

CHAPTER 7

Solomon had given many proofs and instances of the vanity of this world and the things of it; now, in this chapter,

I. He recommends to us some good means proper to be used for the redress of these grievances and the arming of ourselves against the mischief we are in danger of from them, that we may make the best of the bad, as

1. Care of our reputation (v. 1).
2. Seriousness (v. 2-6).
3. Calmness of spirit (v. 7-10).
4. Prudence in the management of all our affairs (v. 11, 12).
5. Submission to the will of God in all events, accommodating ourselves to every condition (v. 13-15).
6. A conscientious avoiding of all dangerous extremes (v. 16-18).
7. Mildness and tenderness towards those that have been injurious to us (v. 19-22). In short, the best way to save ourselves from the vexation which the vanity of the world creates us is to keep our temper and to maintain a strict government of our passions.

II. He laments his own iniquity, as that which was more vexatious than any of these vanities, that mystery of iniquity, the having of many wives, by which he was drawn away from God and his duty (v. 23-29).

❧ ECCLESIASTES 7:1-6

THE VALUE OF A GOOD NAME

In these verses Solomon lays down some great truths which seem paradoxes to the unthinking part, that is, the far greatest part, of mankind.

I. That the honour of virtue is really more valuable and desirable than all the wealth and pleasure in this world (v. 1): *A good name is before good ointment* (so it may be read); it is preferable to it, and will be rather chosen by all that are wise. *Good ointment* is here put for all the profits of the

earth (among the products of which oil was reckoned one of the most valuable), for all the delights of sense (for *ointment and perfume* which *rejoice the heart*, and it is called *the oil of gladness*), nay, and for the highest titles of honour with which men are dignified, for kings are anointed. *A good name is better than all riches* (³⁰¹Proverbs 21:1), that is, a name for wisdom and goodness with those that are wise and good — *the memory of the just*; this is a good that will bring a more grateful pleasure to the mind, will give a man a larger opportunity of usefulness, and will go further, and last longer, than the most *precious box of ointment*; for Christ paid Mary for her ointment with a *good name*, a name in the gospels (⁴⁰³Matthew 26:13), and we are sure he always pays with advantage.

II. That, all things considered, our going out of the world is a great kindness to us than our coming into the world was: *The day of death* is preferable to the *birth-day*; though, as to others, there was joy *when a child was born into the world*, and where there is death there is lamentation, yet, as to ourselves, if we have lived so as to merit a *good name, the day of our death*, which will put a period to our cares, and toils, and sorrows, and remove us to rest, and joy, and eternal satisfaction, *is better than the day of our birth*, which ushered us into a world of so much sin and trouble, vanity and vexation. We were born to uncertainty, but a good man does not die at uncertainty. *The day of our birth* clogged our souls with the burden of the flesh, but *the day of our death* will set them at liberty from that burden.

III. That it will do us more good to go to a funeral than to go to a festival (v. 2): *It is better to go to the house of mourning*, and there *weep with those that weep, than to go to the house of feasting*, to a wedding, or a wake, there to *rejoice with those that do rejoice*. It will do us more good, and make better impressions upon us. We may lawfully go to both, as there is occasion. Our Saviour both feasted at the wedding of his friend in Cana and wept at the grave of his friend in Bethany; and we may possibly glorify God, and do good, and get good, in the house of feasting; but, considering how apt we are to be vain and frothy, proud and secure, and indulgent of the flesh, *it is better for us to go to the house of mourning*, not to see the pomp of the funeral, but to share in the sorrow of it, and to learn good lessons, both from the dead, who is going thence to his long home, and from the mourners, who go about the streets.

1. The uses to be gathered from *the house of mourning* are,

(1.) By way of information: *That is the end of all men. It is the end of man* as to this world, a final period to his state here; he shall return no more to his house. *It is the end of all men; all have sinned* and therefore *death passes upon all*. We must thus be left by our friends, as the mourners are, and thus leave, as the dead do. What is the lot of others will be ours; the cup is going round, and it will come to our turn to pledge it shortly.

(2.) By way of admonition: *The living will lay it to his heart*. Will they? It were well if they would. Those that are spiritually alive *will lay it to heart*, and, as for all the survivors, one would think they should; it is their own fault if they do not, for nothing is more easy and natural than by the death of others to be put in mind of our own. Some perhaps *will lay that to heart*, and *consider their latter end*, who would not lay a good sermon to heart.

2. For the further proof of this (v. 4) he makes it the character,

(1.) Of a wise man that his *heart is in the house of mourning*; he is much conversant with mournful subjects, and this is both an evidence and a furtherance of his wisdom. *The house of mourning* is the wise man's school, where he has learned many a good lesson, and there, where he is serious, he is in his element. When he *is in the house of mourning* his *heart* is there to improve the spectacles of mortality that are presented to him; nay, when he is in *the house of feasting*, his *heart is in the house of mourning*, by way of sympathy with those that are in sorrow.

(2.) It is the character of a fool that his *heart is in the house of mirth*; his heart is all upon it to be merry and jovial; his whole delight is in sport and gaiety, in merry stories, merry songs, and merry company, merry days and merry nights. If he be at any time in *the house of mourning*, he is under a restraint; his heart at the same time *is in the house of mirth*; this is his folly, and helps to make him more and more foolish.

IV. That gravity and seriousness better become us, and are better for us, than mirth and jollity, v. 3. The common proverb says, "An ounce of mirth is worth a pound of sorrow;" but the preacher teaches us a contrary lesson: *Sorrow is better than laughter*, more agreeable to our present state, where we are daily sinning and suffering ourselves, more or less, and daily seeing the sins and sufferings of others. While we are in a vale of tears, we should conform to the temper of the climate. It is also more for our

advantage; for, by the sadness that appears in the countenance, the heart is often made better. Note,

1. That is best for us which is best for our souls, by which *the heart is made better*, though it be displeasing to sense.

2. Sadness is often a happy means of seriousness, and that affliction which is impairing to the health, estate, and family, may be improving to the mind, and make such impressions upon that as may alter its temper very much for the better, may make it humble and meek, loose from the world, penitent for sin, and careful of duty. *Vexatio dat intellectum — Vexation sharpens the intellect. Periissem nisi periissem — I should have perished if I had not been made wretched.* It will follow, on the contrary, that by the mirth and frolicsomeness of the countenance the heart is made worse, more vain, carnal, sensual, and secure, more in love with the world and more estranged from God and spiritual things (^{<3912>}Job 21:12, 14), till it become utterly unconcerned in the afflictions of Joseph, as those ^{<3065>}Amos 6:5, 6, and the king and Haman, ^{<1785>}Esther 3:15.

V. That it is much better for us to have our corruptions mortified by the rebuke of the wise than to have them gratified by the song of fools, v. 5. Many that would be very well pleased to hear the information of the wise, and much more to have their commendations and consolations, yet do not care for hearing their rebukes, that is, care not for being told of their faults, though ever so wisely; but therein they are no friends to themselves, for reproofs of instruction are the way of life (^{<1063>}Proverbs 6:23), and, though they be not so pleasant as the song of fools, they are more wholesome. To hear, not only with patience, but with pleasure, the rebuke of the wise, is a sign and means of wisdom; but to be fond of the song of fools is a sign that the mind is vain and is the way to make it more so. And what an absurd thing is it for a man to dote so much upon such a transient pleasure as the laughter of a fool is, which may fitly be compared to the burning of thorns under a pot, which makes a great noise and a great blaze, for a little while, but is gone presently, scatters its ashes, and contributes scarcely any thing to the production of a boiling heat, for that requires a constant fire! The laughter of a fool is noisy and flashy, and is not an instance of true joy. This is also vanity; it deceives men to their destruction, for the end of that mirth is heaviness. Our blessed Saviour has read us our doom: Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh; woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep, ^{<1161>}Luke 6:21, 25.

~~217~~ ECCLESIASTES 7:7-10

SCENES OF MOURNING AND OF JOY

Solomon had often complained before of the *oppressions* which he saw *under the sun*, which gave occasion for many melancholy speculations and were a great discouragement to virtue and piety. Now here,

I. He grants the temptation to be strong (v. 7): *Surely* it is often too true that *oppression makes a wise man mad*. If a wise man be much and long oppressed, he is very apt to speak and act unlike himself, to lay the reins on the neck of his passions, and break out into indecent complaints against God and man, or to make use of unlawful dishonourable means of relieving himself. *The righteous*, when the *rod of the wicked rests long on their lot*, are in danger of *putting forth their hands to iniquity*, ~~1338~~ Psalm 125:3. When even wise men have unreasonable hardships put upon them they have much ado to keep their temper and to keep their place. *It destroys the heart of a gift* (so the latter clause may be read); even the generous heart that is ready to give gifts, and a gracious heart that is endowed with many excellent gifts, is destroyed by being oppressed. We should therefore make great allowances to those that are abused and ill-dealt with, and not be severe in our censures of them, though they do not act so discreetly as they should; we know not what we should do if it were our own case.

II. He argues against it. Let us not fret at the power and success of oppressors, nor be envious at them, for,

1. The character of oppressors is very bad, so some understand v. 7. If he that had the reputation of *a wise man* becomes an *oppressor*, he becomes a *madman*; his reason has departed from him; he is no better than a roaring lion and a ranging bear, *and the gifts*, the bribes, he takes, the gains he seems to reap by his oppressions, do but *destroy his heart* and quite extinguish the poor remains of sense and virtue in him, and therefore he is rather to be pitied than envied; let him alone, and he will act so foolishly, and drive so furiously, that in a little time he will ruin himself.

2. The issue, at length, will be good: *Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof*. By faith see what the end will be, and with patience expect it. When proud men begin to oppress their poor honest neighbours

they think their power will bear them out in it; they doubt not but to carry the day, and gain the point. But it will prove better in the end than it seemed at the beginning; their power will be broken, their wealth gotten by oppression will be wasted and gone, they will be humbled and brought down, and reckoned with for their injustice, and oppressed innocency will be both relieved and recompensed. *Better was the end of Moses's treaty with Pharaoh, that proud oppressor, when Israel was brought forth with triumph, than the beginning of it, when the tale of bricks was doubled, and every thing looked discouraging.*

III. He arms us against it with some necessary directions. If we would not be driven mad by oppression, but preserve the possession of our own souls,

- 1.** We must be clothed with humility; *for the proud in spirit* are those that cannot bear to be trampled upon, but grow outrageous, and fret themselves, when they are hardly bested. That will break a proud man's heart, which will not break a humble man's sleep. Mortify pride, therefore, and a lowly spirit will easily be reconciled to a low condition.
- 2.** We must put on patience, *bearing* patience, to submit to the will of God in the affliction, and *waiting* patience, to expect the issue in God's due time. *The patient in spirit* are here opposed to *the proud in spirit*, for where there is humility there will be patience. Those will be thankful for any thing who own they deserve nothing at God's hand, *and the patient* are said to be *better than the proud*; they are more easy to themselves, more acceptable to others, and more likely to see a good issue of their troubles.
- 3.** We must govern our passion with wisdom and grace (v. 9): *Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry*; those that are hasty in their expectations, and cannot brook delays, are apt to be angry if they be not immediately gratified. "Be not angry at proud oppressors, or any that are the instruments of your trouble."

(1.) "Be not soon angry, not quick in apprehending an affront and resenting it, nor forward to express your resentments of it."

(2.) "Be not long angry;" for though anger may come into the bosom of a wise man, and pass through it as a wayfaring man, it *rests only in the bosom of fools*; there it resides, there it remains, there it has the innermost and uppermost place, there it is hugged as that which is dear, and laid in

the bosom, and not easily parted with. He therefore that would approve himself so wise as not to *give place to the devil*, must not *let the sun go down upon his wrath*, ~~406~~ Ephesians 4:26, 27.

4. We must make the best of that which is (v. 10): “Take it not for granted *that the former days were better than these*, nor enquire *what is the cause* that they were so, for therein *thou dost not enquire wisely*, since thou enquirest into the reason of the thing before thou art sure that the thing itself is true; and, besides, thou art so much a stranger to the times past, and such an incompetent judge even of the present times, that thou canst not expect a satisfactory answer to the enquiry, and therefore *thou dost not enquire wisely*; nay, the supposition is a foolish reflection upon the providence of God in the government of the world.” Note,

(1.) It is folly to complain of the badness of our own times when we have more reason to complain of the badness of our own hearts (if men's hearts were better, the times would mend) and when we have more reason to be thankful that they are not worse, but that even in the worst of times we enjoy many mercies, which help to make them not only tolerable, but comfortable.

(2.) It is folly to cry up the goodness of former times, so as to derogate from the mercy of God to us in our own times; as if former ages had not the same things to complain of that we have, or if perhaps, in some respects, they had not, yet as if God had been unjust and unkind to us in casting our lot in an iron age, compared with the golden ages that went before us; this arises from nothing but fretfulness and discontent, and an aptness to pick quarrels with God himself. We are not to think there is any universal decay in nature, or degeneracy in morals. God has been always good, and men always bad; and if, in some respects, the times are now worse than they have been, perhaps in other respects they are better.

~~411~~ ECCLESIASTES 7:11-22

THE ADVANTAGES OF WISDOM

Solomon, in these verses, recommends wisdom to us as the best antidote against those distempers of mind which we are liable to, by reason of the

vanity and vexation of spirit that there are in the things of this world. Here are some of the praises and the precepts of wisdom.

I. The praises of wisdom. Many things are here said in its commendation, to engage us to get and retain wisdom.

1. Wisdom is necessary to the right managing and improving of our worldly possessions: *Wisdom is good with an inheritance*, that is, an inheritance is good for little without wisdom. Though a man have a great estate, though it come easily to him, by descent from his ancestors, if he have not wisdom to use it for the end for which he has it, he had better have been without it. Wisdom is not only good for the poor, to make them content and easy, but it is good for the rich too, good with riches to keep a man from getting hurt by them, and to enable a man to do good with them. *Wisdom is good* of itself, and makes a man useful; but, if he have a good estate with it, that will put him into a greater capacity of being useful, and with his wealth he may be more serviceable to his generation than he could have been without it; he will also *make friends to himself*, ^(~~16~~) Luke 16:9. *Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, yea, better too* (so the margin reads it); it is more our own, more our honour, will make us greater blessings, will remain longer with us, and turn to a better account.

2. It is of great advantage to us throughout the whole course of our passage through this world: *By it there is real profit to those that see the sun*, both to those that have it and to their contemporaries. It is pleasant to *see the sun* (^(~~11~~) Ecclesiastes 11:7), but that pleasure is not comparable to the pleasure of wisdom. The light of this world is an advantage to us in doing the business of this world (^(~~11~~) John 11:9); but to those that have that advantage, unless withal they have wisdom wherewith to manage their business, that advantage is worth little to them. The clearness of the eye of the understanding is of greater use to us than bodily eye-sight.

3. It contributes much more to our safety, and is a shelter to us from the storms of trouble and its scorching heat; it *is a shadow* (so the word is), *as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land*. *Wisdom is a defence, and money* (that is, as *money is a defence*). As a rich man makes his wealth, so a wise man makes his wisdom, a *strong city*. *In the shadow of wisdom* (so the words run) *and in the shadow of money* there is safety. He puts wisdom and money together, to confirm what he had said before, that *wisdom is good with an inheritance*. Wisdom is as a wall, and money may serve as a thorn hedge, which protects the field.

4. It is joy and true happiness to a man. This is *the excellency of knowledge*, divine knowledge, not only above money, but above wisdom too, human wisdom, *the wisdom of this world*, that it *gives life to those that have it*. *The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom*, and that is life; it prolongs life. Men's wealth exposes their lives, but their wisdom protects them. Nay, whereas wealth will not lengthen out the natural life, true wisdom will give spiritual life, the earnest of eternal life; so much *better is it to get wisdom than gold*.

5. It will put strength into a man, and be his stay and support (v. 19): *Wisdom strengthens the wise*, strengthens their spirits, and makes them bold and resolute, by keeping them always on sure grounds. It strengthens their interest, and gains them friends and reputation. It strengthens them for their services under their sufferings, and against the attacks that are made upon them, *more than ten mighty men*, great commanders, strengthen *the city*. Those that are truly wise and good are taken under God's protection, and are safer there than if ten of the mightiest men in the city, men of the greatest power and interest, should undertake to secure them, and become their patrons.

II. Some of the precepts of wisdom, that wisdom which will be of so much advantage to us.

1. We must have an eye to God and to his hand in every thing that befalls us (v. 13): *Consider the work of God*. To silence our complaints concerning cross events, let us consider the hand of God in them and not open our mouths against that which is his doing; let us look upon the disposal of our condition and all the circumstances of it as the *work of God*, and consider it as the product of his eternal counsel, which is fulfilled in every thing that befalls us. Consider that every work of God is wise, just, and good, and there is an admirable beauty and harmony in his works, and all will appear at last to have been for the best. Let us therefore give him the glory of all his works concerning us, and study to answer his designs in them. *Consider the work of God* as that which we cannot make any alteration of. *Who can make that straight which he has made crooked?* Who can change the nature of things from what is settled by the God of nature? If he speak trouble, who can make peace? And, if he hedge up the way with thorns, who can get forward? If desolating judgments go forth with commission, who can put a stop to them? Since therefore we cannot mend God's work, we ought to make the best of it.

2. We must accommodate ourselves to the various dispensations of Providence that respect us, and do the work and duty of the day in its day, v. 14. Observe,

(1.) How the appointments and events of Providence are counterchanged. In this world, at the same time, some are in prosperity, others are in adversity; the same persons at one time are in great prosperity, at another time in great adversity; nay, one event prosperous, and another grievous, may occur to the same person at the same time. Both come from the hand of God; *out of his mouth both evil and good proceed* (^{234B} Isaiah 14:7), and *he has set the one over against the other*, so that there is a very short and easy passage between them, and they are a foil to each other. Day and night, summer and winter, are set *the one over against the other*, that in prosperity we may rejoice *as though we rejoiced not*, and in adversity may weep *as though we wept not*, for we may plainly see the one from the other and quickly exchange the one for the other; and it is *to the end that man may find nothing after him*, that he may not be at any certainty concerning future events or the continuance of the present scene, but may live in a dependence upon Providence and be ready for whatever happens. Or that man may find nothing in the work of God which he can pretend to amend.

(2.) How we must comply with the will of God in events of both kinds. Our religion, in general, must be the same in all conditions, but the particular instances and exercises of it must vary, as our outward condition does, that we may *walk after the Lord*.

[1.] *In a day of prosperity* (and it is but a day), we must *be joyful*, be in good, be doing good, and getting good, maintain a holy cheerfulness, and *serve the Lord with gladness of heart in the abundance of all things*. “When the world smiles, *rejoice in God*, and praise him, and let *the joy of the Lord be thy strength*.”

[2.] *In a day of adversity* (and that is but a day too) *consider*. Times of affliction are proper times for consideration, then God calls to *consider* (^{300B} Haggai 1:5), then, if ever, we are disposed to it, and no good will be gotten by the affliction without it. We cannot answer God's end in afflicting us unless we consider why and wherefore he contends with us. And consideration is necessary also to our comfort and support under our afflictions.

3. We must not be offended at the greatest prosperity of wicked people, nor at the saddest calamities that may befall the godly in this life, v. 15. Wisdom will teach us how to construe those dark chapters of Providence so as to reconcile them with the wisdom, holiness, goodness, and faithfulness of God. We must not think it strange; Solomon tells us there were instances of this kind in his time: “*All things have I seen in the days of my vanity; I have taken notice of all that passed, and this has been as surprising and perplexing to me as any thing.*” Observe, Though Solomon was so wise and great a man, yet he calls the days of his life *the days of his vanity*, for the best days on earth are so, in comparison with the days of eternity. Or perhaps he refers to the days of his apostasy from God (those were indeed the days of his vanity) and reflects upon this as one thing that tempted him to infidelity, or at least to indifferency in religion, that he saw *just men perishing in their righteousness*, that the greatest piety would not secure men from the greatest afflictions by the hand of God, nay, and sometimes did expose men to the greatest injuries from the hands of wicked and unreasonable men. Naboth perished in his righteousness, and Abel long before. He had also seen wicked men prolonging their lives in their wickedness; they *live, become old, yea, are mighty in power* (~~Job~~ Job 21:7), yea, and by their fraud and violence they screen themselves from the sword of justice. “Now, in this, consider the work of God, and let it not be a stumbling-block to thee.” The calamities of the righteous are preparing them for their future blessedness, and the wicked, while their days are prolonged, are but ripening for ruin. There is a judgment to come, which will rectify this seeming irregularity, to the glory of God and the full satisfaction of all his people, and we must wait with patience till then.

4. Wisdom will be of use both for caution to saints in their way, and for a check to sinners in their way.

(1.) As to saints, it will engage them to proceed and persevere in their righteousness, and yet will be an admonition to them to take heed of running into extremes: *A just man may perish in his righteousness*, but let him not, by his own imprudence and rash zeal, pull trouble upon his own head, and then reflect upon Providence as dealing hardly with him. “*Be not righteous overmuch*, v. 16. In the acts of righteousness govern thyself by the rules of prudence, and be not transported, no, not by a zeal for God, into any intemperate heats or passions, or any practices unbecoming thy character or dangerous to thy interests.” Note, There may be over-doing in well-doing. Self-denial and mortification of the flesh are good; but if we

prejudice our health by them, and unfit ourselves for the service of God, we are *righteous overmuch*. To reprove those that offend is good, but to cast that pearl before swine, who will turn again and rend us, is to be *righteous overmuch*. “*Make not thyself over-wise*. Be not opinionative, and conceited of thy own abilities. Set not up for a dictator, nor pretend to give law to, and give judgment upon, all about thee. Set not up for a critic, to find fault with every thing that is said and done, nor busy thyself in other men's matters, as if thou knewest every thing and couldst do any thing. *Why shouldst thou destroy thyself*, as fools often do by meddling with strife that belongs not to them? Why shouldst thou provoke authority, and run thyself into the briers, by needless contradictions, and by going out of thy sphere to correct what is amiss? *Be wise as serpents*; beware of men.”

(2.) As to sinners, if it cannot prevail with them to forsake their sins, yet it may restrain them from growing very exorbitant. It is true *there is a wicked man that prolongs his life in his wickedness* (v. 15); but let none say that therefore they may safely be as wicked as they will; no, *be not overmuch wicked* (v. 17); do not run to an excess of riot. Many that will not be wrought upon by the fear of God, and a dread of the torments of hell, to avoid all sin, will yet, if they have ever so little consideration, avoid those sins that ruin their health and estate, and expose them to public justice. And Solomon here makes use of these considerations. “*The magistrate bears not the sword in vain*, has a quick eye and a heavy hand, and is *a terror to evil-doers*; therefore be afraid of coming within his reach, be not so foolish as to lay thyself open to the law, *why shouldst thou die before thy time?*” Solomon, in these two cautions, had probably a special regard to some of his own subjects that were disaffected to his government and were meditating the revolt which they made immediately after his death. Some, it may be, quarrelled with the sins of their governor, and made them their pretence; to them he says, *Be not righteous overmuch*. Others were weary of the strictness of the government, and the temple-service, and that made them desirous to set up another king; but he frightens both from their seditious practices with the sword of justice, and others likewise from meddling *with those that were given to change*.

5. Wisdom will direct us in the mean between two extremes, and keep us always in the way of our duty, which we shall find a plain and safe way (v. 18): “*It is good that thou shouldst take hold of this*, this wisdom, this care, not to run thyself into snares. *Yea, also from this withdraw not thy hand*;

never slacken thy diligence, nor abate thy resolution to maintain a due decorum, and a good government of thyself. Take hold of the bridle by which thy head-strong passions must be held in from hurrying thee into one mischief or other, as *the horse and mule that have no understanding*; and, having taken hold of it, keep thy hold, and withdraw not thy hand from it, for, if thou do, the liberty that they will take will be *as the letting forth of water*, and thou wilt not easily recover thy hold again. Be conscientious, and yet be cautious, and to this exercise thyself. Govern thyself steadily by the principles of religion, and thou shalt find that *he that fears God shall come forth out of all those straits and difficulties which those run themselves into that cast off that fear.*” *The fear of the Lord* is that wisdom which will serve as a clue to extricate us out of the most intricate labyrinths. *Honesty is the best policy.* Those that truly fear God have but one end to serve, and therefore act steadily. God has likewise promised to direct those that fear him, and to order their steps not only in the right way, but out of every dangerous way, ^{<1872>}Psalm 37:23, 24.

6. Wisdom will teach us how to conduct ourselves in reference to the sins and offences of others, which commonly contribute more than any thing else to the disturbance of our repose, which contract both guilt and grief.

(1.) Wisdom teaches us not to expect that those we deal with should be faultless; we ourselves are not so, none are so, no, not the best. This *wisdom strengthens the wise* as much as any thing, and arms them against the danger that arises from provocation (v. 19), so that they are not put into any disorder by it. They consider that those they have dealings and conversation with are not incarnate angels, but sinful sons and daughters of Adam: even the best are so, insomuch that *there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not*, v. 20. Solomon had this in his prayer (^{<1186>}1 Kings 8:46), in his proverbs (^{<2100>}Proverbs 20:9), and here in his preaching. Note,

[1.] It is the character of just men that they *do good*; for the tree is known by its fruits.

[2.] The best men, and those that do most good, yet cannot say that they are perfectly free from sin; even those that are sanctified are not sinless. None that live on this side of heaven live without sin. *If we say, We have not sinned, we deceive ourselves.*

[3.] We sin even in our doing good; there is something defective, nay, something offensive, in our best performances. That which, for the

substance of it, is good, and pleasing to God, is not so well done as it should be, and omissions in duty are sins, as well as omissions of duty.

[4.] It is only just men upon earth that are subject thus to sin and infirmity; *the spirits of just men*, when they have got clear of the body, are made *perfect* in holiness (³⁸²³Hebrews 12:23), and in heaven they *do good and sin not*.

(2.) Wisdom teaches us not to be quicksighted, or quickscented, in apprehending and resenting affronts, but to wink at many of the injuries that are done us, and act as if we did not see them (v. 21): “*Take no heed to all words that are spoken; set not thy heart to them. Vex not thyself at men's peevish reflections upon thee, or suspicions of thee, but be as a deaf man that hears not,*” ³⁸²³Psalms 38:13, 14. Be not solicitous or inquisitive to know what people say of thee; if they speak well of thee, it will feed thy pride, if ill, it will stir up thy passion. See therefore that thou approve thyself to God and thy own conscience, and then heed not what men say of thee. *Hearkeners*, we say, *seldom hear good of themselves*; if thou heed every word that is spoken, perhaps *thou wilt hear thy own servant curse thee* when he thinks thou dost not hear him; thou wilt be told that he does, and perhaps told falsely, if thou have thy ear open to tale-bearers, ³⁸²³Proverbs 29:12. Nay, perhaps it is true, and thou mayest stand behind the curtain and hear it thyself, mayest hear thyself not only blamed and despised, but cursed, the worst evil said of thee and wished to thee, and that by a servant, one of the meanest rank, of the abjects, nay, by thy own servant, who should be an advocate for thee, and protect thy good name as well as thy other interests. Perhaps it is a servant thou hast been kind to, and yet he requites thee thus ill, and this will vex thee; thou hadst better not have heard it. Perhaps it is a servant thou hast wronged and dealt unjustly with, and, though he dares not tell thee so, he tells others so, and tells God so, and then thy own conscience will join with him in the reproach, which will make it much more uneasy.” The good names of the greatest lie much at the mercy even of the meanest. And perhaps there is a great deal more evil said of us than we think there is, and by those from whom we little expected it. But we do not consult our own repose, no, nor our credit, though we pretend to be jealous of it, if we take notice of every word that is spoken diminishingly of us; it is easier to pass by twenty such affronts than to avenge one.

(3.) Wisdom puts us in mind of our own faults (v. 22): “Be not enraged at those that speak ill of thee, or wish ill to thee, *for oftentimes*, in that case, if thou retire into thyself, thy own conscience will tell thee *that thou thyself hast cursed others*, spoken ill of them and wished ill to them, and thou art paid in thy own coin.” Note, When any affront or injury is done us it is seasonable to examine our consciences whether we have not done the same, or as bad, to others; and if, upon reflection, we find we have, we must take that occasion to renew our repentance for it, must justify God, and make use of it to qualify our own resentments. If we be truly angry with ourselves, as we ought to be, for backbiting and censuring others, we shall be the less angry with others for backbiting and censuring us. We must show all meekness towards all men, for we ourselves *were sometimes foolish*, ~~<302>~~Titus 3:2, 3; ~~<400>~~Matthew 7:1, 2; ~~<501>~~James 3:1, 2.

~~<202>~~ ECCLESIASTES 7:23-29

THE EVIL OF SIN

Solomon had hitherto been proving the vanity of the world and its utter insufficiency to make men happy; now here he comes to show the vileness of sin, and its certain tendency to make men miserable; and this, as the former, he proves from his own experience, and it was a dear-bought experience. He is here, more than any where in all this book, putting on the habit of a penitent. He reviews what he had been discoursing of already, and tells us that what he had said was what he knew and was well assured of, and what he resolved to stand by: *All this have I proved by wisdom*, v. 23. Now here,

I. He owns and laments the deficiencies of his wisdom. He had wisdom enough to see the vanity of the world and to experience that that would not make a portion for a soul. But, when he came to enquire further, he found himself at a loss; his eye was too dim, his line was too short, and, though he discovered this, there were many other things which he could not prove by wisdom.

1. His searches were industrious. God had given him a capacity for knowledge above any; he set up with a great stock of wisdom; he had the largest opportunities of improving himself that ever any man had; and,

(1.) He resolved, if it were possible, to gain his point: *I said, I will be wise*. He earnestly desired it as highly valuable; he fully designed it as that which he looked upon to be attainable; he determined not to sit down short of it, ^{<181>}Proverbs 18:1. Many are not wise because they never said they would be so, being indifferent to it; but Solomon set it up for the mark he aimed at. When he made trial of sensual pleasures, he still thought *to acquaint his heart with wisdom* (^{<208>}Ecclesiastes 2:3), and not to be diverted from the pursuits of that; but perhaps he did not find it so easy a thing as he imagined to keep up his correspondence with wisdom, while he addicted himself so much to his pleasures. However, his will was good; he said, *I will be wise*. And that was not all:

(2.) He resolved to spare no pains (v. 25): *“I applied my heart; I and my heart turned every way; I left no stone unturned, no means untried, to compass what I had in view. I set myself to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, to accomplish myself in all useful learning, philosophy, and divinity.”* If he had not thus closely applied himself to study, it would have been but a jest for him to say, *I will be wise*, for those that will attain the end must take the right way. Solomon was a man of great quickness, and yet, instead of using that (with many) as an excuse for slothfulness, he pressed it upon himself as an inducement to diligence, and the easier he found it to master a good notion the more intent he would be that he might be master of the more good notions. Those that have the best parts should take the greatest pains, as those that have the largest stock should trade most. He applied himself not only to know what lay on the surface, but to search what lay hidden out of the common view and road; nor did he search a little way, and then give it over because he did not presently find what he searched for, but he *sought it out*, went to the bottom of it; nor did he aim to know things only, but the reasons of things, that he might give an account of them.

2. Yet his success was not answerable or satisfying: *“I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me; I could not compass it. After all, This only I know that I know nothing, and the more I know the more I see there is to be known, and the more sensible I am of my own ignorance. That which is far off, and exceedingly deep, who can find it out?”* He means God himself, his counsels and his works; when he searched into these he presently found himself puzzled and run aground. He *could not order his speech by reason of darkness. It is higher than heaven, what can he do?*

^{<818>}Job 11:8. Blessed be God, there is nothing which we have to do which

is not plain and easy; *the word is nigh us* (³¹⁸⁹Proverbs 8:9); but there is a great deal which we would wish to know which is *far off, and exceedingly deep*, among the secret things which belong not to us. And probably it is a culpable ignorance and error that Solomon here laments, that his pleasures, and the many amusements of his court, had blinded his eyes and cast a mist before them, so that he could not attain to true wisdom as he designed.

II. He owns and laments the instances of his folly in which he had exceeded, as, in wisdom, he came short. Here is,

1. His enquiry concerning the evil of sin. He *applied his heart to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness*. Observe,

(1.) The knowledge of sin is a difficult knowledge, and hard to be attained; Solomon took pains for it. Sin has many disguises with which it palliates itself, as being loth to appear sin, and it is very hard to strip it of these and to see it in its true nature and colours.

(2.) It is necessary to our repentance for sin that we be acquainted with the evil of it, as it is necessary to the cure of a disease to know its nature, causes, and malignity. St. Paul *therefore* valued the divine law, because it discovered sin to him, ⁴⁸¹⁰Romans 7:7. Solomon, who, in the days of his folly, had set his wits on work to invent pleasures and sharpen them, and was ingenious in making provision for the flesh, now that God had opened his eyes is as industrious to find out the aggravations of sin and so to put an edge upon his repentance. Ingenious sinners should be ingenious penitents, and wit and learning, among the other spoils of the *strong man armed*, should be divided by the Lord Jesus.

(3.) It well becomes penitents to say the worst they can of sin, for the truth is we can never speak ill enough of it. Solomon here, for his further humiliation, desired to see more,

[1.] Of the sinfulness of sin; that is it which he lays the greatest stress upon in this inquiry, to *know the wickedness of folly*, by which perhaps he means his own iniquity, the sin of uncleanness, for that was commonly called *folly in Israel*, ¹³⁴⁷Genesis 34:7; ⁴⁵²²Deuteronomy 22:21; ¹²¹⁶Judges 20:6; ¹¹³²2 Samuel 13:12. When he indulged himself in it, he made a light matter of it; but now he desires to see the *wickedness* of it, its *great wickedness*, so Joseph speaks of it, ¹³¹⁹Genesis 39:9. Or it may be taken

there generally for all sin. Many extenuate their sins with this, They were *folly*; but Solomon sees *wickedness* in those follies, an offence to God and a wrong to conscience. *This is wickedness*, ^{<248>}Jeremiah 4:18; ^{<388>}Zechariah 5:8.

[2.] Of the folly of sin; as there is a wickedness in folly, so there is a folly in wickedness, even foolishness and madness. Wilful sinners are fools and madmen; they act contrary both to right reason and to their true interest.

2. The result of this enquiry.

(1.) He now discovered more than ever of the evil of that great sin which he himself had been guilty of, the *loving of many strange women*, ^{<110>}1 Kings 11:1. This is that which he here most feelingly laments, and in very pathetic expressions.

[1.] He found the remembrance of the sin very grievous. O how heavily did it lie upon his conscience! what an agony was he in upon the thought of it — the wickedness, the foolishness, the madness, that he had been guilty of! *I find it more bitter than death*. As great a terror seized him, in reflection upon it, as if he had been under the arrest of death. Thus do those that have their sins set in order before them by a sound conviction cry out against them; they are bitter as gall, nay, bitter as death, to all true penitents. Uncleanness is a sin that is, in its own nature, more pernicious than death itself. Death may be made honourable and comfortable, but this sin can be no other than shame and pain, ^{<389>}Proverbs 5:9, 11.

[2.] He found the temptation to the sin very dangerous, and that it was extremely difficult, and next to impossible, for those that ventured into the temptation to escape the sin, and for those that had fallen into the sin to recover themselves by repentance. The heart of the adulterous woman is *snares and nets*; she plays her game to ruin souls with as much art and subtlety as ever any fowler used to take a silly bird. The methods such sinners use are both deceiving and destroying, as snares and nets are. The unwary souls are enticed into them by the bait of pleasure, which they greedily catch at and promise themselves satisfaction in; but they are taken before they are aware, and taken irrecoverably. Her hands are as bands, with which, under colour of fond embraces, she holds those fast that she has seized; they are *held in the cords of their own sin*, ^{<392>}Proverbs 5:22. Lust gets strength by being gratified and its charms are more prevalent.

[3.] He reckoned it a great instance of God's favour to any man if by his grace he has kept him from this sin: *He that pleases God shall escape from her*, shall be preserved either from being tempted to this sin or from being overcome by the temptation. Those that are kept from this sin must acknowledge it is God that keeps them, and not any strength or resolution of their own, must acknowledge it a great mercy; and those that would have grace sufficient for them to arm them against this sin must be careful to please God in every thing, by keeping his ordinances, ^{<B125>}Leviticus 18:30.

[4.] He reckoned it a sin that is as sore a punishment of other sins as a man can fall under in this life: *The sinner shall be taken by her*. *First*, Those that allow themselves in other sins, by which their minds are blinded and their consciences debauched, are the more easily drawn to this. *Secondly*, it is just with God to leave them to themselves to fall into it. See ^{<B125>}Romans 1:26, 28; ^{<B125>}Ephesians 4:18, 19. Thus does Solomon, as it were, with horror, bless himself from the sin in which he had plunged himself.

(2.) He now discovered more than ever of the general corruption of man's nature. He traces up that stream to the fountain, as his father had done before him, on a like occasion (^{<B125>}Psalm 51:5): *Behold, I was shapen in iniquity*.

[1.] He endeavoured to find out the number of his actual transgressions (v. 27): "*Behold, this have I found*, that is, this I hoped to find; I thought I could have understood my errors and have brought in a complete list, at least of the heads of them; I thought I could have counted them one by one, and have found out the account." He desired to find them out as a penitent, that he might the more particularly acknowledge them; and, generally, the more particular we are in the confession of sin the more comfort we have in the sense of the pardon; he desired it also as a preacher, that he might the more particularly give warning to others. Note, A sound conviction of one sin will put us upon enquiring into the whole confederacy; and the more we see amiss in ourselves the more diligently we should enquire further into our own faults, that what we see not may be discovered to us, ^{<B125>}Job 34:32.

[2.] He soon found himself at a loss, and perceived that they were innumerable (v. 28): "*Which yet my soul seeks*; I am still counting, and still desirous to find out the account, but I find not, I cannot count them

all, nor find out the account of them to perfection. I still make new and amazing discoveries of the desperate wickedness that there is in my own heart," ⁽²⁴⁷⁰⁾Jeremiah 17:9, 10. *Who can know it? Who can understand his errors? Who can tell how often he offends?* ⁽²⁴⁹²⁾Psalms 19:12. He finds that if God enters into judgment with him, or he with himself, for all his thoughts, words, and actions, he is *not able to answer for one of a thousand*, ⁽³⁰⁰⁾Job 9:3. This he illustrates by comparing the corruption of his own heart and life with the corruption of the world, where he scarcely found one good man among a thousand; nay, among all the thousand wives and concubines which he had, he did not find *one good woman*. "Even so," says he, "When I come to recollect and review my own thoughts, words, and actions, and all the passages of my life past, perhaps among those that were manly I might find one good among a thousand, and that was all; the rest even of those had some corruption or other in them." He found (v. 20) that he had sinned even in doing good. But for those that were effeminate, that passed in the indulgence of his pleasures, they were all naught; in that part of his life there did not appear so much as one of a thousand good. In our hearts and lives there appears little good, at the best, but sometimes none at all. Doubtless this is not intended as a censure of the female sex in general; it is probable that there have been and are more good women than good men (⁽⁴⁴⁷⁰⁾Acts 17:4, 12); he merely alludes to his own sad experience. And perhaps there may be this further in it: he does, in his proverbs, warn us against the snares both of the *evil man* and of the *strange woman* (⁽²¹⁹²⁾Proverbs 2:12, 16; 4:14; 5:3); now he had observed the ways of the *evil women* to be more deceitful and dangerous than those of the *evil men*, that it was more difficult to discover their frauds and elude their snares, and therefore he compares sin to an adulteress (⁽²¹⁹³⁾Proverbs 9:13), and perceives he can no more find out the deceitfulness of his own heart than he can that of a strange woman, whose ways are movable, that thou canst not know them.

[3.] He therefore runs up all the streams of actual transgression to the fountain of original corruption. The source of all the folly and madness that are in the world is in man's apostasy from God and his degeneracy from his primitive rectitude (v. 20): "*Lo, this only have I found; when I could not find out the particulars, yet the gross account was manifest enough; it is as clear as the sun that man is corrupted and revolted, and is not as he was made.*" Observe, *First*, How man was made by the wisdom and goodness of God: *God made man upright; Adam the first man*, so the Chaldee. God made him, and he made him *upright*, such a one as he

should be; being made a rational creature, he was, in all respects, such a one as a rational creature should be, *upright*, without any irregularity; one could find no fault in him; he was *upright*, that is, determined to God only, in opposition to the *many inventions* which he afterwards turned aside to. Man, as he came out of God's hands, was (as we may say) a little picture of his Maker, who is *good and upright*. *Secondly*, How he was marred, and in effect unmade, by his own folly and badness: *They have sought out many inventions* — they, our first parents, or the whole race, all in general and every one in particular. *They have sought out great inventions* (so some), inventions to become great as gods (~~GEN~~ Genesis 3:5), or *the inventions of the great ones* (so some), of the angels that fell, the *Magnates*, or *many inventions*. Man, instead of resting in what God had found for him, was for seeking to better himself, like the prodigal that left his father's house to seek his fortune. Instead of being for one, he was for many; instead of being for God's institutions, he was for his own inventions. The law of his creation would not hold him, but he would be at his own disposal and follow his own sentiments and inclinations. *Vain man would be wise*, wiser than his Maker; he is giddy and unsettled in his pursuits, and therefore has *many inventions*. Those that forsake God wander endlessly. Men's actual transgressions are multiplied. Solomon could not find out how many they are (v. 28); but he found they were *very many*. Many kinds of sins, and those often repeated. *They are more than the hairs on our heads*, ~~PSALM~~ Psalm 40:12.