

words which wend their way into the communicative fabric of every culture and society.

The servant is mentioned for two reasons. Since he is a servant, he will most likely know the weaknesses of his master, or at least be near when his master loses control of his tongue. On the other hand, the master would be nearby and would overhear the conversation of the servant.

The idea of "cursing" in this context suggests more of a reviling than what one normally considers either "to curse" or "to swear." *Base* men curse and swear, but *all* men, whether of high or low estate, have difficulty controlling their tongues. The master is reminded that he has *often* "reviled others." He must admit that he, too, has spoken words in a moment of weakness or heated discussion which he would like to recall. He confesses that he would like such words to be forgotten.

FACT QUESTIONS 7:21-22

381. What two-fold blessing does wisdom offer?
382. When should information be withheld?
383. When is one obligated to share information?
384. Give two reasons why the *servant* is mentioned here.
385. What prompts the "cursing" (reviling) which comes forth from the master of the house?

B. IMPORTANT LESSONS DRAWN FROM THESE OBSERVATIONS 7:23-29

1. Practical lessons can be learned but the deeper things are unattainable. 7:23-24

TEXT 7:23-24

23 I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

24 What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 7:23-24

213. List the things that "all this" refers to if it has reference to the teaching found in verses 1-22.
214. Make a list of the things "all this" refers to if it has reference to the teaching found in verses 25-29.
215. What was the means by which Solomon tested everything?
216. Identify the conclusion at which Solomon now arrives.

PARAPHRASE 7:23-24

I have proved many things, and in each case I proved it by wisdom. However, I have not discovered all there is to know about anything. I became wise, but complete wisdom was far from me. What I have failed to discover is still remote and exceedingly deep. Is there anyone who can find it?

COMMENT 7:23-24

v. 23 What is the "all this" to which Solomon here refers? Whatever it is, he declares that he *tested* it with *wisdom*. One idea is that "all this" refers to everything written thus far in Ecclesiastes. This suggests that all of his previous experiments, observations and conclusions have been tested with wisdom. Others argue that "all this" is limited to the observations which pertain to a *good name*, and speak only to the material in the first twenty-two verses in chapter seven. On the other hand, there are those who believe that "all this" refers only to the final five verses of chapter seven, and not to any of the previous material. There is little doubt that Solomon claims that *all* of his activities were guided by wisdom. Examine the

following random expressions: "explore by wisdom" (1:13) "I set my mind to know wisdom" (1:17); "my mind was guiding me wisely" (2:3); "My wisdom also stood by me" (2:9); "I turned to consider wisdom" (2:12); "Wisdom is protection . . . wisdom preserves" (7:12); "wisdom strengthens" (7:19). Similar references to the place of wisdom are found in eleven direct instances in chapters eight through twelve. Note: 8:1, 16; 9:10, 13, 15, 16, 18; 10:1, 3, 10; 12:11.

What does this prove? First, it proves that one should not make too much of what "all this" refers to since *everything* in the book is tested by wisdom. Secondly, the emphasis is on the fact that *wisdom* is the tool used to test everything. Solomon's stated purpose was to possess wisdom fully. He wanted to understand all the facets of life—the perplexing contradictions as well as the transparent joyous experiences, the deep riddles along with the self-evident truths. There is now the obvious desire to probe deeper into the hitherto unexplored areas of life. His desire to know more concerning the deeper things of life is openly stated. He wishes to explore each nuance of every side of life, and yet his conclusion is almost a declaration of frustration: " 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me." The secret things of God are *always* a little distance from man's reach; at least until that time when God chooses to disclose the deep, deep mysteries. (Cf. Deuteronomy 29:29; Colossians 1:26-27). A parallel thought is found in Solomon's own words: "Man cannot find out the work that God does" (3:11). The Bible receives a new dimension of appreciation from such a *searcher* for it holds numerous answers to what would otherwise be perplexing riddles of life. More than that, the Bible gives us the most important answer to the most important question of life: "What will God do with my sins?" What "the Preacher" of Ecclesiastes searched diligently to discover, the Christian knows about and gives thanks, for God teaches us that ". . . the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:7).

A beautiful parallel passage to the two verses under discussion here is found in Job 28:12-28. The reader would do

well to look it up and read through it thoughtfully. One is immediately impressed with three conclusions: (1) Man is limited in his knowledge and understanding; (2) Wisdom is of the greatest premium; and (3) God is the only source of true wisdom and man must turn to Him for understanding.

v. 24 Solomon set out to write about wisdom and in the midst of his adventure, he confesses his lack of it. He is wise but not fully wise. He can see the value of wisdom and extols it honestly and sincerely while at the same time humbly confessing that he is helpless before the infinite wisdom of God. He wants to know what is the actual *essence* of all things. Yet, he cannot discover it. He turns to a superlative which is variously translated but the impact is still felt. He states that it is "remote and exceedingly mysterious"; or that it is "far from me and deep, deep." He wishes to impress upon the reader that such knowledge as he is seeking is beyond the grasp or understanding of man. He cannot discover it!

There is a wisdom which is discoverable by man but it lies "under the sun." It is this wisdom that Solomon employs. However, there is a wisdom which God alone possesses and man cannot discover it. It is to Solomon's credit that he perceives his limitations and is wise enough to admit to them.

What is the nature of the information he seeks? From the context, it is obviously the every-day entanglements of life with its recurring inequities which build a web of unexplained riddles to bind and limit the understanding. He is practical rather than philosophical. He wants answers to *why* things happen as they do rather than *how* did they come to be. He knows God is the Creator (Cf. 8:15, 17; 11:5; 12:1, 7). He now wants to know the *why* behind the behavior of men. He is unable to explain it but he does draw a conclusion that temporarily satisfied him. He says, "Behold, I have found only this, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (7:29). Man's eyes are blinded by sin and the darkness is compounded because he lives in a sinful (dark) environment. Solomon's conclusion is another way of saying that man is

the author of his own blindness, while "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5).

FACT QUESTIONS 7:23-24

386. Identify three sections of Ecclesiastes that the "all this" of verse 23 could possibly refer.
387. Since there are numerous views as to what "all this" refers to, what two lessons should be drawn?
388. Was Solomon determined to be wise? Explain.
389. What kept Solomon from becoming completely wise?
390. Write out the three obvious lessons found in Job 28:12-28 which parallel the Ecclesiastes 7:23-24 passage.
391. What is the nature of the wisdom Solomon seeks? Explain.
392. What is it that blinds the eyes of men and keeps them from seeing clearly?
393. What compounds this darkness.

2. Through intensive study, one comes to see the potential within men and women to do evil. 7:25-28

TEXT 7:25-28

- 25 I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness.
- 26 And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her.
- 27 "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "adding one thing to another to find an explanation,
- 28 Which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 7:25-28

217. Who will escape from the evil woman?
218. Identify the three figurative tools used by the evil woman.
219. Solomon "directed" his mind to "seek" what?
220. How many men out of a thousand did he find that had such wisdom as he desired?
221. How many women did he discover who possessed wisdom to this degree?

PARAPHRASE 7:25-28

I said in my heart that I will seek out two things: on the one hand, I will study, investigate and find an explanation and wisdom; on the other hand, I will come to know and identify wickedness, stupidity, folly and madness. What did I discover? I discovered something more bitter than death itself! I found through my experience with woman that her thoughts are snares and traps, and her hands are chains. One who seeks God and pleases Him may escape her. However, one who is a sinner will be caught in her snares and traps. "Look!" says the Preacher, "This is what I have discovered by adding one thought to another to find an explanation, which still calls forth my soul's energy and asks my strength. Yes, I am still searching but have not found a satisfactory answer. I have found that among a thousand men there is but one who can be numbered among the wise. However, I cannot say the same for women. I have not found one such women among all these."

COMMENT 7:25-28

These verses are among the most difficult verses in Ecclesiastes to interpret. The primary cause of difficulty stems from whether one should exegete the passage literally or figuratively. If the woman is figurative (false wisdom), it is one thing, but

if she is a real woman then a different interpretation must be given. It is true, however, that regardless of the direction one takes, whether literal or figurative, there are similar passages in the Bible to support the principles involved.

An overview of the passage. Solomon is determined to discover wisdom in the fullest sense. This is not a new quest. (Cf. 1:13, 16-17; 7:23-24) However, he admits that he has not found the satisfactory answers. The one thing he has discovered is that not only is complete wisdom illusive, it is equally difficult to discover a wise person. His observation is that only one man in a thousand could be considered wise, but he failed to discover even one woman among this number. He further observes that there are some women who will catch and destroy you if it is in their power to do so. The one who pleases God and receives His favor will escape from the snare of such a woman. However, the one who acts foolishly will be caught by her.

The literal view. Solomon does not categorically label *all* women as evil. He identifies the evil woman as "the woman whose heart is snares and nets." The implication suggests that there are women whose hearts are not snares and nets. It is from the writing of Solomon that we have the beautiful description of the virtuous woman so delineated in terms of praise and honor. (Cf. Proverbs 31:10-31)

There can be little question concerning the power women are capable of exerting over men. In the context of Solomon's discussion, that power is evil. There are numerous non-Biblical proverbs which speak to a consensus on this subject. Some of these are: "It is better to follow a lion than a woman"; "Woe to the age whose leader is a woman"; "Who follows the counsel of his wife arrives at hell"; and "Women are snares of Satan." There is also the warning from Solomon: "Now therefore, my sons, listen to me, and pay attention to the words of my mouth. Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths. For many are the victims she has cast down, and numerous are all her slain. Her house is on the way to Sheol, descending to the chambers of death" (Proverbs 7:24-27).

In Solomon's investigation to discover the "evil of folly" and the "foolishness of madness," he discovered how far both men and women are removed from their original design. There is little comfort for men, and less for women. He was unable to discover the degree of wisdom which he desired, but he discovered all too soon the depths of evil to which both men and women are capable of descending. As a male writer, he naturally turns to his counterpart in crime to impress the minds of his readers with the extent of his discovery of evil. He speaks of inescapable snares, nets and chains. However, he hastens to speak objectively and suggests that although God made men upright, they have bent low in the pursuit of devising new ways of committing sin.

His statement that he was unable to find one wise woman among a thousand should not be looked upon as saying there are no wise women. It is rather a relative comparison with men. He is saying that from his own observations, he has discovered that there are fewer wise women than men.

These verses should not be used to build a case for the superiority of men over women in the possession and use of wisdom. Many commentaries miss the point of Solomon's argument when they draw attention to the fact that only men were employed in writing the Bible, and in holding prominent positions of leadership in both the Jewish economy and the Christian church. The inference is that women were neither wise enough nor suited for such undertakings. It is true that woman was first in the fall (Cf. I Timothy 3:13-14), and that she is to be in subjection (Cf. Ephesians 5:22-24). But neither of these conclusions speak to the point at hand. It is simply that in Solomon's pursuit of wisdom and evil, he discovered *mankind* to be perverse and crooked. His conclusion is: wise, righteous people are scarce!

The literal interpretation of this passage satisfies the hermeneutical demands placed upon it.

The figurative view. The personification of false wisdom as "the woman" establishes a natural correspondence between sound doctrine which is "pleasing to God," and its opposite,

“folly and madness” which trap, ensnare, and destroy the sinner. It could be argued that “the woman” answers to philosophy and vain deceit. (Cf. Colossians 2:8; I Timothy 6:20) While it is true that both Israel and the church are personified as a woman (Cf. Ephesians 5:24-32; Revelation 21:2, 9; 22:17; Judges 8:27), it does not necessarily follow that such figurative language is used here. Solomon’s *literal wives* (300 of them and 700 concubines) were responsible for turning his heart away after other gods. They were real, physical women who ensnared and captured Solomon’s heart. So enslaved was he by their evil powers that he actually accepted the false wisdom of Ashtoreth and Milcom. He was led to false doctrine by his entanglement with real women. It is written of him, “And Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done” (I Kings 11:6). There is little justification in the light of Solomon’s experiences and the context of Ecclesiastes for a figurative interpretation.

Christological thoughts. It is true that men and women are equally wise. It is also true that they are equally sinful. When one realizes that Solomon is marking *all* with the curse of sin and only a few with the blessing of wisdom, he has arrived at the intent of the passage. Some have not shared this interpretation of the passage and since they are reluctant to make a distinction between men and women in the area of wisdom, they ascribe the “one man among a thousand” to Jesus Christ. The *one man* they insist is a reference to Jesus who to Solomon was also the “rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys” (Song of Songs 2:1). There are a number of arguments that militate against such a conclusion. Jesus does stand in a class by Himself. He *is* wisdom. However, to find one among a thousand implies that he would find another if he continued his search. There is only one Jesus (God). To ascribe this passage to Jesus would be breaking from the “under the sun” context of Solomon’s search. It is better to simply take him at his word: he did find one among a thousand. Finally, the context is not clarified or helped by such an interpretation.

Solomon *is* still reasoning "under the sun." He has clearly expressed his desire to be wise, and he has confessed to his inability to achieve such wisdom. He states his purpose to discover folly and madness and it is in this area that he excels. His final conclusions are consistent with the total context. He says (1) there are few wise people, (2) there are many who are caught in the trap of wickedness, and (3) those who devise new ways of sinning!

FACT QUESTIONS 7:25-28

394. What makes the interpretation of these verses difficult?
395. Identify the two general areas Solomon is attempting to discover?
396. Is Solomon declaring that all women are evil? Discuss.
397. Was Solomon able to discover an "explanation" (vs. 27-28) of the wisdom he sought?
398. What did he find?
399. Explain what Solomon means by his statement: "I have not found a woman among all these."
400. If this passage is interpreted figuratively, the evil woman is a personification of what?
401. Were the women who turned Solomon's heart away from God real or figurative? Give proof of your answer.
402. In what was Solomon entangled when he turned away from God?
403. Give two reasons why a Christological interpretation of this passage is unwarranted.
404. After a careful study of these verses, write your own summary statement of the passage.

3. A final observation: Men seek evil devices. 7:29

TEXT 7:29

29 "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices."

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 7:29

222. How many things did Solomon discover?
 223. What do you think is meant by the term upright?
 224. If "many devices" are the occasion for keeping man from being upright, what would be the nature of the "many devices"?

PARAPHRASE 7:29

Be sure to look at this! Only this one thing have I discovered: When God created man, He created him perfect. However, since the creation, man has invented many ways to fall short of what God intended him to be.

COMMENT 7:29

The use of the interjection "behold" suggests that Solomon wants the attention of his readers on this subject. Why is there the gravity at this particular point? Two things become apparent: First, God is not to blame for man's inability to discover wisdom. God made man upright, and in that state man was in a position to know and understand the things which are now hidden from him. Man cannot achieve complete wisdom, but it is his own fault. Second, man busies himself with innovative, vain speculation and self-wise reasonings which compete in his own mind with the true wisdom of God. Solomon is underscoring his previous contention that both men and women are evil.

The "inventions" of this verse are speculations or thoughts which result in a spiritual and sometimes physical stance which is contrary to God's word. The one evil invention that Solomon cites in this entire passage is found in verse twenty-six. Here he speaks of the weakness of his own life. He speaks of the violation of the monogamous marriage situation in his own personal experience. The large number of both wives and concubines which he possessed defies the imagination. However, Solomon implies by the "*many devices*" that there are numerous ways to sin, many of which are unrelated to immoral sexual activity.

Man should both desire and be ready to receive the will of God for his life. He should not invent his own speculative philosophies. God approves of the wise man who allows God to speak to him. The promise has been given: "Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you" (Proverbs 1:23). The word translated "devices" is used only twice in the Old Testament. The other reference is II Chronicles 26:15 where the devices or "inventions" were "engines of war." These devices were clearly designed to shoot arrows and great stones at the enemy. They were also strategically located on the towers and on the corners to give maximum defense to the city. Such detail and cunning illustrates the ingenuity of the mind of man and demonstrates the variety of his inventiveness. The context under consideration, however, implies evil devices because they are set against the fact that God made man "upright." Man was made to walk with God, but he fell from his high place of honor because of sin. Without grace and truth (John 1:17) man continues to invent pathways of departure from the presence of God.

Solomon's conclusion is the inevitable point to which all thinking men are drawn: all have sinned. The Apostle Paul concurs. He writes, "we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God, all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

FACT QUESTIONS 7:29

405. Give two reasons why Solomon expresses "gravity" at this particular point.
406. What is Solomon "underscoring" in this verse?
407. Explain what is meant by "devices" or "inventions."
408. What *one* invention does Solomon cite?
409. The word translated "device" is used elsewhere only in II Chronicles 26:15. From this passage, what does the use of the word illustrate?
410. State Solomon's conclusion.

C. ADMONITIONS TO USE WISDOM IN THE WORK OF SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF LIFE 8:1—9:18

1. Work in submission to the king. 8:1-8

TEXT 8:1-8

- 1 Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.
- 2 I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God.
- 3 Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.
- 4 Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?"
- 5 He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure.
- 6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, when a man's trouble is heavy upon him.
- 7 If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?
- 8 No man has the authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge