

Ecclesiastes 7: Knots and Tangles.

Many of you here will know just how great it is to be a Christian, to be one of God's people! Listen to a sample of the wisdom of the book of Proverbs chapter 10...

² Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death.

³ The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

⁶ Blessings crown the head of the righteous, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

⁷ The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.

⁹ The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Or ²⁵ When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

Yes, it truly is a life of blessing to be counted amongst the righteous, the people of God. We have joy, peace security and the love of God who has a wonderful plan for our lives...!

Come to Jesus and all you get is good things, all your problems will be over, He just wants you to be healthy and wealthy and happy...

...The problem is *that isn't really true is it?*

The history of the people of God (Christians of past generations) is littered with cases where this hasn't been the case.

In the early days of the Church Christians were persecuted and martyred, killed because of their faith in Jesus – many were beaten and imprisoned, some were torn apart by wild dogs or lions for the entertainment of a mocking audience, others were wrapped in oily rags and burned for street lighting in the city of Rome!¹

It's thought that only one of the apostles themselves died of natural causes.

And in case we think this was just a problem rooted in the ignorance and intolerance of the past, it's worth noting that in our own generation, persecution and victimisation of Christians is so bad globally that on average over 170,000 Christians still lose their lives every year.

And that doesn't even start to explore the *suffering* that some Christians live with. Christians are not immune from depression, anxiety, bereavement and terminal sickness. Christians get cancer, have strokes and heart attacks and they are not immune from car accidents and disasters.

I read a report that 150 members of a single church in Haiti were killed as they made their way to the weekly Bible study that fateful Tuesday evening!²

Many of you here tonight will know Christians who are suffering in a variety of ways. Our lives which should be pleasant and ordered appear to be full of KNOTS and TANGLES – But if the book of Proverbs is right then they shouldn't be... either that or we're not *righteous*...? What's going on here? Why does this happen?

And what's it got to do with Ecclesiastes chapter 7?

Well, lots... because that's exactly the issue on the Teacher's mind.

The Teacher (Mr. Qohelet if you prefer!) is on a mission. He is trying to discover how to achieve the good life. What is good for human beings to do with our lives? He is searching for Wisdom.

Biblical wisdom is about knowing how to *do* life. How to respond to each and every circumstance and situation so that your life is successful.

The Teacher already has wisdom of a sort, but it's not what the Bible calls wisdom! Just quickly look at verse 23, "All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"—but this was beyond me."

The Teacher is already wise, but wisdom is beyond him! – weird eh?

Actually, the wisdom he already has is the wisdom that comes from himself, his individual wisdom – his experiences of the world so far, what he's seen and felt and heard, and of course, his intellect, his ability to process all that information – the wisdom he doesn't have is the Wisdom that comes from God alone... God's *revealed Wisdom*.

And its using his own wisdom that he says the following...

Let's read his words in verse 15: "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."

The Teacher is confused. Why does this stuff happen? The goodies get beaten up and shot and the baddies keep their drug-money and get to sun themselves on a beach in Malibu – that's not how the plot should go...

But isn't that exactly what we see in the world?

Of course, it's not that simple in the real world. More often than not, those who live clean and wise lives actually do pretty well, and foolish people who are lazy and wicked tend to do pretty badly...

I remember my brother in law saying that the missionaries in Colombia used to plant churches in areas where people were very poor, but a few years down the road they had become middle class and wealthy – the reason being that when people came to faith in Christ they gave up gambling, drugs and alcohol and started to look after their families which slowly lifted the Christian community out of poverty and into comfortable wealth.

But it isn't always so... and you and I know it!

The Teacher actually starts this chapter with the first dozen verses dedicated to rubbishing the wisdom of the sages – the kind you find in Proverbs. And as you look at that first section you'll actually notice that it looks like it could all have been lifted out of the book of Proverbs.

The teacher systematically quotes the wisdom of these wise teachers of the past and seeks to discredit them... let's look at some examples:

Verse 1: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth."

How wise to recognise that your reputation is more important than your wealth... What people think about you is more important than how much you've got in the bank... but ultimately, one day you're going to die, your life will be gone... and then your reputation isn't going to do you any good at all!

And verse 2 adds to this...

"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."

Death is the one destination you can count on. All the twists and turns of your life are chaotic and unpredictable... you never know what will happen next, so surely only a fool would put the pleasures of this life first? But death is a dead cert. 1 out of 1 die, you can bank on it, it's a rock! Only a fool would waste his or her time feasting when there's the possibility of a funeral to attend! The Teacher is being deliberately provocative... "don't celebrate life, it's better to be obsessed with death!"

Verse 3, "Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.

Proverbs 14:13 tells us "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief." So, with perverse logic the Teacher concludes, "if laughter may possibly lead to heartache, then the chances are that heartache and grief can lead to happiness!"

Well, surely wise people *are* the ones to listen to when you need guidance?

Verse 5, "⁵ It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. ⁶ Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. ⁷Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart."

No, even wise people are susceptible to corruption. Can you think of great public figures in your own lifetime that have been thought of as examples to follow... people whose words and whose teaching was really worth listening to? ...and then they fell! Scandal struck and their reputation was destroyed... it has happened often in the secular world as well as in the church!

The teacher concludes, "They may be superior to fools in their wisdom, but if even the wisest heart *can* be corrupted then why should we listen to any of their wisdom and their rebukes?"

And so it goes on. The Teacher looks at the world around him... remember he uses only his experience, his senses and his intellect... and his conclusion concerning all of the so-called traditional wisdom of the sages is that no one has the right to tell others what is best for them! Traditional wisdom is flawed. Things don't always work out well for good people and they don't always go wrong for bad people.

What's going on? ...he asks. And the conclusion he comes to is in verses 13.

"Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?"

There's no point fighting it, if you try to live your life by the wisdom of the wise old Sages, all you will discover is that though the proverbs give us a logical and straightforward approach to life, all they do is reveal that life itself is crooked... it is full of chaotic knots and tangles that we cannot understand, unpick or avoid! ...and what's more, isn't it *God* Himself who made it that way?

Let's follow some more of his reasoning. Verse 15 again,

"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."

There's the dilemma remember... what does he suggest? Verse 16,

¹⁶ Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?

¹⁷ Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?

¹⁸ It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes."

Now, this would be a good time to pause and say something about Biblical context!
 Young people... we have to be careful about how we read our Bibles, don't just grab at verses, consider why they are *where* they are!...

There's a story told about a guy who has an important decision to make and he was trying to decide what God wanted to say to him so he flipped through his Bible and poked a finger into it randomly... the verse it landed on was Matthew 27:5 "So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself." OK he thought, obviously a mistake, I'll try again... so he flipped onwards a way and jabbed his finger back in. It landed in Luke 10:37... the colour drained from his face as he read the words "...go and do likewise".

Now, those verses we just read are very odd... the Teacher is actually suggesting in the light of his discoveries that we *don't be too righteous and don't be too wicked* – find a happy medium! But you need to understand that he's being deliberately provocative. His experience of this crooked, tangled world seems to suggest! People who are too wicked as well as people who are too good can *both* come to sticky end – so if you want to live then avoid both!

He knows that's not right, but he's so frustrated that he wants to scream!

Actually, his farcical suggestion is not that far off the way we and our culture tend to think is it? You don't want to be a goody-goody – you'll get bullied, you'll miss out on all the fun... and you don't want to go too far – drug dealing to kids definitely out, but speeding, tax dodging, a little "affair" on the side... aren't they the spice of life?

Yet deep down, just like the Teacher, we know that before our holy, perfect creator God there's no such thing as being a little bit wicked... or a little bit righteous... you're either clean or you're tainted – there's no half way position.

Are you still with me? Good, right, can you see in verses 16 and 17 the teacher connects Wisdom with Righteousness and Wickedness with folly? That's actually a well established connection in Biblical wisdom literature (literally, the wise are righteous and foolishness is wickedness) and we need to remember that if we are to understand what comes next. Verse 19,

¹⁹Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

²⁰There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.

²¹Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you-

²²for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

Wisdom is very valuable, he says in verse 19, true Wisdom – knowing how to handle anything life throws at you - makes you a force to be reckoned with.

BUT v20 – *No-one* is truly wise! (remember the connection between wisdom and righteousness?)

This problem is universal – we're ALL fools! (sorry if you find that insulting – maybe you'd prefer me to say "we're all less than perfectly wise!")

He illustrates the point by saying that others say bad stuff behind our back... but hey, hands up if you've *never* been guilty of doing the same to someone else (I thought not)!

Well, Let's look at his summary then in the last few verses:

²³All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"— but this was beyond me.

²⁴Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound— who can discover it?

²⁵So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.

²⁶ I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

The mission of discovering the answer to how to do life successfully is beyond the Teacher. He cannot come up with anything. The world is a tangle of suffering and trials. Inexplicably, good stuff happens to bad people and bad stuff happens to good people and no systematic approach to life can guarantee that you'll avoid the bad stuff. You can spend years wisely saving your money, going to the gym regularly, eating healthily... and still be hit by a drunk driver, struck down with a heart attack or die in a tsunami or earthquake!

Remember, the Teacher is *really* smart. He's King Solomon smart (and you don't get better than that!) and yet where does HIS wisdom leave him? In the embrace of the woman who is a snare, v26.

Who is this woman? Those of you who came to our series in the book of Proverbs will recognise her. It's Dame Folly!

The book of Proverbs introduces 2 women. The beautiful Lady Wisdom and the seductive Dame Folly. They are the embodiments of the Wisdom of God and the foolishness of any voice that contradicts Him.

The teacher finds that all his efforts to unpack and understand the fabric of life turn him into a fool. (Illustrated nicely by his conclusion in verses 16-17.)

²⁷ "Look," says the Teacher, [In verse 27] "this is what I have discovered: "Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things-

²⁸ while I was still searching but not finding— I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.

The teacher has been entirely logical and methodical in his search... he has left no stone unturned, "adding one thing to another" to try to discover the scheme behind the apparent chaos of life.

Figuratively in verse 28 he says he can find a needle in a haystack "one person amongst a crowd" and yet there is an upright woman that he cannot find.

Is this an example of chauvinism? No! (at least I don't think so!)

He's *not* saying "all women are fools!" far from it.

These verses are not concerned with gender, they're all about *searching*. And what is it the Teacher cannot find? Or rather who is it he cannot find?... Lady Wisdom!

The big frustration is that he is entirely... ENTIRELY unable to find Her.

Let's get under his skin here. Qohelet, the Teacher has observed and experienced the crookedness of life in the world he lives in. If there's a God, if that God is as powerful as the Bible claims he is, and if that God really cares about me and you the way He says He does... then WHY? Why do the innocent suffer? Why do our family members and friends suffer from disease and depression?

Why did 150 of His worshippers die on their way to a prayer meeting for goodness sake?!

Is God bad? Is He unable to do anything? Doesn't He care? Or.. is this God's idea of a good world?

The only answer He offers is verse 29, "This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."

Assuming God is good and powerful and loving, if He didn't make our world crooked then the fault must lie with us!

Why is the world such a bad, dark and scary place? Because *people* are in it (and that includes you and me)!

God made us upright – He made a perfect creation – but the first people decided to pursue their own agenda ...and we inherited that same attitude! We all tell our maker to shove off whilst we pursue our own schemes.

Now, the teacher might have finally worked out the root cause of the knots and tangles of life, but he can offer us no solution! Nothing to help us deal with why God apparently does nothing about it. Nothing about how to find the true wisdom that will help us do life in and amongst the mess.

Who is this Lady Wisdom? How can she help us and how do we find her? We certainly need someone wiser than Solomon...

We find the answer in Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 2. Here he says that his concern for them is:

“that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:2-3)

Jesus himself is behind the persona of Lady Wisdom! He's the source of all Godly wisdom – wisdom that cannot be gained by any of our efforts, no matter how smart we think we are. AND He gives that wisdom as a gift to those who ask!

Do you remember our reading from James chapter 1? And those shocking words...

Verser 2 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...” The knots and tangles of life can be a joy to us! How? Through Wisdom!

Verses 5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

Without Jesus, we are in the same boat as Qohelet the Teacher. It's as if all the history and events of the world and our lives is a great big rug on a cosmic loom, and God is the supreme designer and weaver.

We all lie under the loom with old Qohelet, staring up at small section the mess of knots and tangles – the meaningless mess and mystery of our existence...

But God stands above (over the Sun), looking down at the beautiful design that He has woven together.

How should we respond? What can we do with our knots and tangles? *Humble* yourself and ask God for wisdom... and then grasp His hand and *confidently trust* the one who designed it all to lead you *through* whatever life throws at you.

Let me say that again: We must grasp just how vastly beyond our understanding (or even our imagination) God actually is (He knows, sees and orchestrates ALL things, past present and future)... and that should bring us to our knees, and only then will we be able to joyfully trust Him in the times of trial.