

Season 9: Ecclesiastes

Episode 7: Eternity Shapes Living Wisely (7:1-8:1)

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Felicity: This season is sponsored by 10ofthose.com. Green ember by S. D. Smith is a young adult fiction series that is threaded through with gospel echoes and themes. My seven year old son and I are reading this together at the moment and we are loving it. It's the tale of Heather and Pickett Longreader, who are young rabbits caught up in an ongoing battle for good against evil. Beautifully written, full of adventure and deftly points the reader to Jesus and the Gospel. Without it feeling like a Bible lesson, it will make an excellent Christmas present for any primary age child who's in your life, but to be honest, adults love it as well. Grab a copy at 10ofthose.com.

Sarah: Welcome to Two Sisters and a cup of tea. My name is Sarah, I live in the UK. This is my sister Felicity, she lives in the States. And today we're jumping into Ecclesiastes, chapter seven, all the way through to chapter eight, verse one. But Felicity, I've been mulling on the kind of rhythms and repetitiveness through Ecclesiastes and I'm just wondering whether you've got any opinions on tea drinking and the repetition of that in life.

Felicity: I appreciate the thought that we do repeatedly drink tea and this is a podcast where we repeatedly talk about the tea as we're drinking. But tea drinking is a joy giving thing and so is it not okay to repeat the joy?

Sarah: Yeah, I think so.

Felicity: I look forward to my daily morning cup of tea and I'm happy for that to be repeated the next day as well. I think. Talking of tea, I have a great cup of tea here. I had the gift of tea being sent to me this week by a very sweet and kind listener and it is a good tea. It's called Paris and it's like a kind of citrusy Earl Grey. You don't put milk in it. It's delicate and it's lovely. I'm enjoying it a lot.

Sarah: Just your type of tea, I'd say.

Felicity: Actually, exactly as if custom made for me. I'm very grateful. Yeah, I will be repeatedly drinking it.

Sarah: So today we're getting into some really kind of practical wisdom in Ecclesiastes. Felicity, I just wanted to ask you before we read it, what's your experience of testing whether something is wise and how do you go about that in life?

Felicity: Isn't that just a question we ask all the time? Like, Lord, how do I know what to do, which decision I should make? And in my experience, we pray, and I think my husband and I would both be of the same opinion on this, we pray, we ask the Lord to show us and we evaluate what we're thinking, like what the next step might be with the Word. We kind of think, is it in line with what the Bible says? If not, then that's a goner. We shouldn't be doing that. But if it is, and we've prayed about it, we tend to then just go for it and pray that the Lord would bless what we're doing and establish that decision if it's right. What about you? I feel like you probably have a more better way of doing that. What's your way?

Sarah: I think probably I'm not so quick to pray. I think we need to need to get to that quicker. But I definitely process things, decisions by talking to others. So that would be my husband first, but actually talking, sounding out a few different people on things, that helps me to articulate and to process what it is that we're trying to be wise or not on. I think so. I think I always find that really helpful, just talking it through and talking it through with the Lord as well. But yeah, the talking thing really helps. So I think maybe you wouldn't be so quick on some things because I'd take a bit more time to talk it to other people. I don't know.

Felicity: That is wise. I like that. I think I'll adopt that. I'm sure I do that anyway and I don't even notice that I am talking about it, but I think you do.

Sarah: All right, let's get into it. So you're going to read for us chapter seven to eight one?

Felicity: Yes, chapter seven, verse one. A good name is better than fine perfume and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go

to a house of feasting. For death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart. Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless. Extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and the patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. Do not say why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions. Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter. But the advantage of knowledge is this wisdom preserves those who have it. Consider what God has done who can straighten what he has made crooked. When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider this god has made the one as well as the other. Therefore no one can discover anything about their future. In this meaningless life of mine, I have seen both of these, the righteous perishing in their righteousness and the wicked living long in their wickedness. Do not be over righteous, neither be over wise. Why destroy yourself? Do not be over wicked and do not be a fool. Why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins. Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you. For you know in your heart that many times ye yourself have cursed others. All this I tested by wisdom, and I said, I am determined to be wise. But this was beyond me. Whatever exists is far off and most profound. Who can discover it? So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate, and to search out wisdom in the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly. I find more bitter than death. The woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. Look, says the teacher, this is what I have discovered. Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things. While I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them. All this only have I found god created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes. Who is like the wise, who knows the explanation of things. A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.

Sarah: Thank you, Felicity. Well, it has to be said, it's a collection of Proverbs here, isn't it? It feels very like we're reading Proverbs at this point, the actual book of Proverbs. And it feels fairly confusing in how they're all put together. But there is a kind of desire to live wisely. That seems to be the thread that kind of seems to be holding them together, doesn't it?

Felicity: Yes, I think we have that desire to live wisely and we have it contrasted with foolishness. I feel like that's the helpful kind of determiner that he's driving us towards seeking to live wisely. I love how he says wisdom is a shelter that preserves those who have it. And it seems that to be a fool and not be wise is then putting yourself in jeopardy in numerous ways. And I feel like this is then an outline of lots of different ways of jeopardizing things by being unwise.

Sarah: Yeah. And I think it's helpful just have that big picture that we're seeing through the book, isn't it, that we're remembering our Creator, we're fearing Him, and we're seeking to do good as we live this life under the sun. And we're seeking to obey his commands because that is ultimately the best way and the wisest way to live in this crooked world and we have that repetition of that phrase, don't we, who can straighten what he's made crooked? We have that here. Again, should we just talk through then what the proverbs say?

Felicity: Yeah, I think that in the first part it's just quite stark, isn't it? We're looking at sort of verses one through to six even further because we have as ever, the teacher is bringing us to the point of death quite frequently, isn't he? So it's better to be in the house of mourning than it is to be in the house of pleasure. And as we read that can feel a bit a little bit depressing maybe, but I think that then that is the key to then living this life wisely with

that perspective. So as he does that again and again, it's not to say that we always need to be thinking of death and we always need to be sad, but actually as we do that is what then thrills our heart with what we have through the Lord?

Sarah: I think, yeah, I think yeah, it's very sobering that, isn't it? That actually a coffin is a better teacher than a cot. He's saying, isn't he, that actually death is a better teacher than new birth, new life, and actually it's better to go to a funeral than it is to a party because of what you're going to learn and how you're going to grow in wisdom. And however sobering a kind of description, that is the reality is it's true, isn't it? Reality is you come away thinking about the fragility of life and what you're doing in the midst of it far more once you've been to a funeral than you do if you go to a party.

Felicity: Yes, exactly. And it's tempered then with what we've been hearing all the way through, especially in the previous chapter or the previous two chapters, this idea of enjoying what God has given you as the thing which doesn't last. But it is a gift from God. And I think then we have that as we go on. And so this thing that you have, this level, this kind of steam that you can't quite grasp, what is it to be wise in that? Well, it's to shelter in the things of the Lord, the wisdom that the Lord gives us. So as we look at verses eleven and twelve, there wisdom like an inheritance is a good thing. These are the things to be chased after. I really was really struck by verse 14 there when times are good, be happy, but when times are bad, consider this god has made the one as well as the other. And just that reminder that God is most definitely the one in control. And therefore whatever I see in front of me, I can attribute both to God, all things to God. And in that I then seek to be wise living out this life that he's given me, whether it's looking bad at that point or good at that point, bringing suffering or joy.

Sarah: Yeah. And the kind of assumption there, isn't it, that wisdom can't actually change the fabric of this world, but wisdom can help us to navigate it and to live in it into the very down to the very details. Like we kind of skipped over it a bit, but actually the patience is better than pride. Just very simple. But actually, yes. Isn't that true? Patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the HAP of fools. If I was to really take that to heart in my day, actually, that is a wiser way to navigate the brokenness of this world, isn't it? I think I was really struck by verse ten. Do not say why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions. How much do I hark back and go, oh, it's so simpler. It's so much simpler when we were kids and, oh, my kids are growing up into such a terrifying world, and I wish it wasn't like this way. I wish we could go back and actually he's saying here, no, don't do that, but ask for wisdom with how to live now. Because this is where the Lord has put you to such a time as this in this season, as we've been seeing the seasons come through. So, yeah, that really struck me, just thinking more about that.

Felicity: What else do we get as we, I think, capturing what you're saying there, that he's asking us to kind of keep moving forwards in this world. Not that we're chasing after the meaningless things, but we are to live in this world. And there's just quite a lot that's just nitty gritty reality here, isn't there? Like you're talking about the patience and the pride thing, but even just verse 21, do not pay attention to every word people say. You may hear your servant cursing you for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. I mean, that's just the reality of being people living in this world and that's just a helpful thing to be reminded of. And in that, live wisely.

Sarah: Yeah. And living wisely here also looks like verse 20, indeed. There's no one on Earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins. That is the reality of our crooked world, isn't it? That is the reality of the makeup of everyone who has ever lived bar one. And living wisely just means that we need to acknowledge that daily, doesn't it? That actually I sit here knowing that I need my sins forgiving and knowing therefore, the wonder of the good news. And that reminds me of kind of the Romans language that Paul uses to then say, but praise be to God, through whom we have this extraordinary grace and good news. The Lord Jesus, who was righteous, who always did what was right, who never sinned, and is able to bring us out of this.

Felicity: Yeah, really helpful just to be reminded. Yeah, reminded of our spot, the other side of the cross and being able to see that clearly. I like in verse 25 when he says, I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom in the scheme of things.

There's just a real deliberateness about there. We're not going to by accident come across the wise way as we deliberately search the scriptures, as we listen carefully to what God is saying, as we fix our eyes on Jesus, then we're going to be working out the best way to live. And I'm glad to be reminded that I need to kind of discern that, like, I need to pray, I need to ask God to help me with that. And it's not going to be obvious all the time, and I just think that's a good reminder of the reality of life, really.

Sarah: Yeah, big time. That it's a process, isn't it? That it's a continual learning I love at the end eight, verse one, a person's wisdom brightens their face, changes its hard appearance. Like wisdom does something to us as we grow in it, we transform and we change. And that is a beautiful thing. But also in the verse, the very breath before that, who is like the wise, who knows the explanation of things. Living wisely can get us so far, but actually, the perspective of we're not God, we cannot know the explanation of all things. It's elusive, you cannot grasp it. And we saw that back in chapter three, didn't we, with the time and the seasons as well, and just being able to remember that however much we long to live wisely, ultimately we're not the Lord and we don't know everything. And that's the point, isn't it?

Felicity: Yes. And so when he comes, he brings us back round a few times to just the mention of God. So even just verse 13, consider what God has done. God has made the one God. And whoever fears God in verse 18 will avoid all extremes. I feel like we have, like previously, back in the first two or three chapters, we didn't have much mention of God, did we? And so it was just slightly lost in the hevel, in the meaninglessness, this life under the sun. And as we get to this point in the book, while he's still kind of cycling in circles, and it's not exactly linear thinking, we are in the spot where we're able to fear God. Remember our creator, those Goads are just I feel like the Goads are a bit more obviously pointing us to the Lord. And so as we look up, we then look down and work out a bit more of what it is to live wisely in this world.

Sarah: Yeah, big time. But I think part of that is because we've been sitting in this longer and it really is going to work on our heart, isn't it? We both say this has been a kind of slow burn on our heart. It's taken a long time to kind of really start to really impact the way that we're seeing, the way that we're viewing the world. But now that it is, I feel like we are grasping something of it, aren't we? And I'm really enjoying this because I get to this point and I do want to learn how to live wisely in a world that is crooked. And I know that in verse 23, verse 24, it says, I'm determined to be wise, but this was beyond me. Whatever exists is far off and most profound. Who can discover it? I know that I can't discover all of it, but if I can discover some of it, then praise God. And then when I start to think about Christ being the very wisdom and power of God and actually Christ crucified, that's where God's wisdom is most known. Coming to the cross and seeing Him there, then, wow, that I get my mind opened to some of that, then praise God. That's just a gift to be enjoyed and to want an appetite more and more for.

Felicity: Yeah, that's so true, Sarah. That's so true. And I think it's so desirable. I think you're right that the Lord has been at work in our hearts, that we want this wisdom more. And when he talks about verses 26 through to 28, this idea that folly is a trap, that we can get ensnared in things that aren't wise. I'm more inclined now than I was before I spent time in Ecclesiastes, I think, to work hard to avoid the snares. Wisdom has been made more and more attractive, I think. And I guess that does come through our perspective being shifted and we're beginning to see the world according to the Lord. And as we do, we see the gift and we see what it is to do good and walk wisely. But I think that's the ongoing prayer, I feel like that's been a prayer that's just been kind of reverberating around my heart as we've been in Ecclesiastes. This praying that I would be desiring to be wise and to listen to the Lord in that, it kind of comes back to what we were talking about last week, that approaching God rightly with few rather than many words. And as I do, would I be eager for obedience and wisdom in that?

Sarah: Yeah, big time. Should I pray?

Felicity: Pray? Yes, please do.

Sarah: Father God, we just thank you so much that you do give us wisdom in how to live in this crooked world. We thank you so much that Your Word is life giving. Your Word is wise and we thank you. Ultimately, that this wise preacher king here points to the wisest preacher king who was always righteous, who never sinned, and ultimately in whose death

we have the very wisdom and power of God. O Lord, please, would you give us an appetite more and more for this wisdom? A wisdom that enables us to live rightly in your world, to do good in this world and to honor and fear you, because that is the wisest way to live. Father, please do that work in our hearts and please help us practically to live this out. To the praise of your glory, we pray. Amen.

Felicity: Amen. It's encouraging, isn't it, that the Lord is at work in our heart, big time. As ever, we would love for you to be chatting with other people about what we're reading, what you and I and what our listeners are getting into. So if you haven't already, why not call a friend and talk through this passage of scripture with them? We've got questions for you to dig into over a cup of tea. They're in the show notes, so do check them out. They're there every episode. So next Friday we'll be looking at chapter eight, and we look forward to seeing you then.

Sarah: See you then.

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