

Season 9: Ecclesiastes

Episode 6: Seeing Jesus in Ecclesiastes: A Conversation with Karen Soole

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We're thrilled today to be bringing a conversation between us and Karen Soole as we continue to wrestle our way through Ecclesiastes. Karen is the author of *Liberated* and *Unleash the Word*, and today's conversation is gold dust for taking us deeper into the depth and breadth of Ecclesiastes and showing us Jesus in it all. We hope you enjoy it. Let's get to it.

Sarah: Welcome to two sisters in a cup of tea. My name is Sarah, I live in the UK. This is my sister Felicity, who lives in the States. And today it's our total joy to welcome Karen Sewell onto the podcast. Our first returning guest. Karen, welcome.

Karen: It's great to be with you. Thank you for bringing me back.

Sarah: Now, last time Karen, we had a conversation together, we were unpacking the joys of John's gospel and the ginger nut biscuit was your staple. Go to biscuit. Just wondering, are there any others that kind of make the height of the ginger nut or you're sticking with the ginger nut as your go to?

Karen: Yeah, I have to confess, I haven't eaten many ginger nut biscuits recently. My husband started going on about all this ultra processed food and that's, having a bit of a downer on buying all these shop bought biscuits, but the consequence means that we've been baking even worse, isn't it? So we've been eating a lot of coffee cake lately, which is really nice, but it's been all proper ingredients. It's not biscuit though, is it? So sorry.

Felicity: A sweet treat to go with your hot cup. I think we'll take it. That's okay. Yeah, this conversation came about really so inviting you on was because you and I sat down for genuinely sat down for a cup of tea in the Lake District over the summer, and I didn't really know that Karen had been teaching through Ecclesiastes. And we're sitting down for our cuppa and we start talking and I realize Karen has just taught through Ecclesiastes and we were just about to start recording ecclesiastes, thinking about ecclesiastes, and I thought, this is it, this is the genuine cup of tea with your Bible conversation. And I just asked Karen all the questions and got so much wisdom and insight into this book that I thought we need to have that conversation while the record button is pressed. So thank you so much for coming and joining us, Karen. We're excited for diving into ecclesiastes. But before we do that, for those who weren't listening to your last appearance on the podcast, can you tell us a bit? Where are you, how do you spend your time? Tell us a bit about yourself.

Karen: Yeah, well, I'm up in the north of England is where I can meet you in the Lake District. So I'm at a church called Trinity Church, Lancaster and I sort of am responsible for women's ministry there, but I also do some other women's ministry sort of in other places. So our church is part of a little network called Anchor Commission in England and I'm the director of women's ministry for that. So I'm involved with teaching women the Bible in lots of different settings, really. That's how I love to spend my time, opening up the Bible with people.

Sarah: Very good. Well, Karen, so you recently spent time in Ecclesiastes as Listy just shared with us and you've taught it to others. What's most struck you about the book as a whole as you've been kind of marinating in it and teaching in it?

Karen: I think actually what struck me about this book is how important it is. Now, I know everyone always says that about any book that you're studying at the time. As you open up

the book, you start to study it, you go, this is the most important, it's really necessary in our world. I mean, it's obviously always been really necessary, but I think we struggle with it as Christians because it doesn't say what we want it to say. And so I know that people have had very sort of I spoke to a young mum who said, I hate Ecclesiastes. It's such a depressing book and also teaching it with some students who also sort of struggling with it because what they wanted Ecclesiastes to say, it didn't say, it doesn't point clearly to Jesus in the way that they would like it to. It doesn't point to the rescue and the grace of God in the way that they want. So it doesn't have that sort of gospel hope. It does talk about judgment and eternity, but it doesn't seem to have the gospel hope that people want. They look at this book and go, oh, this is an uncomfortable book, it's really miserable. And yet, as I've worked with it and one of the things I've actually just seen before I talked to you this morning, I did walk my dog so that she wouldn't be barking in the background. And she was well exercised. And I re listened to David. Souche his reading of Ecclesiastes and just let the book wash over me. And the more I just go through the whole thing and let the ideas wash over, the more it resonates to just practical things in life, day to day living discipleship issues, but also the heart that we need to have if we are going to repent and believe the good news. Because I think unless we really understand we're living in Ecclesiastes world. We don't understand our need for Jesus. So I think it exposes the heart that we the lies that I'll go on and on, but, yeah, I think there are lies that we believe. We believe that we're in control. We believe that things will all be sorted out if we just do things the right way. And Ecclesiastes says, what is crooked cannot be made straight, and what God has made crooked cannot be made straight. And Ecclesiastes describes a fallen world, and it's a fallen world which we cannot redeem ourselves. But I think we spend so much time trying to think that we can, and it doesn't tell you not to do good things and to be wise and to implement good relationships. And it even talks about ruling cities and having wise leaders and politics. It talks to politics. So it's not saying there isn't an attempt to do good. We're called to do good. But the fact that actually we will fail and the fact that injustice keeps on coming, the fact that the horrors are still there, and the fact that good people suffer, all of those things Ecclesiastes is so real about. So I think it does leave us gasping for eternal hope. So I'll stop there because I can keep going.

Felicity: That's really helpful. Really helpful and just pushing in a bit, pressing in a bit to that. And the kind of I think that's really helpful. You're saying the lies that we believe and how Ecclesiastes says things that we don't really want to hear but do ring true for reality, I think that's such a good that's kind of what's going on, isn't it? We're being exposed in that now, you've just taught this to a group of women, those things that you're saying, that's a great sort of understanding of what's going on in Ecclesiastes. But why would we want to get this book open with other people? That sounds a little bit depressing in the sense of all of those things being exposed. We're always encouraging people to get the Bible open with someone else. It's helpful to have these conversation with other people. I think as I've been in Ecclesiastes, it's not the one when I'm meeting up with my women from church, my friends, whatever, I'm not thinking, just can't wait for the opportunity to get Ecclesiastes open. So can you persuade us, or what's persuaded you that this is a book to get open with other people and not just to kind of mull on those things on our own?

Karen: Yeah, I would say what's persuaded me is I do think it's an incredibly practical book. I think it does two things, I think. One, I think it actually does help us in our discipleship. So I think it does point to things that are good and the things that are important. So the preacher in Ecclesiastes is asking questions, isn't he? And he's looking, trying to understand what the world is like under heaven, how God has established everything and how it works. But he also is looking at life under the sun. And that's sort of the day to day experience. But within that, he's asking a question and he asks the question in chapter one, what is it good to do? What is it good to do, considering that we're living in a fallen world? And I think he does address that. He just doesn't answer it in the straightforward way that we would say what's good to do? Number one, it's good to work. Number two, it's good to go to the house of God and fear the Lord. He does it in all sorts of strange orders. And I think those things that are good are really sort of fundamental things that we would acknowledge are good. It's good to have food to eat, it's good to have work to do. It's good to have friends and to not be on your own. He doesn't even say wealth is

bad. He actually says wealth is good if you use it well and it's for the sake of others. It's good to enjoy marriage, it's good to have contentment, and that's a gift of God. And it actually strips away a whole load of things that I think we think are good which are added on and it actually points to the so this is what a good life is. But then at the same time it says you might not have it. Whatever you do, you can't control what you might have. You might be wise. Life often does bring good things, but then again, it might not. So you've always got that tension all the way through. But I actually think we need that. I think we need it in our discipleship. We need that realistic view of what matters. What are the things that we can enjoy but also know that we can't hold on to them? They're not eternal. It's that word, isn't it? Meaningless. I don't know why they translate it meaningless. It's so unhelpful, isn't it? The heavy word, which is sort of you can't grasp that mist, that vanishing thing, that it's just going to be temporary. And so even the good things that we can enjoy now are temporary. And having that perspective is the preacher's perspective and what he says, and then the big kick. And I think it's interesting that right at the end it is addressed to the young person, isn't it? Remember your Creator in the days of your youth and he does say, and you can enjoy all these things, but remember your Creator in the days of your youth and remember for all these things you'll be brought into judgment. So there's this sort of these are the good things and they're great. God has given them to us and we can rejoice in them, but don't live for them. They're not everything. You might not be able to keep hold of them. And when things get really, really tough and you don't have them, that is the reality of a fallen world. We are in exile now. And what we're to do now, today at the moment we have, is to remember our Creator and to remember Him and to walk faithfully whatever comes our way. And I think it does teach us how to walk. It teaches us that we're not in control. But God is. The whole end of the book. The phrase you do not know, you do not know, you do not know, comes over and over and over again. We think we do know. We think we've got systems and everything in place. That means that we can work it all out and we're in control of our lives, but we're not. And we need to know that God is in control. He is ruling over all time and he is bringing us to eternity one day when every single thing we do in the here and now matters and is brought to account. So how we live now matters, but how we experience life now could be well, the good, the bad and the ugly as far as the writer of ecclesiastes is concerned and enjoy the good, but when there's the bad still hold on. Because it's not that God isn't in control, he still is in control. So that's a sort of a discipleship thing, I think. evangelistically there's a huge other theme, which is that over the fact that everything is temporary, you need to know that you're going to die. And we live in a world that does know that it's going to die. People do know they're going to die, and yet at the same time they kind of deny it all at the same time. And there's a center section, isn't it? It's better to go into the house of mourning than the house of feasting because actually that gives you the reality of life is short and you are going to die. And then it builds up to that incredible poem in chapter twelve, which I think is one of the most amazing things written about aging. I mean, Shakespeare has a go with the ages of man, but it's not a touch on Proverbs. And that final sort of chapter of this decay and this awfulness that is the inevitable truth of our lives. Our media is telling us endlessly that that's not how it's going to be, that we can do things with ourselves now. Avoid ultra processed food they talk about living in. Have you heard about Blue Zones? And that's sort of the areas in the world where people live to 100 because they have amazing diets. So copy their diets and you'll live to 100. But the end of ecclesiastes still stands. Whatever you do, that decay is inevitable and you need to remember God. You need to have that perspective. It's so important. It was in England for English viewers, and it Strictly Come Dancing season. One of the judges who was there from the beginning of the show, from, I don't know, the early 2000s, it's been going for ages, died this year. He was a very popular figure and they opened up the show and during the show they actually had a tribute to him, the reality. Even in the midst of this great big party, his death was real. He's unavoidable and he'd been great and he'd been dancing into his indwelling to his seventies and he died. One of the other judges who's on the panel now is in her 60s. There Was Pictures of her all over the weekend papers looking glamorous and Talking about being beautiful and Sexy in her sixties. And You Think It's such a lie, the idea that We Can somehow, at the same time, there's this Tension of sort of almost trying to portray, look At Me. I'm in my sixties and I Can Do all these amazing things. Yeah, I've got eternal youth, but you haven't. And actually, you know, one of your

colleagues died this year. Death is the reality, and we are constantly trying to pretend that it's not. And the big kick for Ecclesiastes is that what do we need to do? Fear the Lord. We need to fear the Lord now, today. None of us know what's going to happen. Some of us might not live to old age, but we must fear the Lord. I think that's an evangelistic call. I think fear the Lord is almost could be two words that summarize the evangelistic call of the Bible. It doesn't tell you the hope, but if you went to Psalm two, those that fear the Lord, run to him. So fear the Lord rightly means turning to him and acknowledging him as your creator. And that's where the rescue is.

Sarah: So helpful, Karen. So helpful in so many different ways there. I want to pick up then on how we do bring this to Jesus, how we do see Jesus in the pages of Ecclesiastes that isn't just a kind of flattened every time the application is the same of fear the Lord because it is in one sense, isn't it? That is the right application of it, but also the cross isn't flat. There's so much depth to it. So how do we start to see Jesus on these pages in a way that isn't just kind of plastering him on at the end of every time we have a conversation, if that makes.

Karen: Yeah, no, it does make complete sense. I think there are two, although obviously there are other places. I mean, when you're looking at the reality of death and the chapter on death, I think you're not plastering it on by saying, who has overcome the grave? Jesus has overcome the grave. So I think the resurrected Jesus we do want to point to the hope. The preacher in Ecclesiastes isn't talking explicitly about the resurrected Lord, but there is that shepherd at the end and you think Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus came and that Mark says you repent and believe the good news. I do think in some ways that is another way of saying fear the Lord. But when Jesus comes, he is the good news. So we've got that good news we can tell people. The good news is that when you face judgment, you've someone who's taken that judgment on himself. Because again, Ecclesiastes has this thing of there is no one righteous that comes clear. None of us can stand in that judgment. So we do want to say as we look at ourselves and we know that we're not righteous, Jesus is our righteousness, Jesus is our rescue, Jesus is our resurrection. And I like the way Paul actually and I'm pretty sure in Acts 17 that he's got Ecclesiastes Three in his head when he's preaching and he talks in that very famous sermon in Athens, isn't it? When he's telling them that God has established all the times and places that is Athens, isn't it, where they've got all the idols around and he says they've got the altar to the unknown God. And he tells them about the God that they don't yet know. And he says, God's established all your times and places that you would be born so that we might fear Him, so we might turn to Him and know that that's a very ecclesiastes idea. And then he says, and God has appointed the man Jesus Christ as the Judge. And when we think of judgment, I don't think we always think of Jesus, but the Judge that we will face one day is also Jesus. So Jesus is our righteousness and Jesus is our resurrection and Jesus is our Judge. And the call that Paul uses evangelistically, God has made you, he has created all things that turn to Him, because Jesus is established as the Judge and one day he's going to judge you. And that's an interesting evangelistic talk, isn't it's? Not really the style we tend to go for. But it's interesting how much I think as you read through the evangelistic sermons in Acts, they point to Jesus as the Judge and the fact that he died, has risen and is seated at the right hand. The Father has established Him as judge of the living and the dead and that's how he's going to return, as the judge of the living and the dead. And that's how Ecclesiastes finishes. So that is I don't think that's a flat Jesus.

Felicity: No, I think that's really helpful. I'm just exploring a few of those we've been talking a little bit about, and I think this is very ecclesiastes, kind of. There's so many different sort of tensions and strands within that of the fact that Jesus did enter into this broken world and the compassion that he has for us and how he walks alongside us in that. Because you're right, as you were saying earlier, those tensions, this is so real, but it also can be so painful. And what do we do with that in the midst of that? And we've been encouraged by just thinking, Jesus does know. He does know this broken world. God stepped into this world. And that's been a comforting thing to be thinking about. And that's part of where we've felt ecclesiastes land for us. And a few of these other things that you're saying as we kind of go from here, as we think about taking ecclesiastes out of listening to it on this podcast or in the Word, how might the wisdom then of ecclesiastes shape the way we think

and we feel and we walk? How do we take it? So lots of what you're saying there is very helpful and mind shifting, perspective shifting, and kind of as we hear ecclesiastes, we think, okay, my perspective is being shift. How else does it then impact us as we go from here, as we kind of shut the Bible and walk on?

Karen: Yeah, okay. As you're talking, there's one other thing I just want to say. Please do, please. I will answer that question. Just make sure you keep hold of it. Because I just think the other thing that I think Jesus does, which is wonderful with the turn in ecclesiastes that it opens with what is crooked cannot be made straight. But when you look at Jesus coming in Luke's gospel, you have that idea of the highways being made straight because Jesus has come. So that restoration that you get in Jesus. And I also think there's a section beginning chapter four where it talks about no one can be comforted. And Jesus brings comfort, and Isaiah has that great promise. Comfort, comfort my people see, because Jesus has come. So I think this will link with what you're thinking, because I think knowing that ultimate comfort comes from Him. Come to me all who are weary and heavy laid. And we can go to Jesus in our pain. And you're right, he knows that pain and he is the one we can go to. We cannot solve everything. And that is really practical. It's practical in our day to day. There are situations we face and they're just beyond us. But we can take them to Him. There's no promises guaranteed this side of heaven that it will all be sorted. But he calls us to take all our prayers and requests and petitions to Him. And so I think it should call us to pray it's consciously. You can't solve this. But he is the One that can make the crooked straight. He can do these things and we can trust them, Him with them. So I think holding on to Him, walking with Him, praying and knowing that each day matters, walking faithfully matters now. So seeking to serve daily, every day, we don't know what we can do tomorrow, but we know what we can do today. And I think Ecclesiastes practically is saying, use what you have now, don't delay, do it now. You don't know what's around the corner, so do it now. And because you don't know what's around the corner, be wise, make good plans. I mean, that's chapter eleven, isn't it? Be sensible, do invest, do think, do plan, do look, be diligent, be hardworking. I mean, I think all those practical things are there, but also you might be chopping the wood and you might get damaged by a splinter. Because he can't resist doing that, can he? All these wonderful, these little phrases, and you just think, oh, man, who's chopping the wood will get damaged by it. He's not telling you not to chop the wood. He's saying, do it, you work. But something might happen. But there's a push to use today. Well, to serve today. Now on remembering all the time that God is in heaven and that there's a place for everything, and I love that. Again, that's the other I mean, even unbelievers love, ecclesiastes, chapter three, and the poem about time, even non Christians will be happy to have that read out at their funeral. But the truth is that that is very, very important to us, practically, isn't it? There is a time to laugh, and that's great, and there's a time to cry, and it's not wrong to cry and to grieve and to mourn. It's really practical about the nitty gritty of day to day life and holding on to the Lord in everything.

Felicity: Thank you, Karen. It's so freeing. So freeing as well, I think, kind of getting a hold of this and living in light of that, it takes.

Karen: The pressure off, doesn't yeah, yeah, definitely. I think we get burdened by thinking, I've got to solve other people's problems. I've got to be everything to everybody, and I'm trying to rescue them. And Jesus is their savior. We're called to do what we can faithfully. I love the word plotting. I always feel like that's what we're called to do, really, just to plot faithfully with the resources at our hands and rejoice in the resources that we've been given. And if we can rejoice in that, that is a gift of God. That is very clear. Ecclesiastes says, if you can rejoice in the work that you've been given and the situation you're in, that's a gift. And I think that's also an opportunity for us to witness to the world. Because again, that's the other thing that comes through in Ecclesiastes, that never ending desire for wanting more, never being satisfied. It says, the eye cannot see enough and the ear cannot hear enough, and I always want more, and I'm never satisfied. And living amongst those people who are so discontent for us as believers to know, whatever my circumstances with Paul, I'm content. I mean, that is a joyful place. Privileged, God given, place to be in the gospel.

Sarah: That's wonderful. And I think, Karen, all of this has just been so helpful. And I think, as Christy, I know that we've both been saying that Ecclesiastes feels like a slow burn, like we've been sitting in it and we're sitting in it.

Karen: And the more that we do, the.

Sarah: More that we're appreciating the goads, the prods that we need to walk in this way. And you have wonderfully displayed that and helped us see that. And we're just so thankful for you. Would you pray for us and our listeners as we close?

Karen: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Sarah: Thank you.

Karen: Oh, Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for this wonderful wisdom that you've given us. We pray that you forgive us for not listening to your wisdom. Father, we thank you that knowing you actually is the beginning of wisdom and fearing you is the beginning of wisdom. Father, pray for all of us as we spend time in Ecclesiastes, that we will really fear you and know what that means to have that reverent awe of you and to live our lives each day for Your sake. To live as you would call us, to live to rejoice with the good things that you have given us and to live with the pains and the struggles and the things that we haven't got, but know we can hold on to you because you understand. Father, I pray that you will help everyone who's going to spend some time in Ecclesiastes begin to see this world rightly in deeper ways, to understand the pains and the struggles and the suffering in a fallen world. But where you're pointing us towards is eternity. And the fact that we long for eternity is a good thing. The fact that we long for things to be put right, the crooked be made straight is a good thing. Help us to know that Jesus is the one that makes things straight. Jesus is the one that comforts. Jesus is the one who's destroyed death. Jesus is the one who is going to one day judge this world, but a perfect judge. Not a failed, unrighteous judge, but the righteous judge that we can trust. And may we rejoice in Him more because we understand the horrors of a world without Him. And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Felicity: Amen. Thank you so much, Karen. What a joy to have you part of this. Really, really grateful. We will next week be back into the text. We'll be kicking into chapter five. Do check out our website, twosystemacuppitate.com. We have blogs going on on there alongside this. We'll be blogging our way through Ecclesiastes as well, which might just help to push home a bit of what we've been talking about with Karen. We will see you next time. We're thankful to ten of those for sponsoring this season.