

**“No Sufficiency in Self”** (Ecclesiastes 7:15–8:1)(3.19.23)

Ecclesiastes 7:15–8:1 (NIV84)

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> Do not be overrighteous,  
neither be overwise—  
why destroy yourself?

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

<sup>18</sup> It is good to grasp the one  
and not let go of the other.

The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.

<sup>19</sup> Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful  
than ten rulers in a city.

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

<sup>21</sup> Do not pay attention to every word people say,  
or you may hear your servant cursing you—

<sup>22</sup> for you know in your heart

that many times you yourself have cursed others.

<sup>23</sup> All this I tested by wisdom and I said,

“I am determined to be wise”—

but this was beyond me.

<sup>24</sup> Whatever wisdom may be,

it is far off and most profound—

who can discover it?

<sup>25</sup> So 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> “Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have  
discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of  
things—

<sup>28</sup> while I was still searching

but not finding—

I found one upright man among a thousand,  
but not one upright woman among them all.

<sup>29</sup> This only have I found:

God made mankind upright,  
but men have gone in search of many schemes.”

**8** Who is like the wise man?

Who knows the explanation of things?

Wisdom brightens a man’s face  
and changes its hard appearance.

**The word of God for the people of God.**

LET US PRAY.

Title: **“No Sufficiency in Self”**

INTRODUCTION:

From 40 Prayers for Lent by David Clowes:

**“Our Darkness”**

Father, so often our darkness is of our own making. Much of the pain and loss we face is because of our own foolishness. We act all surprised when we are filled with despair. We are alone and afraid, but have wandered far from you. Forgive our wandering off on our own, forgive our foolish attempts at self-reliance.

Here and now we confess that without you there is no health, no hope, and no way home. Forgive us for

walking in dark places and bringing darkness to those that we love.

Forgive us, cleanse, renew, and reclaim us. We thank you for your welcome which we never deserve and for the cross of Christ, before which we now stand. **Amen.**

BODY:

Joel Lehman wrote an article for Psychology Today, titled "Knowing Just Enough to Be Dangerous – How overconfidence subverts rational thinking." He starts with a quote from William Shakespeare: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool." Well, I don't think we can give Shakespeare full credit for this being an original thought. Surely, this is part of what Qoheleth, our Preacher and Teacher conveys in different ways throughout Ecclesiastes.

Lehman says, "In general, we tend to [motivate our reasoning](#) so that the world appears well-aligned with our pre-existing story about how it should work."

"Do you think you're a good driver, at least better than average? A full ninety-three percent of Americans say they're better than average drivers. In [another study](#), college students who performed the worst in tests of logic, [humor](#), or grammar still believed they were better than most. Most of us are the heroes of our own story, even when the reality is more ordinary."

"A similar thinking flaw is the [overconfidence effect](#), when we take our feeling of certainty as proof that we actually have the right answer. There's an important difference

between how well we actually understand something, and how certain about it we feel.”

There is much more, but hopefully you get the idea. I have posted a link to the article in our RightNow Media Ecclesiastes Bible Study for week 10.

Of course, our Bibles warn us against this danger of self-deception. Here are just three warnings:

Isaiah 5:21 (NIV84) Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.

Proverbs 3:7 (NIV84) Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.

Proverbs 26:12 (NIV84) Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Those proverbs were authored by King Solomon, who uses Qoheleth as his mouthpiece here in Ecclesiastes. In today’s scripture, he is wrestling with the paradoxes of life in this world, life under the sun. He tells us, “So 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.”

King Solomon was renown for knowledge, in his day, and down through the ages. He used this foundation of wisdom to gain more wisdom. He had the tools and resources to investigate, to research, to reason, and to conclude accurately. And where did his efforts bring him? “I am determined to be wise, but this is beyond me. Who

is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things?”

I ask, “Is it you my brothers and sisters?” I know it is not me. The obvious answer is not any of us; but many times we live and make decisions under our own power and authority, without consulting God’s word in study, or God’s will through prayer.

Jesus declares in Luke 11:31 (NIV84) “**The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.**”

Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30 (NIV84) “It is because of him [God] that you are in **Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God**—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” No, whatever merit we have does not originate in us. It is from Christ alone – the Messiah – our Savior.

I read this account in The Preacher’s Commentary: “Lee Edward Travis was the founding dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Seminary. His intellectual pilgrimage illustrated Koheleth’s frustration. As a brilliant young psychologist, he was the first American to develop techniques of electroencephalography and [the] study human brain waves.

As he began his research he was heady with the hope of getting to the core of what it means to be human. Yet the more he worked in the lab at the University of Iowa the

further away he found himself from the profound aims of his research.

Later, he turned to the study of speech impediments, especially stuttering. For years he labored with students and colleagues to understand the physical and emotional causes of defective speech. He helped to found the American Speech and Hearing Association. Along the way he transferred his hope from brain-wave research to studies in speech pathology. Again his hopes were dashed.

The closer he tried to approach the essence of humanity the further away it moved. Finally, when he met Christ as Lord and Savior, he uttered his "Eureka!" In that one encounter, he had found the answer both to what we human beings are and to what we need. A wise man always, yet he, in Christ, came to know the wisdom beyond wisdom."

In our 15<sup>th</sup> verse, Qoheleth is mystified by the injustice of a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. We want life to be fair. The good should be rewarded. The bad should be punished. And in fact, many scriptures promise blessing for obedience to God and punishment for disobedience.

During our Responsive Reading of Psalm 73, the author, Asaph, confesses, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Where did Asaph find peace? – "Whom have I in heaven

but you [LORD]? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”

Warren Wiersbe quoted Francis Bacon, “Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New Testament.” What? Doesn’t our spirit rebel against that? Where does that conclusion come from? It comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ words:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

Qoheleth did not have the testimony of Jesus like we do. We have a substantial advantage over him. In his wrestling to find answers, to use wisdom, he is making arguments to reach conclusions. Don’t mistake his ponderings for the final answer. It may be that the musings and meanderings are to demonstrate the futility of human wisdom. For instance, the warning against being “overwise” seems nonsensical when you consider that he is trying to penetrate the riddles of life with his wisdom.

It is pretty clear throughout that wickedness and evil he equates with foolishness. He seems to be saying that we should **not** strive after righteousness, but that is not his meaning. Do not take confidence in your righteousness. Do not be self-righteous or have any pretense to righteousness. Why? Matthew 5:20 (NIV84) “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the



Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Again, our sensibilities are violated. How can this be? Matt Chandler explains in his sermon, “Love Interrupts: ” Righteousness is a state of being, it’s not a list of actions. Righteousness is a state of being. It’s the way we are when purchased by Christ.”

Here is a conclusion of Qoheleth’s that we can bank on, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” We must use scripture to interpret scripture.

1 Kings 8:46 (NIV84) “When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—

Psalm 14:1–3 (NIV84)

<sup>1</sup> The fool says in his heart,

“There is no God.”

They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;  
there is no one who does good.

<sup>2</sup> The Lord looks down from heaven  
on the sons of men  
to see if there are any who understand,  
any who seek God.

<sup>3</sup> All have turned aside,  
they have together become corrupt;  
there is no one who does good,

not even one.

Romans 3:10 (NIV84) As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

Normally, I only give two or three scriptures to make a point. But, this issue is central to the Christian faith and contrary to what most people believe. So, I will further demonstrate this truth from God’s word.

Isaiah 53:6 (NIV84)

<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

Who is the HIM that bore the burden of our iniquity?

Romans 3:20–25 (NIV84)

<sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

<sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, **through faith in his blood.**

That is why we sang "Nothing but the Blood" before the sermon. This is **ALL my righteousness**; nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Many of you know that John Newton, former slave trader, wrote the famous hymn, Amazing Grace. Here is another hymn he wrote –

In evil long I took delight,  
unawed by shame or fear,  
Until a new object met my sight,  
and stopped my wild career.

I saw one hanging on a tree  
in agony and blood,  
Who fixed His languid eyes on me  
as near His cross I stood.

Sure, never till my latest breath  
shall I forget that look.  
It seemed to charge me with His death,  
though not a word He spoke.

A second look He gave,  
which said, "I freely all forgive;  
My blood was for thy ransom paid,  
I died that thou mayest live."

CONCLUSION:

Have you ever heard someone argue that God made me this way? I have. It is the ultimate cop-out. Qoheleth's

strongest conclusion in this seventh chapter is the last verse: "**This only have I found:** God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."

Yes, even mature Christians still struggle against sin. In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul confesses his struggle with the sinful nature within him. He wonders why he does the things he hates and fails to do the things he wants to do. Then in the first verse of Romans chapter eight, we have a glorious promise. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And Romans 8:37 (NIV84) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Here is the beauty of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not us. We cannot be wise enough. We cannot be good enough. It is not because of what we do. **There is no sufficiency in our selves.** Our righteousness is because of what God has already done through Jesus, His only begotten and beloved Son.

From that well, springs a life of gratitude. The more we celebrate what God has done in us, the greater work He will do. We are, as scripture declares, new creations in Christ Jesus. We are to live into the adversity and the blessings because both are from God. We trust God. We revere God. What happens within us during our Pilgrim journey is that the sinful nature gets displaced as the image of God is manifested in our very essence.

It can never be us. We must become less as Jesus becomes greater.

Amen and amen. Let us pray.

#### 40 Prayers of Lent: "Self-confidence" by David Clowes

Father, forgive our self-confidence, our foolish self-reliance, and our empty self-satisfaction which is lost in the first wave of defeat.

Forgive us the poverty of our faith and the weakness of our hold on you which is too easily broken by pain and despair.

Forgive us our too easy victories and our desire to win friends and influence people that is crushed by the first word of critical comment.

Forgive us and keep us from self-pity when things go wrong and give us your mercy, your hope, and a share in Christ's victory of love.

Give us the strength to support one another, the power to grow in faith, and the love and determination to offer hope to our neighbours.

In the name of Christ the Lord, who sets us free. **Amen.**