

‘THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM’ ECCLESIASTES 7

[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday May 22, 2022]

1. The Joys and Grievs of Wisdom.

Last Saturday night we caught up for dinner with some old friends. They’re not a church-going family. But half way through dinner our friends told me that their son Spencer had a question for me. Spencer is 6. And Spencer does Scripture at school. So he’s often got questions about God and the universe. And I don’t know if you’ve got much experience in this area, but questions from 6 year olds are often very tricky to answer. Adult questions tend to follow a more predictable pattern. But questions from 6 year olds can be about anything! So I took a deep breath and tentatively asked Spencer what his question was. Was he going to ask me who made God, or what God’s middle name was, or why the sky is blue, or whether there’s Wifi in heaven? These were all possibilities. But as it was, he had a question that was very easy to answer. He wanted to know whether God ever sleeps. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was able to share with him what Psalm 121 clearly teaches- that God never sleeps because he’s always awake to watch over and care for his people. Spencer seemed pleased and satisfied with the answer.

You see, even 6 year olds seek wisdom. They want to know how the world works. They want to know what life is all about. They want to know what God is like. And, of course, for those who are humble and curious, the pursuit of wisdom continues all the way through life. That’s true now, as it was in the days when Ecclesiastes was written.

Wisdom is the topic of Ecclesiastes 7. But this is not the first time Ecclesiastes has spoken about the subject. Back in chapter 1 the Teacher explained that he sought to explore life under the heavens with wisdom¹, and he was glad to report that his wisdom and knowledge grew². And that is a joyful thing isn’t it? Like Spencer getting an answer to his question, so too the adult who grows in wisdom rejoices to be wiser today than they were the day before. But Ecclesiastes 1 finished with a more sober assessment of the gaining of wisdom- 1:18: ‘For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief’. Yes- it’s a joyful thing to learn, to understand, and to become wise. But that’s not the whole story is it? Sometimes knowledge is a weight on the shoulders and a shadow in the heart. Sometimes wisdom brings us into grief. Because the world isn’t always a happy place.

¹ 1:13

² 1:16

2. Some Kind of Introduction (7:1-6).

And as we come to the start of this chapter, the Teacher is keen to remind us of this. And I think the first six verses of the chapter are some kind of introduction. And in these six verses he says some pretty interesting things.

Basically, it's a meditation on the relationship between wisdom and sadness. Things on the surface may seem sweet- like perfume. But wisdom is concerned with the deeper things. And death is a reality that we must all contend with. So the Teacher says that you can go to a party and eat and dance and have a happy time. But going to a funeral will make you wiser- because it causes you to think more about what really matters. And whilst there's a place for laughter, when it comes to wisdom, frustration is even better- because it reflects that a person is thinking about what life is actually like.

In this introduction to the chapter I don't think the Teacher is saying that you should never wear perfume, or feast with your friends, or laugh your head off. He's just saying that if you want to be wise you need to face reality. If you want to be wise you need to look death in the face, and see clearly the frustration to which God has subjected the world, and you need to be prepared to weep and mourn. In these opening verses the Teacher invites us to take off our rose-coloured glasses.

3. Wisdom in Ecclesiastes 7.

And then, having issued that invitation, the Teacher offers us a series of wisdom sayings. In many respects Ecclesiastes 7 is like a chapter from the book of Proverbs. There's not necessarily a unifying through-line, but rather it's a 'fragmentary collection'³ of wise thoughts. And I want to briefly take you through them now. I think there are ten distinct sayings, and I've listed them there on your outline.

- corruption (v.7)

Firstly, verse 7.

[Read 7:7]

This is an interesting perspective on corruption actually. It reminds us that when one person takes advantage of another by deceptive means, or when a person uses money or power to get what they want, it's not just others who are harmed and it's not just the system that's corrupted. The guilty person themselves is corrupted. Corrupt behaviour

³ Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Tyndale Series), p.108

actually changes a person. It makes them more likely to do the same again, or worse. Corrupt conduct is a fast track to becoming a fool.

- patience and pride (v.8)

Then he has a reflection on patience and pride. Verse 8.

[Read 7:8]

It's easy to puff out your chest before you do something and to pronounce how well you're going to do. "I'm going to smash this". "This is a piece of cake". But success can only be measured at the end. The bluster or promise at the beginning is just hot air. But the finished product or task- that's the satisfying ending. So patiently working on something to bring it to its conclusion, or patiently waiting for something to be concluded, that is wisdom.

- slowness to anger (v.9)

Then, verse 9, slowness to anger.

[Read 7:9]

The fool is the one who sits with anger every day. The one who is quickly provoked. I guess by implication the wise person is the one who takes a deep breath before responding, who chooses to be calm and careful rather than to speak rash words with a raised voice. And I guess if you're anything like me it's not hard to think of times you've been the fool here- when you've even surprised yourself at how quickly anger has bubbled up within you. But of course, we know the Father who is always slow to anger and we can learn from him. And we have the Spirit of his Son producing in our hearts patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. The path towards wisdom here is in prayerfully keeping in step with the Spirit.

- pining for the past (v.10)

Next the Teacher has a saying about pining for the past. Verse 10.

[Read 7:10]

This is perhaps especially the folly of the middle-aged and older. We who can easily remember simpler and better times and who are fond of telling those younger than us about how good those times were. But the Teacher's warning here is not just to avoid being a grumpy old man. It's not just about pining for the olden days, but it's also about

not pining for the old ways. It's impossible to read this verse without thinking of the Israelites in the wilderness telling Moses they wished they could go back to Egypt⁴! Despite the fact that their life there was a life of slavery, the Israelites rated it as better than living under the LORD's discipline in the desert. But their assessment in that moment of frustration was clearly foolish. Because under the LORD's hand they had been rescued, and even in the wilderness they were provided for, and they were heading for the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. And that story is a reminder to us that we must never think the days before we were Christian were better than these days. Sure, you may not have known the loving discipline of the LORD back then, but you were a slave. And that should never be forgotten.

- the goodness of wisdom (vv.11-12)

Next, in verses 11-12, the Teacher says something wise about wisdom itself. I think his main idea here is that wisdom is good not only for the present- like money in the pocket and a roof over your head, but also for the future- like an inheritance. Wisdom not only has benefits in the here and now. It also has the power to preserve a person through the years. And wisdom even has power, as we know, to preserve us into eternity.

- the hand of God (vv.13-14)

And then we come to verses 13-14. I actually read these verses a few weeks ago when we were looking at chapter 3. But they're so important I want us to pause over them again now. The point of verse 13 is that God's sovereignty is irresistible.

[Read 7:13]

And he may know what lies ahead. But we don't. And this is the point he makes in verse 14.

[Read 7:14]

We should relish the good times with happiness. But we should also submit ourselves to God's will in the bad times. Wisdom insists that we accept every moment in life as it comes to us from the hand of God. Now, I realise that many people today, including many Christians, just refuse to believe this. But what we find here is the consistent teaching of the Bible from beginning to end. And my own perspective is that I'm incredibly grateful to learn that God is control of the bad times as well as the good. Because the alternative would be to accept that bad things happen randomly and mercilessly and that God can do nothing about it. And I would hate to live in world like that. But the Bible teaches instead that I can trust God to be working out his good

⁴ Eg. Exodus 16:3, Numbers 11:5-6, Numbers 14:1-4.

purposes even through bad times. I find that that brings me a lot of comfort. I hope you do too.

- extremes (vv.15-18)

Next we have some wise sayings about extremes. Verses 15-18. And these are perhaps the most difficult verses in the passage to grasp.

[Read 7:15-18]

Being righteous doesn't protect people from death. And being wicked is no guarantee that you'll die young. But nevertheless, there is a correlation between foolish wickedness and an early death. Just like there is a correlation between effortful righteousness and burn-out. And it's with these observations that the Teacher urges us to avoid extremes⁵.

It's not as if he thinks a little bit of wickedness is a good thing. I think the Teacher would condemn all wickedness. But he does want us to appreciate the special dangers that come with surrendering oneself to a wicked way of life. We know what he means, don't we? We know people who've been caught up in a lifestyle of wickedness that sees their lives cut tragically short.

And when it comes to righteousness and wisdom he has something similar to say. Again, I don't think the Teacher would claim that there's a limit to the goodness and beauty of true righteousness or wisdom. But I think he's reflecting here on the person who tries so hard to be morally faultless that they wear themselves out in the process, and the person who seeks wisdom so relentlessly that they become obsessed and exhausted. Perhaps these are people who haven't accepted what he goes on to say in verse 20⁶, people who haven't admitted the limits of their own righteousness. Perhaps these are people who haven't accepted what the Teacher also says about the limits of human understanding⁷. And, as he's always reminding us in Ecclesiastes, it's the fear of God that will teach a person this necessary humility.

- the power of wisdom (v.19)

Well, in verse 19 we then have a saying about the power of wisdom. He's just finished reminding us of wisdom's limits, but he's quick to clarify that he still sees immense value in wisdom. And here the emphasis is on the way in which wisdom is stronger than authority. Better to be a wise servant than a foolish king. Verse 19.

⁵ This has echoes in other significant works of philosophy- eg. Aristotle's concept of the 'golden mean'.

⁶ And verse 29.

⁷ Eg. 6:12

[Read 7:19]

- righteousness (v.20)

And then, as if one clarification requires another, in verse 20 he makes the limits of righteousness as clear as possible.

[Read 7:20]

- paying attention (vv.21-22)

And finally verses 21-22.

[Read 7:21-22]

This is a shrewd comment about the looseness of the human tongue. He is making the same observation that many others have made, including James the New Testament writer⁸. Who can tame the tongue, James asks? Who indeed? And given we're caught out by that question as much as the next guy, the Teacher urges us here to be careful what we tune our ears to. If we listen to everything, we may hear people speak of us the same way we've sometimes spoken about others.

4. Some Kind of Conclusion (7:23-29).

Well, there are the ten different wisdom sayings that we have in the middle of the chapter. And each one of them repays careful thought and reflection. But as best I can tell, I think the last seven verses of the chapter act as some kind of conclusion to this extended discussion of wisdom. Certainly verse 23 has a concluding ring to it.

[Read 7:23-24]

Like we saw at the end of chapter 6 last week, the Teacher wants to round this chapter out with an expression of his great humility. He approaches the task of finding wisdom with great determination. And yet, he quickly confronts his limitations. And this too is wisdom- knowing how little we know. Nevertheless he's given his mind to searching out wisdom and understanding wickedness and folly- as he says in verse 25. And what has he found? In short, his answer is simple. Sin.

He talks in verse 26 about a sinful woman who ensnares a sinful man. This seems to be a reference to the destructive power of sexual immorality- a force for particular evil in the

⁸ Eg. James 3:1-12

world that he feels constrained to draw particular attention to. And those of us who have been touched in some way by this sin will be quick to agree with his assessment of it. More bitter than death! And those of us who are tempted in this way will do well to hear that assessment and to let it sink in, not permitting the evil one to persuade us that it's actually thrilling rather than destructive, or that it's actually freeing rather than enslaving. Here is a word of wisdom which our society right now desperately needs. And if people today were more wise even in this one area, the world would most certainly be a less bitter place.

But whilst he wants to especially understand the unique pains of this sin, he also wants to underline the ubiquity of sin. It's everywhere. In everyone. Here he repeats the point he made back in verse 20. And this is his final word about wisdom in the chapter. From verse 27.

[Read 7:27-29]

Of course, verse 28 is a tricky one in our cultural moment. And I'm happy to admit that if I were writing a poem about the pervasiveness of human sin I would definitely choose some different words. And I think we can only conclude that in the day that he wrote, the way he expressed himself here was less likely to alienate people than it is today! But we mustn't be distracted by that verse and miss the point he's making. Because I'm convinced that what we have in that verse was is just a colourful way of making the point that all people are sinful. I don't think he really believe there are occasional upright men but zero upright women. He's already told us in verse 20 that there's no one on earth who never sins- male or female. And that's his point here again. As he reiterates in verse 29. God created us for better things. But we have left his way, every one of us, and we've gone looking for sin. And we continue to find what we seek, every one of us.

5. Seeing Clearly.

Chapters like this one are not easy. I've certainly found this a difficult sermon to prepare. Not least because it is such a fragmentary collection of ideas. It's hard to know how to see the chapter as a unified whole. And I wanted to take you through the different proverbial sayings so we could wrestle together with what being wise in this world involves. But I also wanted to think deeply about what does hold this chapter together, if anything. I wanted to consider if there are any major themes that emerge, perhaps a thought that we might walk away with today and which will help us see the bigger picture and not just the details. And here's where I've landed.

It seems to me that the Teacher would say that wisdom is all about seeing clearly. Seeing ourselves clearly. And seeing the world clearly. And remember, this means

welcoming both the joys of wisdom and its griefs. So let me draw the threads together today/tonight with four ways in which seeing clearly helps us to be wise.

- our limits

Number 1- seeing our limits clearly. The Teacher says that we need to see the limits of our life. And that means facing the reality of death. And until you've been to a funeral and learnt its lessons, and until you've thought honestly about your own funeral, you haven't embraced wisdom.

And the teacher also says that we need to see clearly the limits of our own understanding. Until we can say like he does in verse 23 that we've sought wisdom with determination but that it's beyond us, until we can admit that we haven't yet begun to be wise.

- our world

Number 2- seeing our world clearly. This chapter reminds us that we live in a world of corruption, a world of anger, a world of bad times as well as good, a world where some are killed by their own wickedness and others are destroyed by their pursuit of righteousness, a world where people curse each other, a world where no-one is without sin. And the Teacher reminds us that until we look at this reality squarely we're not being wise. Those who think the world is a wonderful place and who close their eyes to its darkness are not wise. Those who think the world is making irresistible progress and that humans are more and more enlightened with every generation- they're not wise either.

About 15 years ago the Australian country singer Casey Chambers released a famous song called 'Ignorance'. In it she talks about how uncomfortable it is to read the paper, to watch the TV, and to listen to the news on the radio. The most famous line of the song is very poignant and, if you can excuse the language, I think it reflects the point Ecclesiastes is making. She sang: 'If you're not pissed off at the world, Then you're just not paying attention.' By which she meant, that many people are just ignoring the shape the world is really in. And that, the Teacher says, is the opposite of wisdom.

- our sin

Which of course leads to number 3- seeing our sin clearly. This is the pulse of this chapter I think. The Teacher says that true wisdom has deep roots in an awareness of how corrupt we really are. And, of course, this is the reason the world is broken too.

The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart⁹. And until we can see our own hearts clearly, we are not wise.

- our hope

So, where does that leave us? Ecclesiastes 7 says that those who seek wisdom must be prepared for grief. And many remain foolish because they only want the wisdom that consists of neat answers and happy thoughts. But those who gain true wisdom learn to grieve the reality they clearly see.

My young friend Spencer seeks wisdom. But as he grows up he needs to learn not just that there's a God who wakefully watches over his people. He also needs to learn that one day he will die. And between now and then the world is a war zone. And the key battle-field is within his own mind and heart. He needs to see these things clearly. Otherwise he'll be a foolish person. But isn't that pretty bleak? Isn't that a pretty negative picture of Spencer's future? Not to mention a bleak picture of your life and mine? Is there any hope?

Well, I guess what the Teacher says to us is that there's certainly no hope in rose-coloured glasses, or wishful thinking, or in choosing not to pay attention. And perhaps he'd actually say that, under the sun, there really is no hope for perfect life, or joy, or righteousness. I guess the implication of his teaching is that there's no hope like that, not unless, unlikely though it may be, you could find someone who could conquer death. Not unless you could find someone who didn't find that wisdom was not beyond them—someone who could know profound and far-off things. Not unless you could find someone who would not just be angry at the brokenness of the world but who could fix it, someone who could change the world with justice and love. Not unless you could find someone who had some kind of solution for human sin. If only we could find someone like that?

I guess the author of Ecclesiastes may not have been able to imagine a day when someone could write a letter to a group of Christians and say something like this (Romans chapter 3 if you're interested):

[Read Romans 3:23-24]

⁹ This line is sometimes attributed to Adrian Rogers: Quote by Adrian Rogers: "The heart of the human problem is the problem o..." (goodreads.com)