

## **I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For**

Ecclesiastes 7:23-29

An Irish poet once lamented in song, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." That's a frustrating existence—to give yourself to the pursuit of something that continually eludes you. Whether it's something as simple but annoying as losing your keys when you're already late, or more significant like chasing a dream that never seems to present an opportunity, or whether you're following some longing in your heart, and you don't even know what it is, but you know you won't be satisfied until you find it—it's frustrating and discouraging to always be seeking but never finding.

But then there's that sometimes happy experience when you find something that you weren't looking for. You're digging through the pencil drawer for your keys and you discover a \$20 bill. You volunteer for something because someone needs help, and you discover your passion and life calling. But of course not everything we discover by accident is happy. Sometimes it's not a \$20 bill you find in the drawer, but an overdue bill for \$200. Or you go in for a routine physical and walk out with a heart disease diagnosis.

That experience—looking for something you can't find, but finding something worse in the process—pretty much describes Solomon's experience in Ecclesiastes 7:23-29. We've been in this book for several months, following him as he tries to make sense of how life works under the sun—in the realm of our daily experience—what we see and do and whether anything we do can provide lasting gain and significance. He set out in the beginning of this book to find wisdom—to put all the pieces of life together and figure out how it works, so that he would know how to find lasting satisfaction in this life. But of course what he's found so far is that there is no lasting gain and significance in what we do day in and day out under the sun. Apart from God and his work, there's nothing new, nothing that lasts, nothing that satisfies, and nothing that ultimately makes sense. And so the Preacher still hasn't found what he's looking for, as he says in 7:23-24:

All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

Like a ship lost at sea, trying to find its bearings under an overcast sky—you plumb the depths, send your measuring instruments down to find out how deep the sea is where you're at, and you literally can't fathom it. It's too deep. You look through the telescope, scanning the horizon for land, but you see nothing. It's too far off. You can't find it out. That's not to say that there isn't a bottom, or land off in the distance somewhere, but it's beyond your comprehension. And so as Solomon has sought to figure out how life works, the "scheme of things," he has discovered that it is too grand, too big, too mysterious for him to take it all in. Which forces him, and us, to

depend on the God who designed it and who is at work to accomplish all his purposes according to his sovereign will and power.

But then Solomon reports to us three things that he has found in his elusive search for wisdom, what you might call three incidental finds—things he wasn't looking for but discovered in the process. And none of them are happy. In essence, what the Preacher discovers is that though we can't make sense of the grand scheme of how life works, the one thing we can be sure of is that people are sinners. That's the focus of this passage.

Now that's not a happy subject. Who wants to think about that for 35 minutes on a Sunday morning—that everyone you're sitting next to, everyone you trust and love, is a dirty rotten sinner just like you? That all humanity has thrown off God's rule and sought to live life on their own terms, often in direct disobedience to God. That's what "sin" means. That's not much fun to think about. But then again, most of what Solomon has forced us to think about in this book hasn't been fun. But it's been *real*. It's been *honest*. And it's given voice to many of the frustrations and quiet wrestlings of our hearts as we try to make our way through life. So it might not be such a bad thing after all to think carefully this morning about what it actually looks like and means that *humanity is fallen in sin*.

It's important to be honest about this realization, lest we are taken off guard by the lure of sin, or else devastated when we realize our friends and those closest to us are sinners as well. But most importantly, unless we're honest about the sinfulness of sin, we will never fully grasp the sufficiency of God's grace in the cross, which is our only hope for navigating life in a fallen world while we look to the glory of God's heavenly new creation.

As we travel through life in a fallen world, a world stained by sin, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to make sense of all that we experience. But one thing we are guaranteed to find is that people are sinners. That's the essence of the three incidental discoveries Solomon made while searching for his all-elusive wisdom. He reminds us of his goal again in v. 25: "I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness." You can hear the diligence and commitment of his study—he set his heart to know and search out and seek. He has not been sitting in an armchair and casually musing about the meaning of life. He rolled up his sleeves and dove head first into life to try and sort it all out, to find "the scheme of things"—the grand design and pattern of how it all works, both wisdom and its benefits and foolishness and its liabilities. We saw some of this exploration up close in chs 1-6, and especially ch. 2. But again, it's been elusive. He still hasn't found what he's looking for. As he says in v. 27, describing one of the things he did find in his search, "Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. . ." (7:27-28). There again you see the diligence of his study, adding one thing to another in order to find the scheme of things—how life works, something his soul has sought over and over yet has not found.

So what has he found? He describes three things in this passage. First, he found the bitterness of being enslaved to sin.

1. *The Bitterness of Being Enslaved to Sin, vv. 25-26*

Verse 25 again: “I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her” (7:25-26).

The description of this woman sounds a lot like the adulteress or forbidden woman in Proverbs, who goes on the prowl after the young fool, seeking to enslave him:

She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home; <sup>12</sup> now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait. <sup>13</sup> She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, <sup>14</sup> "I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows; <sup>15</sup> so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you. <sup>16</sup> I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen; <sup>17</sup> I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. <sup>18</sup> Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love. <sup>19</sup> For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey; <sup>20</sup> he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home." <sup>21</sup> With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. <sup>22</sup> All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast <sup>23</sup> till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life. (Prov. 7:11-23)

One thing the Preacher has found in his search is the bitterness of being enslaved to sin. It's more bitter than death.

Now he describes this enslavement using the image of the forbidden woman, but make no mistake, sinful predators come in both male and female. Most Old Testament wisdom literature, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, is written from the vantage of a king giving instruction to his son (e.g. Prov. 1:1, 8; 2:1; 3:1). So the temptations warned against are often framed relative to men. But sin is an equal opportunity employer, and men are just as prone to taking advantage of women, if not more so.

But the emphasis here is not on who commits sin, but how sin works—entrapment and enslavement. Look again at the language: her “heart is *snares* and *nets*,” the kinds of things you use to trap unsuspecting animals. Her “hands are *fetters*,” that is, shackles and chains—the kinds of things you use to keep your prey as prisoner once you've caught it. That's how sin works.

First it lures us, appealing to what are often legitimate desires in our hearts, but offering illegitimate ways of fulfilling them. For instance, sexual intimacy is a legitimate desire; it was God's idea. But he also provided the proper place for it—marriage between a man and a woman. God's commandments always reflect God's purposes, and sex has a purpose in marriage—it's part of the picture of the union between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Cor. 6:15-20). Sin entices us to fulfill that desire in illegitimate ways—to seek satisfaction outside of marriage, which not only disregards God's rule but ruins the picture.

But sin doesn't stop there. Once it lures us in, it springs the trap and captures us. It enslaves us, such that we can't escape. That is Satan's goal—to enslave us to sin, so that we serve his purposes instead of God's. And as Solomon says, “the sinner is taken by her.” Those who have

no regard for God and his ways will fall quickly and pleasantly into the trap. They think they are finally free to experience all they want in life. But as one author describes, “Their exhilarating sensation of liberty is only temporary—a free fall with death at the end of it.”<sup>1</sup>

But “the one who pleases God escapes her” (v. 26). Those who know God and walk according to his ways will find a way out. But that raises a huge question, especially after what we saw last week in ch. 7:20: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” What about the fact that we’re all sinners? What hope do we have for being rescued from sin’s rule over our lives?

Great sinners, such as we, need an even greater Savior. And that’s who Jesus Christ is. Jesus rescues us from sin first by canceling the debt of sin that we owe to God. Our sin, our rebellion against God stirs God’s holy anger. He is the king of heaven and earth, and when we throw off his rule, we commit treason against his throne—a treason punishable by eternal death. But Christ steps in our place, living a life of perfect obedience before his Father, and taking on himself the punishment we deserved for our sin, that he might cancel our debt—declare us ‘not guilty.’ When we trust in Christ, and place all our hope in him, this forgiveness and freedom is ours forever. Author Jerry Bridges describes more fully:

. . . not only has the debt been fully paid, *there is no possibility of going into debt again*. Jesus paid the debt of all our sins: past, present, and future. As Paul said in Colossians 2:13, “[God] forgave us all our sins.” We don’t have to start all over again and try to keep the slate clean. There is no more slate. . . . This is true not only for our justification, but for our Christian lives as well. God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance. The score has already been permanently settled by Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus rescues us from sin by canceling the debt once and for all for everyone who believes. But second, Jesus rescues us from sin’s power by giving us his Holy Spirit, who changes our lives to look more and more like Jesus in how we live and think and act. Just as Christ resisted temptation, so the Spirit helps us to resist it, even to flee from it. As 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (NIV). When we’re tempted, are we looking for the way out? Or are we trying to get as close as we can to the fire without getting burned? Beware of the trap. Sin is not your friend. It doesn’t keep its promises. And there’s not a single one of us who is immune.

In this fallen world, we will sin, and we will be sinned against. In Jesus there is grace for sinners, and shelter from sin’s assault.

Solomon’s second incidental find comes in vv. 27-28, the rarity of trustworthy friends.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God’s Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991, 2008), p. 20. Kindle Edition.

## 2. *The Rarity of Trustworthy Friends*, vv. 27-28

Verse 27: “Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.” While Solomon didn’t find the scheme of things and the mystery of life, he did discover that people are generally untrustworthy—that in his search for a wise or virtuous person, he found one man in a thousand, and no women.

Now, why does he say that he could find one man in a thousand, but not a single woman? That just sounds rude. Some even take it as misogynistic. It’s a legitimate question. As we wrestle with that question, we need to keep in mind the whole counsel of God—that God made both male and female in his image, that they are equal before God, with complementary roles in the marriage and church. It’s also good to observe here that neither men nor women are painted in a positive light—one in a thousand is not much better than none in a thousand. But most importantly, we need to recognize that the Preacher is not making universal claims about how men and women work, but reporting his personal experience. If in fact the Preacher is Solomon, this makes sense. As one author notes, “in his own search, Solomon had found virtually no men of integrity at his court, and in the rest of his study, conducted largely with the lights down low, he found no women of integrity in his harem”<sup>3</sup>—one thousand women: 700 wives, and 300 concubines, whom the Lord told him not to take, and who ultimately turned his heart away from the Lord (cf. 1 Kgs. 11:3). The point here is that in this life, be assured that people will let you down.

This is scary for us to think about. It’s hard to let ourselves trust others if we’re afraid that they might betray that trust. We want to live life with our guard up, keeping others at arm’s length so as to avoid being hurt. And yet, as we’ve seen elsewhere in this book, we were made for community with each other. Chapter four told us that if we looking for lasting gain in our relationships, we will be disappointed. There’s only one Savior, and it’s not your spouse, not your child, not your friend or neighbor, and certainly not your pastor. But that doesn’t mean we don’t need each other. That chapter also reminded us we were made for community. But the only thing that makes community work when everyone involved is a sinner is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Christ, we can be honest about our fears, our weaknesses, and the sin in our relationships, because God’s grace provides an adequate solution to deal with our sin and grow us in our relationship with God and others. If Jesus died not only for our sins, but the sins committed against us; if his grace not only rescues us from the penalty of our own sin but gives us the strength to love others as he loved us, then we can risk loving and being loved, knowing full well that at some point we will be let down, but knowing just as well that Christ will never let us down. As one of the hymns says, “Foes may hate and friends disown me; Show thy face and all is bright.”<sup>4</sup>

In this fallen world, we can be sure that being enslaved to sin is more bitter than death, that trustworthy friends can be hard to find. Praise God that Christ deals with both of these. Finally,

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Lyte, “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken.”

v. 29 gives us Solomon's third incidental find, and really his summary conclusion to this section, *that humanity's rebellion against God is the root of that's broken in life under the sun.*

### *3. The Root of All Brokenness in Life: Humanity's Rebellion Against God, v. 29*

Verse 29: "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." God did not design humans to live in disobedience to him. He certainly made them with the capacity to rebel, but as Solomon wrestled to discover how life works and what's wrong with the world, found this foundational truth, that God made humans "upright," morally good. He made them in his own image and likeness, which expresses our relationship to God as children, but also the way we are to reflect his character as we serve his kingdom. Sin and rebellion is not the way it's supposed to be. But ever since the beginning humans have, as the Preacher puts it, "sought out many schemes." In other words, since the early hours of creation we have been plotting our rebellion against God's design and our overthrow of his throne, trying to find away to topple him off and replace him with ourselves. Every one of us, in the darkest corner of our hearts, thinks that in some way we would do a better job running this world than God. God designed us to be like him, but we have been rebels from birth.

And so the reason the world doesn't work the way it's supposed to, the way God designed it, is because human sin has messed the whole thing up. God designed this world for life; when we rebelled, we brought on ourselves the punishment of death. God designed this world that we might find satisfaction in him; in response to our sin he gave it over to futility, vanity, vapor (Rom. 8:20-21). He designed this world for peace, *shalom*; sin has brought strife and brokenness—the fracturing of lives, relationships, our bodies, our societies, and most importantly, our relationship with God.

But what we have spoiled in our sin, God is putting back together in Christ. Jesus followed God's design perfectly. He never rebelled, never sought his own kingdom in place of his Father's. And so Jesus alone was qualified to be a perfect substitute for our sin. Moreover, because he is God's eternal Son, he alone is able to conquer sin and death through his resurrection. He secured that victory when he rose from the grave on the third day. When he returns he will claim that victory forever, and sin, death, and Satan will be no more. The world will be put to rights, God's people will dwell forever in his presence, and we will finally be completely free to do what we were designed to do—worship God forever.

If we are looking to figure out all the mysteries of how life works, wisdom and the scheme of things, we're going to be looking for a long time and eventually join in Bono's lament. Moreover, we're not always going to like what we find instead. But if in our attempt to sort it all out, we look to Christ, we will find the hope, the perspective, the joy we need to make our way through a fallen world, knowing that even though sin is powerful, Christ is greater still.