

TELLING IT SLANT (1)

ECCLESIASTES 7.1-13



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Telling It Slant (1): Ecclesiastes 7.1-13
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Ecclesiastes 7.1-13: Introduction

Solomon is determined to break through to Rehoboam, so in chapter 7 he changes his approach, turning to proverbs – a Solomonic specialty – to come at the truth of life “under the sun” rather more “slant.”

Emily Dickinson said we should “Tell the truth, but tell it slant –/Success in circuit lies.” Sometimes puzzles and proverbs, that cause us to stop, think, ponder, compare, and apply, can be a more powerful way of communicating truth than just “telling it like it is.”

And that’s what Solomon was hoping, as he takes up a variety of proverbs to help his son, Rehoboam, think about the consequences of his chosen course in life.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 A Good Name

Pray Psalm 49.15.

But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave,
For He shall receive me.

Read Ecclesiastes 7.1.

Prepare.

1. Which thing mentioned in the first part of verse 1 lasts longer?
2. Which day of life did Solomon prefer?

Meditate.

Solomon tries to get his son to focus on things that last.

Precious ointment may be of great value, but it is not to be compared with a good name. One's name, in the sense of his reputation, memory, or legacy, can endure for many generations; therefore, he is wise who lives for the generations.

We should not read the second part of this verse as suggesting that dying is better than living; that's not Solomon's point. Biblical faith, while mindful of the past and anchored to the present, is a future-oriented faith. Those who live "under heaven" know that the full realization of their hope lies beyond time and history; thus, they live in the present in the light of past promises and blessings, ever moving toward their future hope of glory (2 Pet. 3.1-13).

The fool, on the other hand, thinks only about present pleasures. But they don't satisfy, and, as we've seen, people "under the sun" have nothing beyond this life to hope for, and they can sometimes think they'd be better off never having been born.

It's all a matter of perspective: "under the sun" or "under heaven".

There are many advantages to teaching in proverbs, as Solomon is doing here. Proverbs encapsulate common sense or everyday observations which are generally received with agreement. Proverbs are also easily memorized and can sometimes convey memorable images. They can also include an element of surprise – a kind of "aha!" moment.

Just as Solomon employed a wide range of literary genre in order to reach his son, Scripture does the same. It is a measure of the grace of God that He goes to such varied lengths to communicate truth to self-centered, live-for-the-moment people such as we.

Reflect.

1. What do we mean by saying that Christians live for the future? How does that affect our lives in the present?
2. Being born is a good thing. But for the Christian, dying is even better. Why?
3. How do people "under the sun" prepare for death? How do people "under heaven" prepare for death?

Whoever does not focus attention on perishable goods and does not think highly of them but knows that "it is better to be with Christ after death" thinks that the day of death is better than the day of birth. The latter is the beginning of many evils; the former, however, the end and termination of evil. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 197.14

I want to be ready, Lord, for whenever You choose to take me to Yourself. So today, help me to...

Pray Psalm 49.1-6.

Use this psalm to pray for the unbelieving people in your Personal Mission Field. How do these verses lead you to pray? How will they hear the Word of God?

Sing Psalm 49.1-6, 15.

Psalm 49.1-6, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

Hear this, you peoples, low and high; give ear as wisdom I proclaim:
My heart with understanding fills to hear and sing my Savior's fame.
Why should I fear when foes arise, who trust in wealth and boast in lies?

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!

His grace and mercy let me tell!

2 The Measure of a Wise Heart

Pray Psalm 49.13, 14.

This is the way of those who *are* foolish,
And of their posterity who approve their sayings.

Selah

Like sheep they are laid in the grave;
Death shall feed on them...

Read Ecclesiastes 7.2-4.

Prepare.

1. Who is the wise person? Why?
2. What do all people have in common?

Meditate.

Death is the common experience of all people. Not everyone can feast abundantly; nor is everyone able to make merry or know much happiness. But everyone will die.

The wise man shares this plight with everyone else. He knows how to sympathize with others, and he is not consumed with gratifying all his own lusts. “Think about others, son; think about all your people and how you can serve them best as long as they and you live.” This seems to be the thrust of this part of Solomon’s admonition to Rehoboam. It was the starting-point for Solomon’s own reign, and led to his having great wisdom (2 Chron. 1.7-12).

This is not a call to moroseness; rather, it is a call to compassion, to suffering with others rather than being occupied only with one’s own concerns. As such it foreshadows the work of Jesus Christ, as Paul outlines that work in Philippians 2.5-11. He came to die, so that all who believe in Him might live.

Verses 1 to 4 form an *inclusio* – they begin and end at the same place – the day of death – and so encompass a single idea. Solomon skillfully blends his images from verse 1 to verse 4. Beginning with the idea of one’s own death, he branches out to the death of all people, and thereby changes the focus of his image – from self to others – and suggests the object of his lesson – to think of one’s legacy in terms of the needs of others.

The measure of a wise man’s heart, Solomon suggests, is in his ability to feel the suffering of others and not merely to focus on his own pleasure. The wise man nurtures a compassionate heart and thereby finds true happiness in living. But for Rehoboam, “it’s a lesson too late for the learning.”

Reflect.

1. What’s “better” about mourning? Does this mean we should never enjoy happiness and the good things of life?
2. If we occupy the “house of mourning”, what will be the ultimate focus of our lives? Why?
3. The writer of Hebrews (2.15) says that people fear death? Why? Should we have more sympathy for those who fear death? What can we do for them?

He who enters the house of mourning indeed weeps for the departed, even though he is an enemy. Do you not see how much better that house is than the other? For there, though he is a friend, he envies; but here, though he is an enemy, he weeps. John Chrysostom (344-407), *Homilies Concerning the Statutes 15.5*

O Lord, use me today to bring life to those who are perishing, especially as I remember...

Pray Psalm 49.10-14.

Scripture teaches that people fear dying (Heb. 2.15). Pray for the lost people you know, that the fear of dying might lead them to the hope of life in Jesus. Pray that God will use you to share His life with them.

Sing Psalm 49.10-14, 15.

Psalm 49.10-14, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

See how the wise and senseless die, and leave to others all their gold.
Vainly forever they longed and hoped to have their names and glories told.
Man in his pomp will not endure; like any beast his end is sure.

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!

His grace and mercy let me tell!

Thus go the foolish on their way, and all who approve their deceitful words.

Meekly like sheep to death they go, and meet destruction afterwards.

See how the righteous overrules the fleeting forms of dying fools!

Refrain v. 15

3 The Rebuke of the Wise

Pray Psalm 49.5.

Why should I fear in the days of evil,
When the iniquity at my heels surrounds me?

Read Ecclesiastes 7.5-7.

Prepare.

1. Why is the counsel of fools like a song?
2. What can corrupt our mind and heart? How can we guard against this?

Meditate.

Solomon surely was aware of Rehoboam's friends, the young men whose counsel he would heed in turning away from the course of wisdom to folly (2 Chron. 10). It may be hard to listen to a wise man as he lays bare the motives of our hearts and tells us things we don't want to hear. But, in the end, it is far better to hear the wise man's rebuke than to heed the advice of fools.

The words of fools are often agreeable to us – like a pleasant song – but they are also fleeting and insubstantial – like a thorn bush in the fire. A fool's ideas may flare up brilliantly, but they won't provide enough sustained "heat" to cook whatever's in the pot – or to carry out any righteous plan or purpose.

The word "oppression" in verse 7 is perhaps better translated "fraud". The wise man who lives a lie becomes a fool ("destroys a wise *man's* reason"), as surely as a bribe corrupts the heart of an honest man. We can imagine that Rehoboam must have bristled somewhat in hearing these words from his father.

An advantage of proverbs as a literary device is that they allow us to say difficult things indirectly, and so leave room for people to interpret those words for their own situations, as each case may allow (if the shoe fits, etc.).

Proverbs cause the mind to become active and engaged; stories, songs, and poetry have a similar ability. The skillful communicator of truth will explore every means of engaging, penetrating, and illuminating the minds of those whose outlook has been darkened by self-interest, and who seem impervious to rational argumentation.

Everyone we try to reach with the Gospel has his own counsel of fools. We'll need to be very skillful and patient in trying to get through or over the hedge of folly each unbeliever has built around his heart and mind. But we must always remember that the Word of God is living and powerful. Keep it always in the conversation.

Reflect.

1. Why are rebukes harder to receive than songs? Why do we need some of both in our lives?
2. Thorns – the counsel of fools – don't provide enough sustained heat to cook up a meal. What does? If we want our plans and purposes to come to fruition for the Lord, what kind of fire should we seek?

3. The fool is the person who does not consult the Lord about his life (Ps. 53.1). He believes he can figure things out on his own. In his daily life, how does the fool differ from the righteous person?

For most people it seems to be right to avoid the critique of a wise man, especially if they like to sin. Whoever desires amusement and sin avoids the person who wants to hinder it. Whoever has no insight is pleased with flatterers, preferring flattery to critique. It is the characteristic of the wise man that he criticizes the one he loves. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 202.2

Keep my mind and heart pure, Lord, and let Your Word rebuke and direct me, so that I may...

Pray Psalm 49.7-12.

Lost people you know are trying to “cook up” some scheme so that they can live a full and happy life, if possible, forever. Pray for them, that they might realize they’re going to die, and all their schemes will come to naught. Pray that the Lord will open their hearts to hear the Gospel.

Sing Psalm 49.7-12, 15.

Psalm 49.7-12, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

No man his brother can redeem, or give a ransom for his soul.

Let him leave off the vain attempt to gather redemption’s priceless toll.

Vainly he longs for eternal day, that he may not endure decay.

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!

His grace and mercy let me tell!

See how the wise and senseless die, and leave to others all their gold.

Vainly forever they longed and hoped to have their names and glories told.

Man in his pomp will not endure; like any beast his end is sure.

Refrain v. 15

4 Live Toward the Future

Pray Psalm 49.12, 13.

Nevertheless man, *though* in honor, does not remain;
He is like the beasts *that* perish.
This is the way of those who *are* foolish,
And of their posterity who approve their sayings.

Read Ecclesiastes 7.8-10.

Prepare.

1. How would you describe Solomon's outlook on life here?
2. To what does impatience lead?

Meditate.

Solomon continues trying to encourage his son to take the long view toward life, to work for a good ending to his life and not just a "big splash" beginning. The thrust of these verses is to encourage us to keep in the race, to press forward always, to increase and improve in all things, and never to be content with thinking that our best days are behind us. We must always strive to make our best day today, and tomorrow better still.

Impatience is the bane of rulers (v. 8), as of all people. Perhaps this is why the Scriptures so often counsel us to wait on the Lord and be content. The patient person waits for God to do what He has promised, and boasts in Him. The proud person wants everything now, to indulge or make a name for himself right now (v. 8).

The fool is the one who acts in haste and becomes angry when his desires are not instantly gratified (v. 9). This is not the way of wisdom. Nor is it the part of wisdom always to be longing for "the good old days" (v. 10). As Solomon has previously said, we must receive each day, and all it brings, as a gift from God and do the best we can to rejoice in His provision, looking toward the future realization of all the promises of God, and living as those who hope to gain the full blessing of God.

These three verses form another *inclusio*, a form of parallelism that begins and ends in the same place, though here more implicit than explicit, as in vv. 2-4. Here the beginning and ending are something like "live toward the future" (vv. 8, 10). The middle part connects impatience with anger and warns the reader against both, for they are both manifestations of pride. Indeed, pride and anger are the very antithesis of patience, since they carry the suggestion that, somehow, the world revolves – or should revolve – around me. Pride is the ruler's downfall – recall Solomon's many references to himself and his achievements in chapter 2. The wise man will avoid it at all costs.

Reflect.

1. What does it mean to "live toward the future"? What is in the future that Christians should be eager to realize?
2. Patience is an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22, 23). What does this suggest about how we must nurture a patient outlook on life?

3. It's not the way of wisdom to hanker for "the good old days", but we should try to learn from our past. What's the difference? How should remembering our past help us in living toward the future?

When anyone lacks patience about being looked down upon in this world, he tries to display any hidden good qualities he may have, and so through impatience is drawn on to arrogance. While he cannot bear contempt, he boasts ostentatiously in self-display. Therefore Scripture says, "Better is the patient than the arrogant." Gregory the Great (540-604), Pastoral Rule 3.9.10

Lord, help me to press on toward realizing Your promises today, especially as I...

Pray Psalm 49.10-14.

People everywhere are caught up in the materialism and narcissism of the day. Pray for lost people, who foolishly believe that things and self are the chief ends in life. Ask God to help you be ready today, should anyone ask a reason for the hope that is within you (1 Pet. 3.15).

Sing Psalm 49.10-14, 15.

Psalm 49.10-14, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

See how the wise and senseless die, and leave to others all their gold.

Vainly forever they longed and hoped to have their names and glories told.

Man in his pomp will not endure; like any beast his end is sure.

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!

His grace and mercy let me tell!

Thus go the foolish on their way, and all who approve their deceitful words.

Meekly like sheep to death they go, and meet destruction afterwards.

See how the righteous overrules the fleeting forms of dying fools!

Refrain v. 15

5 What You Leave Behind

Pray Psalm 49.1-3.

Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.
My mouth shall speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart *shall give* understanding.

Read Ecclesiastes 7.11.

Prepare.

1. Why is wisdom good as part of what one leaves for others?
2. How do unbelievers benefit from the wisdom of God?

Meditate.

This verse, while spoken to Rehoboam, seems almost like a concession on Solomon's part. He is leaving his son a vast inheritance; he also wants very much to leave him the benefits of wisdom, in the hope that Rehoboam will be wise and leave wisdom as well as an inheritance for his own children.

But – and we can almost hear Solomon sighing – even though his son seems bent on living “under the sun”, he will leave him wisdom anyway. For the wisdom of the wise benefits even those who do not believe in absolute truth or transcendent values. They who are wise – who live “under heaven” – must always strive to leave wisdom behind, even though that wisdom may not be appreciated, and even though it may be squandered by those who use it without acknowledging its source.

In a secular age such as ours, when people seem, not merely indifferent, but hostile to the things of the Lord, we might feel inclined to withhold His blessings from those who scorn His Name. But we do not have this option. Those who know the redemption which is in Christ Jesus must reflect the love of God to a lost and dying world, to whatever extent we may give them, and not withhold any of His blessings (Matt. 5.43-48).

Here again Solomon's wisdom previews the grace of God in Jesus Christ, Who, when He departed this earth, left no material inheritance for the generations to come, but the greatest blessing of all: “Father, forgive them.”

Reflect.

1. What is wisdom? How would you explain the concept of wisdom, and why it is so important, to an unbelieving friend?
2. Give some examples of the many ways Christian wisdom benefits even the unbelieving world. What are the implications of this for you, in your Personal Mission Field?
3. How might we use the wisdom God gives us to open a door for talking to someone about Jesus?

Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, yea better. It shelters from the storms and scorching heat of trouble. Wealth will not lengthen out the natural life; but true wisdom will give spiritual life, and strengthen men for services under their sufferings. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 7.11-22*

I know, Lord, that Your wisdom reaches to all of life. Help me to be wise today, especially as I...

Pray Psalm 49.1-12.

People who are lost need to know that they cannot redeem themselves, and that they are on a course for judgment unless they turn to Christ. Pray for wisdom to live a life of hope before your unbelieving friends, so that they might ask you for a reason for that hope.

Sing Psalm 49.1-12, 15.

Psalm 49.1-12, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

Hear this, you peoples, low and high; give ear as wisdom I proclaim:
My heart with understanding fills to hear and sing my Savior's fame.
Why should I fear when foes arise, who trust in wealth and boast in lies?

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!
His grace and mercy let me tell!

No man his brother can redeem, or give a ransom for his soul.
Let him leave off the vain attempt to gather redemption's priceless toll.
Vainly he longs for eternal day, that he may not endure decay.

Refrain v. 15

See how the wise and senseless die, and leave to others all their gold.
Vainly forever they longed and hoped to have their names and glories told.
Man in his pomp will not endure; like any beast his end is sure.

Refrain v. 15

6 The Protection of Wisdom

Pray Psalm 49.15.

But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave,
For He shall receive me.

Read Ecclesiastes 7.12.

Prepare.

1. Which is more to be desired, wisdom or wealth?
2. What is the relationship between knowledge and wisdom?

Meditate.

Wealth can blind people to the things that matter most. Wealth provides a false sense of security to those who have it. It can lead people to think that now they are truly happy. Now they have everything they need. Great wealth also gives people a feeling of influence and power. But all of this is fleeting; when the money goes, so go security, happiness, power, and friends.

Still, wisdom is *like* this, with the exception that the knowledge that brings wisdom truly preserves a man's life, because it secures him in *eternal* verities, invests him with *eternal* riches, and allows him influence that extends even beyond his own lifetime.

Granted, these benefits are intangible; but they are real, and they last. The wise person will strive for whatever lasts – such as the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6.33) – whether he can see it or not (1 Pet. 3.8, 9; Col. 3.1-3).

Here again we note Solomon's poetic skill, as he telescopes this proverb out of the previous one, thus making a connection between inheritances and wealth – and the false sense of wellbeing they convey – and wisdom and true knowledge – and the lasting benefits they afford.

An advantage of a proverb is that it can be easily recalled when, in the midst of a life situation, something about our context brings to mind a pearl of wisdom we heard, perhaps long ago. Perhaps Solomon hoped that these references to wealth and money might come to Rehoboam's mind at some point after Solomon's departure, so that, by frequent recall he might find his way to the wisdom which, at present, he seems indifferent, if not altogether oblivious to.

Reflect.

1. How are wealth and wisdom alike? How are they different?
2. Why is wisdom so much harder to secure than wealth? How would you counsel a fellow believer who said he was hoping to grow in wisdom?
3. In what sense does wisdom “give life”? How is wisdom expressed in life?

The word translated defense literally means “shade” or “shelter,” a kind of protection. The Hebrew word translated here as excellence is often rendered profit in Ecclesiastes. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Notes for Ecclesiastes 7.12

Help me to increase in wisdom's protection, Lord, and to seek Your Kingdom rather than...

Pray Psalm 49.13-20.

Give thanks to God for your redemption, and pray for the lost people in your Personal Mission Field, that they might see the light, understand their need, and turn to Jesus.

Sing Psalm 49.13-20, 15.

Psalm 49.13-20, 15 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

Thus go the foolish on their way, and all who approve their deceitful words.

Meekly like sheep to death they go, and meet destruction afterwards.

See how the righteous overrules the fleeting forms of dying fools!

Refrain v. 15

My God redeems my soul from hell!

His grace and mercy let me tell!

Let the redeemed of God take heart, though fools and all their wealth increase.

Death shall deprive him of all he owns, the grave shall make his glory cease.

Thus though he boasts, no light he sees; his end in hell shall ever be.

Refrain v. 15

7 The Hammer of the Lord

Pray Psalm 49.1-3.

Hear this, all peoples;
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
Both low and high,
Rich and poor together.
My mouth shall speak wisdom,
And the meditation of my heart *shall give* understanding.

Read Ecclesiastes 7.13.

Prepare.

1. What is the work of God?
2. What is intended by the idea of “making straight” and “making crooked”?

Meditate.

This verse falls like a hammer on the nail of verses 1-12, thus constituting something of a break in this barrage of proverbs and common sense.

Solomon has been plying Rehoboam with the truth of God – explaining the way the world works. The world works according to the wisdom of God, because the world is God’s, and He rules over every aspect of it. All of life comes under the sovereignty of God, and it can only make sense and be fruitful when received and pursued according to God’s plan.

Solomon’s approach in this chapter is to pile up proverbs, but they contain truth from God, and they cannot be resisted without peril. If Rehoboam thinks that somehow, he can circumvent or ignore the divine plan, he has another thing coming. Solomon hammers away at his son’s conscience, hoping to avert God’s hammer crashing down on his eternal soul.

In our secular age Christians can sometimes give the impression that the truths of Scripture are only true for those who believe them: “This is just what I believe,” we say, meekly.

This, of course, is not the case. That’s why, when we share the Gospel with someone, and they reject it, we shouldn’t simply smile and say, “Well, have a nice day.” We need to say something like this verse: You cannot resist the will of God; either you will serve Him, or you will fall under His wrath (Rom. 1.18-32). You will never find the satisfaction you’re seeking, or the rest your soul desires, apart from believing in Christ.

We do the unbelieving world no favor when we allow them to think that they can reject God’s truth and ignore Him, and no harm will come their way. We must goad and provoke and urge people to consider the joy of life “under heaven”. The hammer of the Lord is always coming down to secure His Word and His works (Eccl. 12.11). The lost of our secular age may not agree with or accept that, but they – like Rehoboam – need to hear it.

Reflect.

1. What does it mean to “consider the work of God”? Who needs to do this? Why?

2. Which way of life has God “made crooked”? That “under the sun” or that “under heaven”? Can the crooked life ever attain the uprightness God intends (Eccl. 7.29)? Explain.

3. But is it possible to make crooked the straight life God intends for us? How do we do that? How can we avoid doing that?

The crooked that needs straightening (1.15) is the presence of afflictions and adversities in life. Both prosperity and adversity come from the hand of God. For prosperity give thanks, but in adversity reflect on the goodness and comprehensiveness of the plan of God. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Notes for Ecclesiastes 7.13

Lord, whatever crookedness remains in me, help me to straighten according to Your Word, as I...

Pray Psalm 49.1-20.

Give thanks to God for your redemption, and pray for the lost people in your Personal Mission Field, that they might see the light, understand their need, and turn to Jesus.

Sing Psalm 49.1-20.

Psalm 49.1-20 (*Sagina: And Can It Be, That I Should Gain*)

Hear this, you peoples, low and high; give ear as wisdom I proclaim:

My heart with understanding fills to hear and sing my Savior's fame.

Why should I fear when foes arise, who trust in wealth and boast in lies?

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Death shall deprive him of all he owns, the grave shall make his glory cease.

Thus though he boasts, no light he sees; his end in hell shall ever be.

Refrain v. 15

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. In what sense is it better to mourn than to feast? Why is sorrow better than laughter? Does this mean we should never feast or laugh? Explain.
2. How many different ways does Solomon commend the value of wisdom? What is wisdom? How can we attain it?
3. Solomon advises us to live toward the end of things, including the end of our lives. What does he mean by this?
4. How are wisdom and wealth alike? How are they different? Which should we most earnestly seek, and why?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 7.1-13? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

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Thank you.