

Season 9: Ecclesiastes

Episode 12: Eternity Shapes the End of Life (11:7-12:14)

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Felicity: 10ofthose have been sponsoring this whole season and we have been so thankful to them. Daily Treasure is a collection of devotions from the 19th century. Preacher Charles Spurgeon goes through the Psalms over the course of a year and there's a profound depth of insight here. I mean, the fact it's been around for century or so testifies to its lasting value. There is so much to dig into, to be honest, with these yearly devotions, it's rare that I would go through it all year, but I dip in for a couple of months and then come back and I guarantee any reading of these devotions will richly reward and encourage you. Grab a copy at 10offthose.com.

Sarah: Welcome to the final episode of season nine of Two Sisters in a cup of Tea, which also happens to be our 100th episode! My name is Sarah and as ever, I'm here with my sister Felicity, straddling the Atlantic with our cups of tea and biscuits. Felicity is studying ecclesiastes together what you'd thought it would be?

Felicity: What did I think it would be? To be honest, I thought when we said that we were going to do it, we were a little bit crazy because everyone talks about it as being hard, don't they? So it felt like we were taking on a challenge. And I definitely came in with that slight sense of confusion and wondering how we're going to make sense of a book that people throughout history have said it's hard to pin down. And I don't think we've really pinned down. But my understanding of the book has made me realize that that's kind of the point. And I feel like I've been caught up in this kind of nonlinear nature of the wisdom that's presented here and it's kind of taken captive of my heart in ways that I really didn't expect. I think the more I'm in it, the more I feel like I want to accept that God alone is in control. Pursuing his wisdom is what I want to do and that I can receive all that I've got from Him as a gift and that I did not expect any of the I didn't know whether I'd expect any of those things. I hadn't much experience of this book before, and in many ways I don't feel like I'm done with it. It's done with me. But it's been rich, hasn't it? What about you? How has it matched your expectations?

Sarah: I mean, exceeded expectations in so many ways. It's been a much bigger wrestle than I'd first anticipated, but I don't know whether you say this, but I think the hard work really has been wholly worth it. It's made me really hungry to keep going and digging deeper, not only in this book, but also in the harder books of the tricky books of the Bible. Because the fruit has just been so worth it, hasn't it? Even when one of the biggest applications of this whole book is basically realizing the severe limits on my own understanding.

Felicity: That is an irony, isn't it? Yeah.

Sarah: But I think I came to the end of the book. And as I was just studying it in my own time last week, in preparation for our conversation and before chatting it through with you, I was telling a friend last week, I just kind of sat here in awe and my words were few, but my heart was full. I didn't really know how to pray, but I knew that I just sat here really thankful for all that the Lord has been doing in this and through this far exceeded our expectations. It's been fantastic, hasn't it? And we're now going to get into chapter eleven, verse seven, all the way through to the end of the book with the most stunning poem I think probably in the whole of Scripture. And much of me just wants to read the poem and then press the stop button and that'll be it. But we are going to have a little bit of chat as well. Let me read for us chapter eleven, verse seven. Light is sweet and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all, but let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things god will bring you into judgment. So then banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless. Remember your

Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach, when you will say I find no pleasure in them. Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark and the clouds return after the rain when the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop when the grinders cease because they're few. And those looking through the windows grow dim when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades when people rise up at the sound of birds but all their songs grow faint. When people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets, when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred, then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember Him. Before the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken. Before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Meaningless. Meaningless, says the teacher. Everything is meaningless. Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The teacher searched to find just the right words and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end and much study. Wearies the body. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Felicity: Wow. As you say, it feels any words that come after that are going to be insufficient. I think it reminds me just I mean, it is deliberately so, taking us back to the start, isn't it, where we had a poem at the start as well of the rhythms of creation. And here we have really we're talking about old age and moving towards death, which is fitting and very ecclesiastes. So it's all very much as we might expect. But the fact that he's written poignant poetry, I mean, as a poetry lover, I just feel like my whole passion is affirmed here.

Sarah: I know, it is just beautiful, isn't it? The language, the way he talks, the metaphors he uses, it's very powerful, isn't it? Every time I read it, I am struck by how powerful that language is. The unwinding of creation, isn't it? Everything is kind of coming to a close and just all the different pictures in there to help us see the power of that.

Felicity: And I love that he does bring back in, in verse eight, that same phrase that we heard at the start, meaningless. Meaningless, says the teacher, everything is meaningless. And I feel like because we've just had this beautiful poem and then he says meaningless, meaningless. The content of meaningless life, this vapor, this steam. There is still beauty in the meaningless life, which has been a big part of what he's been talking about all the way through, isn't it? Is meaningless because we don't have control over it, it's not going to last, but yet it is a gift which we are to enjoy. And I feel like those two things next to each other just really confirms that. Yeah.

Sarah: And there is that tension here, isn't there? Because at the beginning in chapter eleven, we've got the kind of enjoy the days of your youth, but also remember that days of darkness will come. Like enjoy what you have whilst you're young, but also remember that God will bring you into judgment and your body is going to fade. And it's this kind of tension, isn't it? And I think that's really interesting, that contrast of the youth. Remember your creator in the days of your youth and then again remember Him in twelve, verse six, before the silver cord is severed. And I think that's not necessarily a call to remember Him right at the end of your life, but actually the key word there being before remember Him before the silver cord is severed, which that language we're talking about, death, just extraordinary, isn't it? But actually this whole book has been priming us to remember Him now, to remember that our days are fleeting now, to remember that eternity shapes everything now, and not just wait until when I'm a little bit older, when I'm in retirement, or I don't know when. The next most convenient point is actually wisdom says remember Him now.

Felicity: And that is such a counter to the way that we live, isn't it? Or the way that our world kind of dictates that we should live the idea that as we remember our Creator now, then we will be wise in how we go about this life and even enjoy life more. And I think that is a stark kind of bosch to what the world says, because I would say it's more like out there,

it's like, well, if you want to enjoy life, don't look at God, don't be religious, don't have a faith, just get on with enjoying life. Whereas here we get because we have the framework of life, because we have the beginning and the end. And the end is certain. Uncertain in its timing, but certain in its certainty. Then therefore we look to God, we remember our Creator, and we enjoy, as you say in verse nine, let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth as we have this perspective.

Sarah: And what joy like to just kind of really drive this to Jesus for the last time in this book. What joy to know that we sit here as those who have resurrection life. We sit here reading this poem about the unwinding of creation, knowing the one who has made us to be new creations, and knowing that to live is Christ and to die is gain. That I just think, wow, that this should make us go wow at Jesus all over again, basically.

Felicity: I think that's right. And I think that as we with the poem, we kind of almost lament the reality of old age. It's a sad picture. It's this grasshopper dragging himself and the grinders cease because they are few. It's a decaying picture, isn't it? And I think we're supposed to just find it sad. And as we then find that sad, we then all the more the contrast with the resurrection hope we have in Christ. But I think one of the big things about ecclesiastes that has been striking me is that it's not that we're supposed to just kind of write well, move on, and just think about, you know, almost sort of compartmentalize, well, this is life. Yeah, and death happens. But then think about Jesus, actually. What does it mean to have resurrection, hope to remember our Creator in the midst of the fact that this is real. Just because we're Christians, it doesn't mean that we're not going to see the sadness of old age and decay and ultimately death. And I love that about ecclesiastes. I think that is a very pastoral well, it's just pastorally wise, isn't it? To not deny death, but actually acknowledge it. And in that acknowledgement, see Jesus, see hope, see the Lord in it.

Sarah: Yeah. There's no way that this book has negates the tough stuff, does it? We really have been sitting in a stark reality of this world, but we really have been grappling with the hope that is kind of shone into that. And as you say, I think that's just pastorally exactly what we need, isn't it? And so whilst at the beginning of the book I was thinking, oh, these prods, these goads feel quite uncomfortable, like I know that I need them, but I'm not sure I want them. I've got to the end I'm like these goads, this prod is exactly what I need. And actually it's good, it's good for my heart. This sitting in this book has done me the world of good and I just pray that that would continue, that I wouldn't lose that perspective that has been so sharpened by sitting in Ecclesiastes.

Felicity: Yeah. And I love that at the end of that verse eleven, chapter twelve, verse eleven, where we have the talk of the wise, the wiser, like goads, firmly embedded nails, but then he says, given by one shepherd. And I think even for the Old Testament reader, psalm 23 comes to mind the shepherd is the Lord and therefore the shepherd. What a wonderful picture of he who gives us this wisdom again picking up on that pastoring of our hearts through these nail embedded goads, which as you say is like a slightly OD. I remember at the start we were saying to each other like, is this a bit much? Should we just book actually? Yeah, it's exactly that. It's exactly what we need in order to then remember our Creator and enjoy the life that God has given us and honor Him and do good. Walk wisely.

Sarah: Yeah. And his application is very simple then at the end, isn't it? In chapter twelve, verse 13, here's the conclusion. He started off conclusion in chapter nine. Hear it? Actually yes. And the last kind of breath of the book, and he says, fear God and keep his commandments. This is the duty of all mankind. That's very simple that, isn't it, really? And actually, whilst that very hard to put into practice, fearing God ultimately looks like repenting and believing in the Gospel, turning to Christ as the one who is the true wise shepherd, preacher king. I love that the shepherd's here and he's not anywhere in the whole rest.

Felicity: Of the book, but right at the.

Sarah: Beginning we've got this preacher this wise preacher king. At the end, we end with the shepherd and putting that all together and just it drives our gaze forward to Jesus, doesn't it? And it particularly does when this does end on a note of judgment, doesn't it? As we've seen all the way through the book, judgment has been a good thing, but it is a sobering thing as well. And here our hearts are kind of led to it again, but in the safety of the everlasting arms of Christ Jesus, and I love that.

Felicity: And I think that these verses, verses 13 and 14, these final verses, I think you hear that fear God, keep his commandments, everything's going to come under the under God's judgment. It pushes you back round to the beginning of the book because you think, well, I really want to work out how to walk wisely. Like, I really want to know how to figure God. I think you get to the end of the book and you're like, okay, let me do this again, because now I know it's an interesting thing, isn't it, that he's put that at the end of the book rather than the start of the book. And I think it then prompts me more and more, oh, let's go back round and hear this wisdom. And I'm more inclined to listen because I really want to fear God and do what he has commanded. So, Sarah, brilliant.

Sarah: Well, that's season ten sorted then.

Felicity: Well, yes, go around again, but give us a flavor of some of the impacts on your heart over the course of this season.

Sarah: Yeah. It's quite hard to give just a flavor, I think, growing in humility, in how much I haven't understood, necessarily how much I haven't understood, but also really embracing that, but embracing the limits of my understanding, of my wisdom, of my capacity. Just really seeing God in his unlimitedness and myself in my finite limitedness has been supremely helpful for me. And I think, just as we were saying before, the kind of accepting the goads and actually really appreciating the prods and the nudges that I've needed. And I think I've been really challenged on how much I don't view life like this. How much I can pretend life isn't like what is described and how much I really need God's words to keep shaping and forming me. That I would see the world rightly, see God rightly and therefore see my response to Him in this way. How about you?

Felicity: I think there's been an underpinning kind of reality that as I've been hearing this prompt to wisdom, and as I've been given the kind of parameters of life and the fact that God is in control, it has prepared my heart for receiving Jesus and the resurrection life he brings. More and more, I think my desire for Him has increased. And I feel like, yeah, it's just been and maybe that comes partly out of the humility that you're talking about, and that kind of feeling the goads and feeling my need for that and therefore wanting to be wise and realizing that I can't and therefore I want Jesus all the more. And I think there's a profound desire for Christ there that's come about more and more. And I think in the midst of that is this or maybe that's, in the midst of the reality of life that's been presented here, I just really have enjoyed that. The teachers kind of plunged us into the nitty gritty of life. There's no looking away from the frustrations and these kind of death marked realities. And as he does that, he then gives us our Creator in the midst of it all, and our gaze is lifted to God again and again. And so I've really enjoyed that. I'm not supposed to look away from the world, actually, while I'm in the world. What does it mean therefore, to then look to the Lord and look to Jesus, and I think that's part of then desiring Jesus more, if that makes any sense.

Sarah: But yeah, it's just been so good, hasn't it? I really have really appreciated it.

Felicity: Yeah, I know, it is really brilliant. And more and more I feel like we always every book I know, and it is, but this is one that I kind of want, like I need to talk about this more, though. We're going to stop. Sarah, why don't you pray for us now before we then finish up?

Sarah: I'd love to. Father, we just really thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. We thank you so much that it is in Your word for our upbuilding, for the necessity on our own hearts to see the world the way that you do and to live in response to what we see, to live wisely and we just pray. Father, please, would you embed this word in our hearts going forward? Please continue to shape us by it. Please, Lord, would we not lose all that we've learned this season? Father, we just really pray that you'd help us to fear you and to keep Your commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. Lord, help us to really live in light of this wisdom as we move forward from here. And we pray to the praise of Your glory. Amen.

Felicity: Amen. Thank you, Sarah, and thank you so much to everyone who's tuned in this season as we've journeyed through Ecclesiastes. We really hope you've enjoyed it as much as we have. Why not get in touch at podcastingsisters@gmail.com to share what's impacted your heart through the course of this season? We would love to hear from you and we'll be back in the new year with another season. But in the meantime, if you're not already do, join our mailing list to stay connected and hear the latest updates. Our

newsletter subscribers are always the first to hear what's happening next for the podcast.
So until next time. Goodbye.

Sarah: Goodbye.

Felicity: We are so thankful for ten of those and their sponsorship of this season.