

## Ecclesiastes chapter 7 – Wisdom

Someone told me once about a man who was facing death by firing squad, and he was afraid this was the end. But he noticed what happened to the men before him.

Another man went and was standing before the firing squad, and as the soldiers took aim, and this man had a brilliant idea, and he shouted “earthquake”. The soldiers ran panic stricken and took cover, and the man made his escape.

Next another man took his position, except this time he shouted avalanche! And the soldiers ran and he too made his escape.

So the third man thought “well I think I’ve got an idea, I think I know what will get me out” (and you know the story) there he was standing as they took arms and he shouted “fire”. Some people are wise, and some are other-wise and there’s a massive difference!

Two people can believe similar things, have similar morals and goals, and yet one person is constantly getting into bother, trouble and disaster, and the other seems to fly through with ease, everything goes their way, the difference? Wisdom.

**It’s not a matter of intelligence!** I’m sure you know some very clever people, brains like a planet, who cannot make sense of life. When we see wisdom, we think “I want some of that”.

And that’s what we’re thinking about today. The wise life! How to do life well. How to know in a situation: what is the right thing to do, and the right way in which to do it?

And we’re going to look to God... look to his word.

We could go to the library and look in one of the thousands of self-help books. Shelf upon shelf upon shelf of them, “5 principles for success” etc. they are the wisdom literature of today. In the ancient world it was books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and archaeologists have even found other, non-Jewish writings.

Many of them are full of little proverbial sayings, most cultures have them

- “A watched pot never boils”
- “A change is as good as a rest”
- “A picture is worth 1000 words”

Proverbs is full of those, and Ecclesiastes is part of this wisdom tradition, and today’s chapter is more like that, little proverbs.

And you’ve got to read them right:

So “a watched pot never boils” – don’t take that literally! You can just imagine, Beatrix watching the pot, and it does boil, and she runs to daddy and says, you got it wrong, the pot did boil! No, you’ve misunderstood it – you need to think about it, read them right.

Proverbs are much less like a box of chocolate; (You know what happens when you open the box of chocolate, some people, once it’s open, they munch through the lot!)

They’re much more like boiled sweets! They demand to be sucked, chewed upon, it takes time. You can’t just devour a whole box!

And so, as we come to a whole chapter, we can't chew them all. But I think there are three principles which tie them together which I'll try to explain:

**Here's the first: embrace suffering!**

That's the theme of the first six verses, the chapter begins with a series of comparisons, the first one is simple and obvious:

*"a good name is better than fine perfume"*

He's saying: your reputation really matters; it is of more value than anything Chanel or Christian Dior might come up! That's fine.

The shock comes in the second half of verse one:

*A good name is better than fine perfume,  
and the day of death better than the day of birth.*

Now how can that possibly be true?

He goes on v2

*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.*

What a misery-guts! You think: but he's not a killjoy, you'll find him at parties, and in fact on a number of occasions he says "enjoy life as much as you can, when you've got something to enjoy, thank God for it!"

He's not a misery guts, but he's talking wisdom here. He saying "you'll learn more wisdom at a deathbed than you will in a maternity ward.

Some people go around just trying to have fun all the time, always looking to celebrate, go to parties... They cannot face bad news! If they're watching the news or surfing the web and bad news comes up, they just switch it off and turn over to watch comedies instead. People like that are very shallow, you won't find much wisdom in them.

If they can't face any suffering or difficulty, they're only willing to see the nice things, when let's face it, life is hard! They won't be wise, how can you know how to navigate through life well when you try to deny or ignore so much of it.

When eventually confronted with the awful reality of death, such a person will just switch off. The nurse has explained "you're dying" the family have been told – they're dying. Yet they can't talk about it, they won't.

King Louis XV of France forbid anyone from ever mentioning the word death in his presence, or any reference to death. By contrast, Philip of Macedon, the Greek ruler, got a servant to wake him up every morning and say "Philip, remember you must die" it's a much wiser approach, although obviously not a cheerful way to get out of bed in the morning. "Philip, remember you must die"

Some people say don't they, when they hear the news that they're dying, "it changed everything"

Someone said “Some of the things I used to think matter very much indeed suddenly became irrelevant – and other things became very significant indeed: relationships, family, friends”

Death makes us consider meaning. What is life all about?

It makes us ask:

About the future: what happens after I die?

About God: am I right with God?

Am I ready to meet my maker as my judge – those are serious issues.

The wise person faces not only the awful reality of death, but also suffering in general v3.

*<sup>3</sup> Frustration is better than laughter,  
because a sad face is good for the heart.*

*<sup>4</sup> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.*

Now again, don't misunderstand the type of literature:

He's not saying, don't ever go to parties, don't be happy.

Find miserable people and spend all your life with them.

He is just stating his point in very strong terms, he's saying “don't spend all your time being happy and laughing”, because there is much to be learned from those who suffer. And there is much to be learned, when you suffer yourself.

Like me, you've probably noticed, it's those who gone through the hardest experiences who seem to get life, and understand it most.

And the Christians who suffer the most, seem to most shine with the love of God in Christ. Someone pointed out that it's when you crush lavender that the beautiful fragrance comes out, it's when you squeeze an orange, that the sweet juice comes out. And so it is again and again, when people go through very difficult times, that wisdom is produced – if they respond in the right way.

Maybe you're going through a particularly hard time at the moment, I know some of you are, maybe you just can't understand that any good could come from it.

I'm not saying that if you look at it in the right way you'll be able to work out what's going on: God is sovereign and often his ways are, well, hidden from us.

It's sometimes years later that we see how God actually used that in our life for good – sometimes only other people can see it, but we can trust in the God of amazing Grace, who can work in very hard times in our life, to bring goodness.

Our task is not to be forever trying to avoid suffering, but to make the most of it – don't seek it, oh he's not saying that!

That would be really foolish, but if it comes – reflect on it, learn from it, embrace it, and God will use it for good in your life and for you. That's the first principle.

The second principal is

**Resist temptation.** That I think comes out in the next chunk, v7-10

Very often, when people come to ruin, it is not primarily because of external circumstances, but internal failures – as we allow weaknesses and failings to blossom in our lives rather than fighting against them.

That can happen over years, when the trajectory begins, and we don't deal with our weaknesses. The more our character is formed by them, the more dangerous they are, and they bring us down, and others around us.

The teacher says, I've looked at life, and I've seen that wise people resist temptation. And he gives a series of examples of them, there's **extortion in v7**

*<sup>7</sup> Extortion turns a wise person into a fool,  
and a bribe corrupts the heart.*

It's said "everyone has their price" – and sadly there is much truth in that. That again and again, sometimes seemingly good and upright people are bought. There's a price that can corrupt them.

Maybe it's a headteacher: that pupil would never normally get a place, yet somehow they get into the school, and then the sports facilities are completely re done, after a generous donation, it's corruption. Or the employee who was thinking about saying something about some corrupt practice, and then suddenly find that they're offered promotion, and they've lost their tongue, and they say nothing. Maybe it's smaller, the captain gives the place in the sports team given to the one who buys the drinks, or the invitation to that exclusive event. Maybe it's bigger, rigged elections, bought world cup votes.

It's not new, and it will always go on. But extortion is corrosive, it works inside you as a person, it works through communities and even nations – don't do it! Says the teacher, resist extortion.

### **Resist impatience v8**

*<sup>8</sup> The end of a matter is better than its beginning,  
and patience is better than pride.*

Someone said about his son, he lived by the motto "if at first you don't succeed, then give up and do something else"

And so many people these days are like that – they don't see things through.

We are impatient, we start things but we don't get to the end.

Paul Newman was married to his wife for about 50 years before he died. He gave an interview after they've been married for decades in which he said this "we live in a throwaway society, we can throw away bottles and cans, we can throwaway children and marriages, Joanne and I work on mending things: we fix the toaster when it breaks, and likewise we fix our marriage when it strained" and yet many don't, we do live in a throwaway culture.

If the relationship is going through a bad patch: "that must be the end of it" and onto the next one, relationships need work.

Friendships too – they need working at. Family, that needs work. Jobs – they need working at. When it's up to you, and it isn't always, but when it is, we are to see things through, as much as we can.

It's true of evangelism, and working to serve the church. Many people, in the early days of their Christian life, are thrilled with the gospel and in small, weak, ways, look for opportunities to tell people about Jesus, yet when it gets hard, don't we so easily give up? The teacher says "keep going, even through hard things" the end is better beginning, resist impatience.

### **And resist anger v9**

*<sup>9</sup> Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,  
for anger resides in the lap of fools.*

Those angry words, that quick response... is regretted for so long. You can't take them back.

Words can come out so quickly can't they? When the red mist descends – the anger rises in your heart, count to 10, count to 20, 30, to 100 if you need to! Because those words will keep on doing their work years later: as the husband of the wife, is still wondering "did he really mean that?" "Is that what she really thinks?" Those words that were said in the heat moment, they **can't** be taken back – resist anger.

### **And resist nostalgia v10**

And we kinda laugh at nostalgia, but it can be just as destructive as those other things:

*<sup>10</sup> Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?"  
For it is not wise to ask such questions.*

We tend to think, it's just older people who do that – but we all do it at different stages of life. At school, the big kids say to the new kids, "well of course it wasn't like this when I was in year 1"

Employees can say it to new colleagues, "It was a lot better when we used to have this..." The school, the college, the workplace, **the church**, oh it's not what it used to be. And the teacher says, it's not wise to ask such questions "why were the old days better than these".

There might be some truth in those comments, but there's no wisdom in them.

And it's a real challenge as we get older, in any sphere of life, whether it is getting older in the job, older in the social group, older in the church, to resist saying, the old days were always the best days:

If the positive for you is increasingly in the past, then we will be getting increasingly disillusioned with the present – and **now** is the time to live, not the good old days: the present!

We are to live wisely, and that means being as positive as we can: **resist temptation!** That's the second principle, and it's a battle within.

And lastly, but not least, perhaps the most important:

from v11-18: **fear God**

Of course the self-help books don't say anything about God, they're all about self, *self-help* tells the story doesn't it – “this is what **you** can do to sort your life out”, you've got the power, you've got the power to create the life that you've longed for, the life that you deserve.

Take control of your destiny, the future belongs to you, you can get the life you dream of if you simply follow this advice: me me me, you you you, self self self.

It's nonsense, of course. I cannot control my destiny, it's arrogant nonsense, I do not have the power. God is in control, God has the power, and so the teacher says v13, *consider what God has done*, that is the essential starting point to wisdom: consider God.

You see wisdom, is about seeing reality, living in the light of it. And the fundamental reality is that God made everything, he sustains everything, everything is for him!

The wise person sees the world the right way, which is with God absolutely central to everything.

The book of Proverbs says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”... And the book of Ecclesiastes says right at the end, as its conclusion “fear God, and keep his commandments”.

So the second half of v13

*Who can straighten what [God] has made crooked?*

It's really saying “I'm not in control”, God has determined what happened in the past, and I can't change it.

And v14 he extends this to the present and the future too:

<sup>14</sup> *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.*

God has determined the past and I can't change it, God determines the present I must simply accept it, and God will determine the future, and I cannot discover it.

You might think that sounds rather fatalistic, like you just sit back and let life happen to you – it's not fatalistic, we have responsibility, the whole wisdom tradition is urging us to take responsibility – we've got choices, and we're to make wise choices not foolish choices – is not fatalism, it's humility.

It's saying God, you are God, and I am not.

And we have to ask, have I recognised that yet? Do you recognise that God is God, and you are not?

Some people don't even believe in God, yet if there *is* a God, and you live as if *you* are God, that is utter foolishness. Living as if the fundamental reality of the universe does not exist. But if you do believe in God, and in his son Jesus Christ, and if you recognise that he is the fundamental reality, and you're still not living/acting as if that's the case, that's foolish too – he doesn't just say, believe in God, believe in Jesus Christ, and that's wisdom! The devil believes in God, the devil believes in Jesus Christ. Do you fear God?

Not that you're terrified of him, or that you can't bear to think of him – but that when you have to make a decision as to how to live: at the moment when there is conflict in your mind, when you have a choice: Do I do what I want to do, or fear the Lord and do what he wants me to do – it's simple wisdom, fear God.

We could say more, but we need to draw to a close.

He warns about being overly righteous, overly picky about every little thing, when some things are so small they genuinely just don't matter.

He warns about being overwicked, letting yourself go into ways which displease God. And concludes

“Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes”

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, not more self-help, but more looking to, listening to and depending on God, with the right attitude in our hearts.

Embrace suffering, resist temptation and Fear God.