

## **A Guide To The Reader**

*Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.*

### **Ecclesiastes 7**

7.1. Much of this chapter is almost like a chapter of Proverbs, though the sermon style peeps through, as, for example, at verses 13, 23 and 27.

At Proverbs 22.1 Solomon uses a different picture, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches,” but it is true that once someone’s reputation is besmirched, even if a person’s name is cleared, some defilement always seems to cling in the minds of many affecting their attitude towards such an one. It should not be so, but lingering doubt is not easy to get rid of and must be prayed about if our relationships are to be right. The series of proverbs in verses 1-4 all have some allusion to sorrow and mourning.

When the preacher could say that the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth it reveals that life and hope are what has been dealt a blow by backsliding. There is, of course, a sense in which the day of death is better. It signals the entry into glory for a believer. The completion of one’s allotted tasks on earth is clearly more satisfactory than training for them and beginning them, when the outcome is in doubt. But no one stepping out into new things, beginning school, university, a career or starting a new home will begin without excitement, hope and energy. So we must note two things particularly from this verse. Firstly, that life, spiritual life, and hope are the casualties when we backslide. And, secondly, that if the end is to be better than the beginning we must pursue our faith to the last. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2.10).

7.2. Again, the same parameters must be understood here. More advantage is to be had from a funeral service if we lay to heart concerning the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to a glorious life after death for eternity. The party, the pleasant social gathering, is mostly just for the pleasure it gives at the time, though it may serve to build proper relationships. A believer may enjoy these gatherings; whereas an all-night partygoer may abuse them. Let us take every available opportunity to consider the “issues from death” (Psalm 68.20) and the issues of life (Proverbs 4.23).

7.3. If our laughter is mere escapism or the snigger of a guilty or unbelieving conscience (Genesis 18.12-13) then it is a betrayal of what laughter is all about. There is a time to laugh (Ecclesiastes 3.4). It is true, however, that the Lord does choose to use our sorrows to draw us closer than ever to the Saviour and that embrace will brace us to new endeavours with renewed hope.

7.4. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6.21-22) prefacing it with the words, “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.” The house of mourning may cause us to meditate on eternal things but it should not be our only stimulant to do so. It is certainly foolish to avoid facing our mortality and what will happen to us after death, which has the judgment of God upon our lives hot upon its heels.

7.5. Would you prefer to listen to a song or a rebuke. The one is entertainment. The other medicine. The one is soon forgotten; the other has within it the seed-germ of helping us to make a new beginning.

7.6. Thorn bushes were frequently used as firewood. They burned with a crackling sound and splattered their incendiary sparks dangerously and without warning in any direction. A fool’s laughter is loose, irreverent and may defile or harm speaker and hearer alike. All to no purpose. Let believers redeem the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5.16).

7.7. Continual, unremitting stress of any sort may test the patience and cause a person to “break,” to act spontaneously against all his better nature. In the same way a bribe may cause even the wisest to waver; it undermines the most strongly held convictions as to what is right. These are both temptations to be resisted. This verse bears some resemblance in its handling of temptation to Proverbs 30.8-9, “give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.”

7.8. Sportspersons sometimes brag before a contest concerning how they will destroy the opposition and, to their shame, it doesn’t always turn out as they have predicted. It would have been better not to have boasted at all. Not until all our aims and ideals have been completed are we in a position to look back; or, after our death, others are able to make a true assessment of our lives. But what counts, of course, is the evaluation our Saviour makes of our lives. To be patient in spirit is the fruit, the end of a lifetime’s apprenticeship in practising humility and meekness in all sorts of situations. By nature we are proud, and the patience represents the end of that particular “thing”, the pursuit of humble waiting upon the Lord.

7.9. Hastiness of response together with anger are two common natural traits which, combined, are an explosive mix. It is foolish to nurture these in our hearts. David was greatly helped by Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 22-23; it is worth studying the whole of 1 Samuel 25 to see the build-up to such a situation, for such a hasty and angry response can easily catch us out in the most unexpected of incidents.

7.10. Firstly, we have to note that the older we get, the more likely we are to look back fondly upon the earlier days of our lives and feel that things are not what they were. A common way of expressing it is to declare, perhaps, that “the country has gone to pot.” Historians may in after years assess it that one period in the life of a country was nobler than another; but, by and large, we are too near to events to make an objective evaluation. We are too influenced by feelings; we “feel” that things are worse, which they may or may not be.

Secondly, as we say, comparisons are odious. That is, if we restrict ourselves to unfavourable comparisons. It is not improper and would be a wiser enquiry to be asking how we can improve ourselves, by attaining higher standards of faith.

Thirdly, our eternal reward (2 Corinthians 4.17) is forged out of the very circumstances of whatever sort in which our lives are placed. It is to no advantage to us whether earlier days were better or worse. But the real problem of this question concerning the former days is that it fortifies an already critical spirit which should have no place in our lives and certainly should not be nurtured.

7.11. A little bit more of the cynicism of the backslider comes across here. Is wisdom only of service with an inheritance? Can it not be exercised without one? Does not the Lord Jesus Christ bestow His wisdom upon the foolish things of the world. Read again 1 Corinthians 1.24-31, especially noting verse 30.

7.12. Wisdom is not to be compared with money; “she is more precious than rubies” (Proverbs 3.15). The best commentary on this verse is to read Proverbs 3.1-26.

7.13. The Lord Jesus Christ made the crooked straight (Luke 13.11-13) in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 40.4. This is in itself a declaration that He, and only He, being the Son of God, is able to change crooked natures by dealing with the sin within and to create new life, a new birth.

7.14. The day of adversity is a time for taking stock, praying and meditating. What is the Lord saying to me? Am I to take a new direction? How may I draw closer to the Saviour? How may I have a closer walk with Him, more daily guidance? Considering our ways (Haggai 1.5,7) may entail asking questions of ourselves, as is the case in Haggai’s prophecy. In verse 13 we were encouraged to consider an aspect of God’s creation; in this verse something of His providence in our lives.

“To the end that man should find nothing after him.” Our lives should be complete in themselves. Not what we bequeath to others should be our concern. Nor our unfinished labours. The aim of our reconsideration at any given point of our lives is to apply ourselves to the wisdom of knowing what the Lord requires of us in any particular day. Thus shall our lives fulfil their potential.

7.15. “The days of my vanity” may mean the “days of my backsliding,” for it is Solomon’s backsliding which has led him to consider the emptiness of things, the meaninglessness of things out of Christ and, how, without Christ, sin takes up once again a disproportionate time in our lives – for God has given much that is healthily good to appreciate. However, if the use of “vanity” here points us to his backsliding, it may be that we may consider each of his uses of “vanity” throughout as referring principally to backsliding. It is backsliding that gives a jaundiced view of life, of the Christian faith and of others. It is backsliding that undermines life and hope. So long has Solomon been in this state of backsliding that he is able to say in this verse that he has seen all things during the time of his backsliding. He has seen everything from this lower, debased perspective. He can see injustice, and how, not infrequently, a just man perishes in his righteousness – murdered ignominiously, toppled perhaps from his

position of influence by an evil regime, his study and learning gone to waste. But backsliding loses the perspective that, in the Lord's hands, these things bring judgment at the day of judgment upon the wicked, being called into evidence against them; and bring redemption in the person of the Saviour whose atoning death brings in His people's salvation. A believer's life is utterly founded upon the merits of the Saviour's death. A falling away from the Saviour inevitably brings in its wake a despair concerning the triumph of righteousness over evil in any situation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

7.16. Can you be too righteous? Too wise? We may be too "wise in our own conceits" (Romans 11.25; 12.16). We may be self-righteous, but, then, we should not be that at all, let alone overmuch. The destruction spoken of here is the destruction of isolation when people avoid us because of our insufferable pomposity which does, in fact, destroy us. We should not affect wisdom, righteousness or any other good thing but in "the simplicity that is in Christ" "let each esteem other better than themselves" (Philippians 2.3).

7.17. Again, the same parameters hold good here. Should we turn a blind eye to allow some wickedness knowingly in our lives? It does not say overmuch foolish, but there is some sense of implication of that. Wickedness may lead to the death sentence and certainly, without repentance, to everlasting damnation. And folly may lead to an early death, through carelessness of our health, putting ourselves into unwise or dangerous situations unnecessarily or by indulgent living or immoral practices.

7.18. Here is a general principle, elegantly expressed. "It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all." Let us take heed to the word of God; let us not be selective in the things we obey from His word, and the things we don't as it suits us. Let us master the things which are wise and sensible; for the scriptures never lead astray and always strengthen our hand. Deliverance from all our troubles is by the Lord of the scriptures (Luke 1.74).

7.19. The word of the Lord revealed to one person will be of more avail than a committee. But the contrast here is principally that wisdom is better than might. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4.6). The Spirit of the Lord controls the hearts and minds of thousands with ease, and to walk in His ways and under His direction, through the scriptures of which He is the author, is to know spiritual power.

7.20. As has been observed before, the best of men is but man at best. All good, whether good intentions, good motives or worthy achievements are flawed, for example, by pride. The nearer one is to the Lord Jesus Christ the more we appreciate this truth; whereas an unbeliever will think that he is all right, and will find difficulty with the words, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psalm 14.3; 53.1; Romans 3.12).

7.21. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the day of Christ when, among other things, "all that watch for iniquity are cut off: that make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought" (Isaiah 29.20-21). Ignoring, taking no notice of everything that is said about us is best practice. It is a good policy. As we say, "what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve about" and similarly what the ear does not hear will be of no significance to us. Some words that are spoken may foment

rebellion in a nation and undermine true government; but as a general rule for the private individual this is good instruction. One rash word overheard may turn our hearts against somebody concerning whom there is no reason, apart from this one little thing, to have ill-feeling.

7.22. The words of the Lord Jesus Christ are apt here. "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7.1-3). Granted that our brother has faults; but the Lord sees that we have greater faults than those we see in him.

7.23. See what backsliding has done. The Lord had said to Solomon, "lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like unto thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee" (1 Kings 3.12). He has thrown it all away, so that he is constrained to say that wisdom was something that was far from him. He did repent and was restored to close fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and was enabled to write the Song of Solomon. If we have thrown our advantages away, let us repent, for the Lord our God is merciful and will "restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten" (Joel 2.25).

7.24-26. There are some depths which are best not peered into. There were some in Thyatira which pretended to secrets in religion only divulged to the initiated. They claimed that theirs was a really deep religion. They spoke of depths; Christ calls their doings "depths of Satan" (Revelation 2.19-25). "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof..." (Genesis 3.6). And what was the wisdom which she discovered? That she and her husband were naked! (Genesis 3.7). To indulge in disobedience to the Lord's revealed word brings only shame, not wisdom. Now this is the wisdom which Solomon sought at this stage (for his initial wisdom was a gift and needed no seeking), a wisdom which mixes the good with the evil - with dire consequences.

Why did he want to know by experience the wickedness of folly? This is no wisdom; certainly not Christ's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1.30) where that wisdom is linked with sanctification.

Just as Adam and his wife discovered that they were naked as a result of their disobedient pursuit of wisdom, so Solomon finds (doubtless from experience) the bitterness of the opportunistic predatory instincts of the adulteress, the harlot. "Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her."

7.27-28. It is stated rather cynically, implying that women are not so favoured with wisdom and trustworthiness as men, that in a sample of one thousand he found but one man and no women who could be considered right towards God. Another sample might have discovered ten women and no men. It is a jaundiced view owing to sin.

One believer among a thousand is not many viewed from one perspective; but, among the billions of the earth, neither is it rare. We must most certainly ensure by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we are "one in a thousand." A preacher (messenger) and teacher (interpreter)

(Job 33.23) may be one among a thousand, but the Saviour is the “chiefest among ten thousand” (Song of Solomon 5.10).

Man has fallen and made many inventions, that is, substitute religions. It began with Cain who substituted his choice of the fruit of the ground rather than the Lord’s chosen way of sacrifice by blood, which pointed to the coming Saviour (Genesis 4.3-4; Hebrews 11.4). Invented religion is powerfully exposed at 1 Kings 12.32-33 where the feast at Bethel was in imitation of the sanctioned feast at Jerusalem. The latter was on the fifteenth day of the seventh month; the imitation looked almost the same but the devil was in the altered detail. So it is with all false religion. Read 1 Kings 12.25-33 and see the seeds which, being sown, led the king to substitute a false religion.

“My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2.13).

All man-made religions are from below, whereas the faith which is in Christ Jesus is revealed from heaven above. They are leaky and impart no life.

When in Jeremiah 6.16 the Lord bids us, “stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein” we are given to understand that even in those days there was a massive declension from the true, revealed faith from heaven. That declension began, following Adam’s fall, with the false worship which Cain offered which, in its turn, led to murder. False religion has never ceased from that time onwards and we have to do a reality check ourselves and ask which path we are on.

The picture in Jeremiah is of standing at a major crossroads. A crossroads in our life, perhaps. But all the options are new roads, picturing modernizing tendencies in religion. The one who asks knows that there were earlier “green lanes” once trodden by many, but now they are all but obliterated. They are to ask if anyone remembers where they are located and, when found, if anyone will join them on the old abandoned paths. But, when discovered, nobody wants to take the narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7.14). The way revealed by the Lord in His holy scriptures is too demanding, too narrow. The modern roads are easier, though they rush people to destruction (Matthew 7.13). They are unwilling to forsake their sin, their culture or their generation to tread the paths the fathers trod.

“They have sought out many inventions.” There is one sphere where to be modern is no advance. And that is in the sphere of worshipping God and of pleasing Him by our lives. That way was revealed from the beginning. The salvation which is through the Lord Jesus Christ is shown straight after the fall, at Genesis 3.15. Speaking of the seed that is to come, that is Jesus Christ (Galatians 3.16), the Lord declares that He will defeat Satan, though Satan will accomplish His death, by the power of His atoning blood and by His resurrection. “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15 21-22). This is the ancient way declared by God from the beginning. There is no other. Invented substitutes will not save anyone. Only the Lord Jesus Christ saves. “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).