

Season 9: Ecclesiastes

Episode 1: Ecclesiastes: Life Shaped by Eternity

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Felicity: Welcome to two sisters and a cup of tea. My name is Felicity and I'm in the States and this is my sister Sarah. She's in the UK. And we are delighted to welcome you to the first episode of season nine. We, as ever, are going to be opening up our Bible, sipping a cup of tea, munching on a biscuit and getting into the Book of Ecclesiastes. We're excited, aren't we, Sarah?

Sarah: So excited. It's really good to be back. It feels like it's been a long break and we are ready and excited to get into this.

Felicity: Absolutely. What is in your cup or on your munching plate?

Sarah: I'm so glad you asked! So we both grew up in Dorset. I say both as in people might not know. We are actually sisters. We grew up in a place called Dorset, which is on the south coast of England. I've got some Dorset tea that I bought this summer. Dorset's kind of known for its kind of foodie. Nice things, isn't it? So I went to the village farm shop and bought some Dorset tea and it's foraged fruits and I have to say it's very good. I think a couple of years ago, when we started this podcast, I was quite skeptical of all the kind of herbal fruit teas and thought, no, not my thing. But I'm a convert. Two years in and I am loving this.

Felicity: I'm still to be converted. The fact that you chose foraged fruits from the farm shop, what we're talking about? Farm shop is like very rural. It's very lovely, isn't it, really? Dorset and produces good tea. Well, good to know.

Sarah: I'm not sure about forage because you don't really know where that's come from either, do you? Like it's? Just found. Foraged means found, really, doesn't it?

Felicity: Which is a good F word. Alliteration foraged foods. I mean, that makes a good name, doesn't it?

Sarah: It does, yeah. What have you got?

Felicity: Well, my greatest kind of revelation is what a sad thing that's happened this summer is that I've realized that I most likely shouldn't eat gluten, which is problematic when you think about biscuits. But what I have in front of me is actually a surprisingly good gluten free chocolate hobnob.

Sarah: Oh, a chocolate one?

Felicity: Yes. It's interesting because the chocolate is on the bottom rather than the top.

Sarah: Did you know that, actually? That is how they make them. That is how we should eat hobnobs with the chocolate. Yes. I was reading the other day about it.

Felicity: What were you reading? Like hobnob weekly.

Sarah: What was it? Something like that? Yes. They're actually made that's. Controversial, isn't it? But you're meant to eat them with a chocolate at the bottom. So you must feel like you're on this kind of journey of a whole new biscuit exploration without gluten. That's exciting. I think it is exciting, and I'm.

Felicity: Sure we have listeners out there who might be able to help me on this journey. What's the next step after the hobnob?

Sarah: That's the question, isn't it? Brilliant. Feed in if you know the answer.

Felicity: Yes, please.

Sarah: Okay. So we're getting into Ecclesiastes. Christie, we're excited, aren't we? But I think we're coming at this not with the answers, but with a whole heap of questions. Would you agree?

Felicity: I wholeheartedly agree. We've taken on a challenge here. I feel like we say that most books, but this one many questions.

Sarah: Yeah, I think so far it's been a humbling and challenging read. We're looking forward to it. It's kind of been marinating over our hearts in the summer, hasn't it? But it is hard. It's not a succinct book that you can kind of understand quickly, and yet in it, it holds a kind of treasure trove of wisdom that we really need for navigating this world. And we'd love you to come and join us on this journey and come and wrestle through the questions with us. That's what we're going to be doing as we walk through Ecclesiastes, isn't it? We're going to be wrestling through our questions, wrestling through the preacher's questions in this book, and kind of just seeing where we get to.

Felicity: Absolutely. So we, as you say, Sarah, have spent a few weeks, a couple of months kind of marinating in this. But it's a good way of putting it. We've been sitting, coming back and forth to it amongst our summer activities, and we've obviously been in the book as a whole. Sarah, at this point, what is your initial takeaway from reading the book as a whole? How have you been helped to get into it for yourself?

Sarah: That's a good question. I think for me, it's been the thing that the content and the form of the book seem to mirror life itself, in that it's confusing and it's undulating and it's poetic and it's stark. And I think more than that, that at the end of Ecclesiastes, we've got these kind of concluding words and they seem to shape the rest of the book, which kind of mirrors the preacher's main point, that death and eternity shape the rest of life, if that makes sense. So I think that's been something that's been really striking me as I've been reading through that. I need the end of the book to help me understand the rest of the book. So at the end of the book, he specifically talks about the value of the words within this book. So if you could turn to chapter twelve, verse ten. He says these words are true and they are wise. And he calls these words like goads in verse eleven, which is like a prodding stick that shepherds use to keep their sheep in tow. So he's kind of saying we need to be prodded to see the world as this preacher does. And these words bring clarity as well on what my response should be in verse chapter twelve, verse 13. And ultimately these words prepare me for death and eternity. So I think I've been really helped by seeing that the end of the book shapes the rest of it and that actually, that really does mirror life as well. And that excites me because I think there's a whole world to get into in this book in that way. How about you?

Felicity: Well, yeah, that is interesting. And it seems a little kind of somber, doesn't it, to be bringing in death, talking about the end things rather than the kind of right here, right now. But actually that being a key element that as we see that perspective, so everything else falls in. And I think that has been a thing. As I've been in the book, I have been struck by how recognizable this reality is that the teacher presents to us, which is amazing. Every time I pick up the Bible and see something recognizable that I see in my everyday, I think, yes, that is really helpful because it reminds me that the God back in the Old Testament is the same God now, is the same world now. And so this is all relevant right now. And with this book, I thought it was just really clearly the world that I see before me. Which is not to say that it's the happiest scene, because actually our world is frustrating and broken and things don't quite go to plan. And that is reality, isn't it? And it's really reassuring to me that in the Bible we have a picture of that reality and there's no polish. It's not kind of put on your best front, it's just kind of stark. It is what it is. And I love that because it helps me see that God does get it and it isn't too far removed from what I see in front of me. And so it makes me want to read this book for wisdom because that's what it is, isn't it? It's wisdom, literature and as we see that our reality is captured in these words, I think I'm more persuaded that I want to hear the wisdom for this world in front of me, which we're going to get through ecclesiastes. And I think similarly, in that death and eternity have been really

ringing out from the book, which does shape how we view the here and now. But in the midst of it all, the word enjoy is repeated again and again, like the book rings out with enjoyment. Which is so surprising because when you first read the book and if any of our listeners have come across this book before, you read it and you kind of think this is a little bit depressing, but actually, if you read it again and again, the word enjoy and this idea of gift, like God's gift of life, it really does kind of begin to surface.

Sarah: It's really amazing, isn't it? I think the repeated themes of death and joy and how they go together, I think it's going to be quite exciting kind of trying to wrestle that through, because I think our culture doesn't really do that. I think our culture says, Enjoy life now. Don't think about death and the future and eternity. Whereas, yeah, I think it's going to be interesting to see how this perspective is different to what our culture says. Let's go back to the idea of asking questions, because actually the preacher asks lots of questions, doesn't he? In the book, as he goes through Felicity, give us a flavor of what kind of questions he's asking as he walks through this book. Well, in the first chapter, and I.

Felicity: Think this is a really key verse for the book as a whole, chapter one, verse three, he says, what's the point of life and all of this toil and that's the thing, isn't it? Life can feel like toil and so what is the point of it all? If it's fleeting, what is the point of it all? And then he goes on in chapter two, verse three, says, what is good for us to do in this life under the sun during these short lives that we have? What are we supposed to do right here, right now? I think those two questions are really helpful, which then helps us to then think, okay, well, what is it to live life in this world which we can't control? I think that's a big thing that comes throughout the book, is God is most definitely in control. We're not we can't decide when we're going to die, when we're going to which verse is it where he says.

Sarah: It'S in chapter one as well.

Felicity: You can't make crooked paths straight.

Sarah: Yeah. Chapter one, verse 15.

Felicity: Yeah. And that's just it, isn't it? So if we can't change anything in that sense, I can't change the course of my life, then what do I do? What other questions would you add into that?

Sarah: Yeah, big questions. Yeah, there's definitely that kind of how do we live life in that world that eludes our control, doesn't it? I think there's very heartfelt questions about how do I reconcile the brokenness of this world? What I see, the stark reality of injustice and oppression. How do I reconcile that with my experience and my faith in God? What does that look like? I think it's very real and raw questions kind of halfway through the book, and I really appreciated that, even though it feels yeah, it was kind of hard questions to ask. But we need to ask those questions, don't we? What does wisdom look like? What does it look like to live wisely if death could be round the corner, if we are facing it, whether we know it or we don't know it, whether we're unaware of that. I think what struck me probably most, which he doesn't voice this question, but I think the kind of tenor of all his questions seemed to be, how do we live life in a post Genesis three world? How do we live life after the fall where we're not yet in heaven? What does it look like to live and navigate life in a broken world? And how do we kind of navigate that tension between now and eternity? And I feel like that is something that just keeps coming through.

Felicity: Just all really relevant questions, aren't they? I think this book, the teacher who's writing it is posing really relevant questions, like they land in real life. So those are the questions that the person writing the teacher is posing. How about questions that we want to be asking ourselves as we go through this book together? What questions have popped up as you've been in it? Do you want to give us a couple?

Sarah: Yeah, I think that's a really helpful question as well. How are we going to come to this book? I wonder whether our questions need to start with a bigger one of what's my heart posture going to be towards listening to these words of wisdom. Because quite often as I've read through this, this summer, I felt like, oh, this feels uncomfortable and this feels like something I don't often engage with. And I guess one of the questions I need to keep asking, or we need to keep asking ourselves, is, where is this uncomfortable for me and why? How am I tempted to pretend that this just isn't a true view of life and reality? Yeah. What is it like to actually sit under these words and to heed this wisdom and to be prodded in the right direction? Am I willing to let this book do that for me so that I will live more

wisely? Yeah, that's the way that I've been approaching questions that I need to work through.

Felicity: Yeah, that's quite a good kind of thing, isn't it? Am I willing to be prodded? That's like the tagline for the book, am I willing to be goaded, which comes with discomfort as well.

Sarah: Absolutely.

Felicity: And I think a part of that discomfort and the tension lies in the fact that we have this utility and fleetingness of the world in which we live, but then also this idea of deep enjoyment of the things of this world that God offers us, like that he gives us this gift. So what do you do with what we've got in front of you while also holding it in tension with the fact that it is not going to last? And I think that is an ongoing on the ground. Like, what does it look like then in terms of work, in terms of family, in terms of marriage, in terms of just going about our daily business? I think this book really lands in.

Sarah: Our everyday big time and also bigger questions as well, like, where is Jesus in all of like, how do we see Him? How does this point to the glory of Jesus? I'm excited about kind of getting into that and just starting to grapple with that question because it's not wholly obvious.

Felicity: Yeah, that has been the thing we've been battling back and forth, isn't it?

Sarah: Have you found him yet? But then the bigger question of, okay, am I ready? Am I ready to face death and eternity? Like, this is a book that is saying, it's there for your preparation, it's there to make you ready. So am I willing to kind of face? Yeah. Felicity, as we get this book open, I guess one of the questions we need to ask ourselves and for listeners listening on is why should we get this book open? And I'm particularly thinking of the people who are going through a really hard season at the moment. Maybe there are layers of grief that you're wrestling through. Maybe life is just really tough and you're exhausted for many different reasons. Do I really have the capacity to open up a book that's going to be a prod at this point? What would you say to that person who's kind of thinking, oh, I'm not just not sure whether this is the right thing. What's the wisdom there in opening up Ecclesiastes or choosing to do that with us this season?

Felicity: So it's a good question, isn't it? Because when we're in that spot and whether that is a long term spot or just how we're feeling today doesn't feel very appealing to open up a book that is going to kind of prod you and make you feel uncomfortable. I think that what we have in Ecclesiastes is a very real picture of life with the pain and the grief encompassed within that. And that is a reassuring thing that is not said without compassion. I feel like the level of empathy is high. Our world is being kind of understood. And as we read this, I think that we, in our brokenness feel a bit more understood. I remember actually, my husband and I, we were having a bit of a rough, just time in life, like four or five years ago, and we were on holiday to try and recover a bit, and we were reading Ecclesiastes. And I remember a friend saying, Are you serious? Are you reading Ecclesiastes? Like, surely that's going to depress you more. But actually, in the midst of grief, this is uplifting, I would say, because it puts everything in its right place. And there's a time for grief, for tears, but there's also a time for seeing it in its right perspective. Where is God in all of this? What is it to live in the light of eternity? I don't know.

Sarah: I think that's really helpful and I think, yeah, there's a pastoral comfort in reading this, isn't there? It doesn't mean it's going to be easy. I don't think it's going to kind of come with your succinct, pithy verses that you can kind of take away and memorize straight away, and a lot of it can feel quite confusing. And there's poetry and there's mystery to it. But I think also that can be a comfort as well, that that kind of just mirrors life. Not that I'm always breaking into poetry in life, but the irony in that is that I love poetry and Sarah's not that enamored with it.

Felicity: I'm excited for the poetry.

Sarah: What I would say in it is that I think there's no better book to then open it with someone else and wrestle through these questions with someone else. And I know we say this at the beginning of every season, and this is our kind of thing that we kind of bang the drum on, like, get the Bible open with someone else, study this with someone else, and you can wrestle through those questions together wherever and however you're feeling. I just think this is a priceless opportunity to do that. Whether that's over voice note, whether

that's over a cup of tea, whether that's just a phone call every couple of weeks, just making the most of that opportunity. Yes.

Felicity: Wholeheartedly. Why don't I pray for us as we kind of begin to think about getting into this book with that other person? Let me pray. Father God, we thank you so much for your word. Thank you. That it is living and active. We pray that as we open ecclesiastes, we pray that you would give us soft hearts to your words, that we would be willing to sit under this wisdom. Help us to have eyes that are open, hearts that are eager to know you and to walk with you wisely as we get into this book. Pray that you might give us that other person to read it with. But, Father, we ask that you might bless us as we're in ecclesiastes, and we pray this in your name. Amen.

Sarah: Amen. Thank you. Felicity. Well, I am excited if you're going to join us. We really hope you will join us on this journey. Do try and have a read through of Ecclesiastes before we get stuck in in our next episode, particularly as the end really does help shape the beginning as well. And you can find more information about our season on our website twosistersandacuptee.com. There are some resources there for you and we really look forward to getting stuck in next time. We'll see you then.

Felicity: Absolutely. See you then.

Sarah: Bye bye.

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