesn’t make a difference as to the benefits of this life, and actually the wicked fare much better on the whole than the righteous, I may as well become wicked, even over wicked, and take it to the limit... one more time.”

## ***Grasp the one and not let go of the other...***

The pondering of this dilemma that the wicked by and large have a long and prosperous life should never lead us to wrong conclusions. The Preacher comes to another conclusion, 7: 18: “It is good to grasp the one, and not let go of the other.” What does that mean? Well, here is the *puncturing* of the dilemma, a rather strange word for it, I know, but good enough. A dilemma is like a tire that rolls on and on, until you puncture it. Poof! And then it rolls no more.

What does it mean to grasp the one and not let go of the other? It means that we hang on firmly to righteousness. I would like to use an illustration to show the meaning of the verb “hang on” here.

You learn what it means *to hang on* in a London subway. As the car twists and turns, speeds up and slows down, you need all your mental alertness and physical effort to stay on your feet. Hang on to the law of God. And the other? Do not let go of the other. That means understand and consider that wickedness is a strong force in this world, that sin is even in your own life. Should you just allow it, then, and do nothing against it? No, but show some compassion. Be gentle.

## ***Profile of the Lord Jesus***

I think that we see here the profile of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ emerging in the book of Ecclesiastes. He never let go of the law of God. There was not even an ounce of wickedness in him. No command was ever relaxed, but He was always so gentle, except when it came to

fanatics. He drove them out of the temple with a whip, and then paid for it all on the cross of Golgotha.

It made me think of the passage where a woman caught red-handed in adultery was brought before the Lord, and they demanded of him that He act (John 8:5). He could not condone this wickedness, could He now? He had to deal with this, did He not? He did. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes. With deep wisdom He resolved the matter.

### ***Avoiding extremes***

The translation “extremes” is a very good one, really, as far as I can tell. It means following something through to the bitter end. An extreme is always as far as you can push it. Some people are extremists, always pushing the envelope a little farther, even using ways and means that God abhors. The end justifies the means, all extremists say.

But if you fear God, you will know better. What if God took everything in your life to its extreme? He did so in the life of his only-begotten Son. God took it only as far as his own word would allow and not one inch farther. When it was accomplished, it was done fully! The LORD God did not say after Easter, “Well, there still is this little matter we have to resolve.” Done is done. It is finished. Forgiven is forgiven. New life is new life.

Our Lord Jesus Christ looked up at the adulterous woman, after everyone had stealthily slipped away, and said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir” and He replied, “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

Not overrighteous. Go now. It’s okay. Not overwicked. Leave your life of sin. Life is never the same after you’ve seen Jesus Christ. The dilemma is gone.

AMEN.