

Ecclesiastes 7:23-26

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The snares of folly can destroy us. And although wisdom is a mystery, trusting in God is better for us than the alternatives.

Solomon lets us know that he has *tested* the previous insights *by wisdom*. He once again discloses his self-talk. He told himself, *I will be wise*, then proceeded to pursue his investigations. However, he found *it was far from me*. As we saw earlier in Ecclesiastes, the wisest man alive, with ample resources to make all the investigations his heart desired, was not able to understand the mysteries of life. The deep questions of life remained *remote and exceedingly mysterious*.

Solomon has told us this many times now, in a number of different ways. Why the repetition? This likely demonstrates Solomon's wisdom. In our modern age, we have re-learned the importance of repetition in learning. We could have observed it from Solomon's example.

What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious fits the entire book of Ecclesiastes so far, but particularly the realities in the immediate context. Namely, that humans are prone to sin but also capable of living wisely. And those who live wisely still sin. Further, it is not always the right action to correct someone who is erring. You can end up doing them no good and yourself harm.

Solomon's statement in verse 16 to "not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise" seems to fit the description of an insight that is *exceedingly mysterious*. This statement means each situation has its own solution of what righteousness looks like and how it is applied wisely. All in the context of an unchanging God who has spoken truth that is unchanging. We simply can't sit in God's chair and see with His eyes. We have to rely on faith and recognize our fallibility as well as that of our fellow humans.

After his investigation, Solomon concludes, *Who can discover it?* Solomon piled up thinking-words to introduce his attempt to research, *discover*, and know. He *directed* his *mind* (literally, "turned about my mind"), *to investigate, to seek, and to know*.

He is searching for an *explanation*. The Hebrew word used here is “cheshbown” and is found nowhere else in Scripture other than twice in [Ecclesiastes 7](#), a fact that speaks to the beauty and uniqueness of the book. Solomon is trying to find a reason, an *explanation*, using all of his faculties. The basic idea of this word involves the use of the mind not so much in comprehending information, but in *understanding*, or “devising” a why. Of course, the problem he comes up against is that God’s thoughts (lit. “devisings”—[Isaiah 55:9](#)) are higher than ours—which leaves our understanding woefully deficient.

The object of Solomon’s investigation is the *evil* (wickedness) of *folly* and the *foolishness* of *madness*. Solomon mirrors his list of searching-words with a list of the problems he is searching to resolve.

The word translated *folly* in the phrase *the evil of folly* is “kecel.” It is translated in a variety of ways—“loins” in Leviticus, “confidence” in Job and Proverbs, “foolishness” here in Ecclesiastes, as well as certain verses in Psalms. The word seems to have a sense of hoping or longing. Solomon is apparently observing that many human desires lead us to *folly*.

The *evil of folly* seems to be connected with the *foolishness of madness*. Someone is “mad” when they behave in a manner that does not fit with the true cause-effect nature of the world around them. They refuse to see things as they truly are. Current reality is not welcome. They prefer to live in a false reality. Unfortunately, Solomon is pointing out to us that this is normal human behavior. And he, the wisest of men, sought to investigate and understand, but failed.

One area we know Solomon failed miserably was in the arena of women. In spite of his wisdom he was led astray from following God’s ways, as we learn in [1 Kings 11:4](#):

“For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”

Perhaps Solomon refers to his personal life in providing an example of something *more bitter than death*—the *woman whose heart is snares and nets*, whose *hands are chains*. The threat of the seductress is an important theme in Proverbs ([Proverbs 2:16-19](#); [5:1-6](#); [7:7-27](#)). Solomon himself succumbed to the *snares and nets*.

It is interesting to note that both *wisdom* and *folly* are personified as being feminine in Proverbs ([Proverbs 9:13-18](#); [Proverbs 1:20](#)). Solomon's observation can be applied to foolishness in general. In the example of the seductress, her *snares and nets* imply a quarry being trapped and controlled. The seductress has use for her quarry. There is no love. No benefit for the prey. Yet the bait for the *snares and nets* is the promise of love and affection. Of pleasure and fulfillment. What the prey gets instead is *more bitter than death*.

This is true of any sin. The offer is some great benefit, the meeting of some deep human need. The actual result is *death*. The Apostle Paul states this principle in blunt terms, telling us that the "wages" or consequences of sin is death ([Romans 6:23](#)). It is worth noting that Solomon does not speak in terms of right and wrong but of "wise" and "foolish." The biblical emphasis is on our personal benefit. What path we can seek that actually serves our self-interest. Our true self-interest is best served by setting aside fleshly appetites, *folly*, such as lust for the *woman with snares and nets*.

Solomon also tells us that the seductress' *hands are chains*. *Chains* provide another metaphor to describe capture. Perhaps the desire to have the touch and caress of her *hands* creates an addiction to her pleasures, which leads to an end *more bitter than death*. The Apostle Paul also describes a choice to walk in sin as a choice to live in slavery ([Romans 6:15-16](#)).

However, as is often the case in Ecclesiastes, Solomon points to an *escape*. *The one who pleases God will escape her*. Solomon did not discern the mysteries of life. But he did find that there is a way to *escape folly*! We cannot fully comprehend why we have these appetites, these longings for pleasure (in this example for sexual pleasure). And they so easily lead us to a consequence *more bitter than death*. How can it be that pursuing what seems like freedom ends up trapping us in *chains* of addiction, while setting aside those pleasures to *please God* brings actual fulfillment? It seems backward.

But that is the way it is. Life is a mystery, a paradox. A vapor. Solomon points us to wisdom. But it rests on trusting God rather than our own understanding. As Solomon will state in [Proverbs 3:5-6](#),

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight."

It seems the desires we feel most readily will lead us to ruin. But if we set those aside and pursue an even deeper desire, then we find what we seek. Our deepest desire is something we only discover through walking in trust. Our deepest desire is in *pleasing God*. And when we walk in a manner that is *pleasing to God*, God will provide a means of *escape* from the aspects of life that are *folly* and *madness*.

Biblical Text:

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? 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.