

Season 9: Ecclesiastes

Episode 5: Eternity Shapes Our View of Others (4:1-16)

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Sarah: We're really thankful for 10ofthose who are sponsoring this season. Heavenly Minded is a short convicting read from Mary Wilson hannah expanding the riches of Colossians, chapter three, verse one to four, and what it is to delight in our identity in Christ and fix our gaze on our future reality in heaven. It's a short read, but wholly worthwhile for the spur and encouragement to keep setting our minds on things above. Grab your copy at 10ofthose.com.

Felicity: Welcome to two sisters and a cup of tea. My name is Felicity. I'm here in the States. I'm here with my sister Sarah. She's in England, and we are about to dive into Ecclesiastes, chapter four. As we continue our season in this book, we're excited. But first of all, Sarah, I just have to tell you about my cup of tea. For a start, a very pretty mug to go with a Regal Tea, no less, which I have mentioned before, but I have rediscovered the smoky Earl Grey.

Sarah: Oh, good. I'm glad you're still enjoying it. Actually, I can't remember, is it loose leaf or is it a tea bag?

Felicity: Yes, loose leaf. Loose leaf. And I say regal because the queen, no less.

Sarah: The late queen.

Felicity: The late queen. Good point.

Sarah: Yes.

Felicity: I said used to, you know.

Sarah: I know, but it sounds like she might have just changed her flavor of tea. But she's in heaven.

Felicity: Yes, fair point.

Sarah: Surrounded by all the tea we know.

Felicity: Anyway, I have a smoky El Grate, which is exactly what the queen liked to drink when she was alive. So I'm enjoying it.

Sarah: Good, I'm glad.

Felicity: And I've ditched the gluten free biscuit. I've just gone for chocolate.

Sarah: Okay, yeah, fair.

Felicity: Yeah. There's no gluten anywhere in sight. Just chocolate. So we are getting into chapter four of Ecclesiastes, but so we've been in it for a little while now. How are you doing with it? I mean, we're finding our bearings, we're getting to grips with it. How's your grip on it?

Sarah: I think I said last time that it feels ever so loose, this grip. I feel like I don't have control. And that is exactly the point of Ecclesiastes. We have been kind of talking about this and just saying it could not feel more humbling. Actually, at the point where we are right now with Ecclesiastes, and we have kind of had these conversation of, are we wise to record our conversations on this? Because we just have so many questions and we want to be thoughtful and wise in our words. But it's felt like, where are we going with this? And are we getting to grips with this or not? It just still feel like I'm asking us a whole load of questions. But I hope us kind of saying that is a helpful thing for listeners to hear, that it's okay to come to a book and not come away with all the answers that you might want or hope to get. It's still worth plugging away. It's still worth being in this, even if it feels like a hard and humbling experience to be there.

Felicity: Yes, I think that's a very good way of putting it. And the ongoing wrestle that you are very much hearing the ongoing wrestle as we kind of talk about it and try and get to grips with it.

Sarah: Yeah. Felicity, help us get our bearings. Just like where we've got to so far in the book.

Felicity: Yes. So what we've had, we had the first half of chapter one and this was a kind of depiction of the world as it is. There is nothing new under the sun. And we had those cycles, beautiful poetry cycles that say that there is nothing new under the sun with the world, with creation, but also humanity. And you kind of sit with that and you feel like, oh, wow, okay, so what is the point in everything? And that is the question that the teacher is asking what is the point in these few days that we have? What is the point? And he goes on as we get into the second half of chapter one and into chapter two, he's kind of on an experiment, an exploration, like, what is it? What is the best thing that we can be doing with our time? And he basically goes on an experiment of pleasure and laughter and getting all the riches and all of these different things in order to work out. Is that it? And ultimately the answer is no. And this word meaningless comes up again and again until we get to chapter two, verses 24 to 26. And it comes with such a great sigh of relief because at this point the teacher's eyes go up and God is brought into the discussion and we see and we hear that what is it all about? Well, all of this is a gift from God and therefore there is enjoyment and satisfaction and there is something of value in this nothing new under the sun world. And so we get to the end of chapter two and we're thinking, okay, so that is the kind of firm ground on which we stand. This is gift. This is God's gift to us, this life. And then as we hit chapter three, we're beginning to work out, okay, so what is it then to live in this gift of life, this gift of the world that God has given us? And we get this very clear realization that God is God. He is the one who controls all things. He controls time. We cannot change anything about that. And so there's an element of accepting that we are not God and he is and resting in that reality. And that's kind of where we've got to. By the time we get to chapter three, verse 22, for a person then to enjoy their work because that is their lot and this is a good thing because God is God and we're not. And therefore we then can approach life and everything toil with that perspective.

Sarah: That's so helpful. Thank you. I really appreciated that run through. Brilliant. Okay, so we're going to get into chapter four. You're going to read that for us. Let's go.

Felicity: Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors, and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This, too, is meaningless. At chasing after the wind, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil. In chasing after the wind again I saw something meaningless under the sun, there was a man all alone. He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. For whom am I toiling? He asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This, too, is meaningless and miserable business. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though 1 may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. The youth may have come from a prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This, too, is meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

Sarah: Thank you, Felicity. Wonderful. It feels like we have a bit of a step change here in that he's starting to talk about what it looks like to live wisely in this world. And it's almost kind of proverb like, isn't it, in some of this? And so I'm kind of looking forward to getting into that. But before we get there, we've got this very stark picture of what the world is like, which kind of sets the tone right at the beginning, doesn't it? What struck you, Felicity, as you were reading that out loud again in those first three or four verses?

Felicity: As you're reading it out loud with every line. You feel like you're just kind of putting a weight on. It's such a sad picture, isn't it? This idea that there is no comforter and the repetition of there is no comforter, the oppression is a reality. And in fact, the evil that is

evident in this world under the sun means that it's better that you wouldn't have been born. Because as someone who's alive, you have to see all of this depressing reality before us. It's such a stark picture, isn't it? Wow. Sobering reality.

Sarah: It really is. Yeah. But it's also refreshing to kind of it gives permission to feel like this.

Felicity: Yes, I love that. This is reality. Again, we've had that before, haven't we? He gives it how it is and that is reassuring that it's in the.

Sarah: Bible and it's right to feel this weight. It's right to feel this about the brokenness, about oppression, about the powerlessness, when people have no way out. And actually, I think so often in our world, we can be cushioned in so many ways to really seeing the depth of how catastrophic post Genesis three is, if that makes sense. And actually here this preacher, this teacher, is feeling the weight of brokenness. And I don't think it's too quick to then say, Jesus also felt that weight, he also felt the weight of brokenness. He wept and he was moved to tears and he cried out in despair at brokenness. And just being able to kind of we have a Lord who identifies with us in the depth of despair. Yeah.

Felicity: And I think we see that even earlier on. If you look at the law in deuteronomy numbers, wherever you see this care and the seeing of the oppressed, the marginalized, the heart of the Lord has always been for those who are oppressed. And so then Jesus, as he steps into that, then that is a fulfillment of that. And what a relief that we have a God who sees that, knows that is in it with us, knows what it is to suffer in that way. Really important, isn't it, to know that. Because then I think that then prompts us to take those cries to the Lord because he knows it.

Sarah: Yeah, big time. I think what's really striking here is that you kind of got this like, look out to the world and see how broken it is. And then within the same breath in verse four, you've got the look inside to a person's heart and see what's stirring up there, what's going on. And actually that, again, it's very stark, isn't it? All toil and all achievements spring from one person's envy of another. And this too is a chasing after the wind. So you've got look outside the world and then look into the heart. And that kind of then follows on into some proverbs, doesn't it, about what it is to live wisely.

Felicity: It's maybe worth just thinking about what we do with wisdom such as this and the wiser wisdom literature. And there is an element of just common sense. We've just had the world described to us and it's very real. That is what we see in front of us. And then as we look into verses five and six and on here we get a very sensible way of looking at work and the world in which we live. Envy is a problem and actually on top of that then laziness we hear about in verse five these fools who fold their hands and then actually we flip flop then two handfuls with toil so over busyness hectic kind of seeking for gain is then also meaningless. So it's kind of a balancing out. It's a common sense like what is it to live in this world? And it's helpful just to hear that, isn't it? I feel like that's quite a good corrective to me and I guess for all of us we might flip flop one way or the other.

Sarah: Yeah, and actually the antidote is in the middle. It's a sandwich, isn't it? At the beginning of verse six, better one handful with tranquility. So actually resting in the gift that God's given you in the lot that he's given you and not seeking to strive for extra in that sense and then yeah, it's interesting because that kind of the striving goes on, doesn't it? And it describes someone who's kind of worshipping I think he's kind of worshipping self advancement kind of verse eight and worship of wealth like there's no end to his toil the kind of striving striving he's not content with his wealth and yet there's nothing. Who am I toiling he asks. For what am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless. So there's a kind of selfish me and then there's a kind of wise we. As you look out, as you look to work with others and as you seek to look outside of yourself, there's a wisdom in that, and there's a good return for your labor. And there's a kind of resilience that comes from just looking not into yourself, but out to others. And that is common sense in kind of working world and how the world works. But that also just reflects the law of God, doesn't it? Love the Lord your God and love others and you kind of see that worked out here which is kind of refreshing, I think.

Felicity: I agree and I think there's an element of this does make sense and are we willing to trust the Lord when he says this? It is wise to look to others rather than just to ourselves and that's not always easy. That is distinctive in our world, isn't it? Just as it would have been then when this was first written. And that's just a good challenge, I think, into how we

think about that and I think it then does prompt us to then look to Jesus in the sense that he did do this. He didn't look to himself, he looked to others, he loved others. He gave of himself, he toiled the greatest toil of all on the cross for others. And that in itself, if we're not persuaded that ecclesiastes wisdom is for us now, I think as we take it through to Jesus in that way, we can be all the more persuaded that that is the pattern which we want to follow. That is what it is to be a Jesus follower.

Sarah: Yeah, I think that's really helpful. And actually, even just thinking about the verse five and verse six that actually Jesus didn't he didn't sit in Laziness. He worked hard, didn't he? But he also didn't kind of strive and strive and strive. He rested in who he was in the Lord. He went and took Himself off to pray. He got that balance. He lived in a life of poverty in many ways, didn't he? But there was absolute contentment in that because he was doing the work of the Lord in that allotted time for Him on earth. And I think that is refreshing, isn't it? And I think, yeah, there's something to say that actually he was the wisest preacher king, the shepherd king, as we're starting to kind of see in this book. And he lived the wisest path. And so that is an attractive thing. We should want to follow his way and follow his footsteps, shouldn't we? And so part of driving this to Jesus and then to our hearts is going, well, this is an attractive way to live. And I do want to strive, not overstrive, but I'd like to be discontent, that I can hold things loosely, better one handful with tranquility and to know that I can rest and have peace in my work and that I've done enough each day because that is what the Lord has given me to do.

Felicity: Yeah, it's so true. And as we hear this resonating in the life of Jesus, then we're all the more persuaded of that. And that's what we need, isn't it? Our hearts need to be persuaded that way, need to ask the Lord to.

Sarah: Help us, hearts that are kind of ready to receive that, isn't it? Yeah. But also have a heart to recognize that the wise path for Jesus was also to weep. The wise path was also for Him to really identify with the brokenness around him. And ultimately he went to the cross to deal with all the injustice and all the oppression in this world. But again, just not kind of diminishing that. And we've kind of read in the chapter before there is a time to weep, there is a time to mourn. So actually just acknowledging that and sitting in that as well, the wise path may be this week that that's what I need to do with a friend. I need to just give time to grieve or weep with them and see that as a really valuable way of being wise and following Jesus.

Felicity: Yeah, I love that Sarah. So good. Why don't you pray for us that we would be able to do that?

Sarah: I'd love to, father God, we do thank you that you give us wisdom that is wise and good and right and helps us to navigate this complex and broken world. Lord, we do thank you that you give us Your word. You reveal yourself in Your word, you reveal Your wisdom to help us. It is such a gift that we have it here. And whilst it can feel elusive and whilst we can't grasp all of it, we thank you for what we have grasped today. We thank you that it's helped us to see more of Jesus and the depth of his compassion, the depth of his kind of weight of feeling at the world around Him when he was on Earth. And Father, we thank you that you draw near in mercy and one day the world will not be like this. One day you will put everything right and we praise you that that day is coming. We praise you that we have the perspective of the rest of the Bible as well, and so we pray. In the meantime, would you help us to live with one handful with tranquility? We pray that you'd help us to rest well in the work that you give us day by day. And Father, please help us to trust you as we look at the world around us. Oh, Lord, we pray all this in Your name. Amen.

Felicity: Amen. Thank you, Sarah. Feels like we're on firm ground. It's good, isn't it?

Sarah: It is good. I feel encouraged, actually, and just being able to really think through this wisdom for ourselves is good, isn't it?

Felicity: Yeah. And don't forget about the show notes, everyone. The questions that will help you to continue thinking this through for yourself. You can find them on our website, or you can find them where you listen to this podcast, do have a look at them, use them to keep the conversation going. This is always just a starting point. We're looking forward to seeing you next time. And so we'll see you then.

Sarah: Bye bye. We're so thankful for ten of those.com who are sponsoring this season.