

Facing Up To Reality

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much. To keep that passage open in front of you as we continue our journey through Ecclesiastes, looking at the words of the preacher that we have in this great book, this in so many ways, unique book of the Bible. Two things to encourage us as we start looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 7 together this morning. Number one is this. I think this is one of the most complicated chapters in Ecclesiastes to read. Its meaning is not immediately obvious. There are lots of little proverbs stuck together to give us a bigger picture. How does that encouragement for the end of you sitting there right now with a few questions about what we've just read? That's okay. Hopefully we will make sense of at least some of those questions and hopefully we'll see the big picture as we move through. So number one encouragement, if that's anything complicated, that's okay. Number two encouragement is this. I think this is one of the most helpful chapters in the whole of Ecclesiastes. This is a passage that in a number of ways reads the book, which explains how we think about life and how we think about the world, really. This is an incredibly counter-cultural chapter. But I think if we actually get this, if we grasp what this passage is all about, this chapter, it can be one of those light bulb moments and shape how we think about so many different aspects of our lives. So that's our prayer as we look through Ecclesiastes chapter 7 this morning. This is a chapter putting forward a very different way of approaching the world.

Sometimes that might sound a bit shocking as we go through. Sometimes that might involve us to unlearn some of what we've been constantly taught through culture and films and music and media. But I do hope with me as we dwell on this this morning, you'll see that this different view is one that we will find incredibly compelling. And again, that big theme of wisdom in the Bible and here in Ecclesiastes, you'll see that this is the view of life and that actually goes with reality, that goes with the grain of reality rather than constantly trying to live in denial of that, pushing against that and the frustration and the disillusionment that can so often bring. So that's the plan.

There's three key areas where we're going to hear this really counter-cultural message this morning. The first one is this, face up to your death. Face up to your death. We're coming back here, if you've been with us for the last couple of months, we're coming back to one of the the preachers, favourite topics in Ecclesiastes, our life is our breath, our life is fleeting. And so to make sense of that fleeting life, we need to face up to our death. We see that straight away.

Verse one, we have this proverb, a good name is better than precious ointments. The idea that our character, our reputation is more significant than external things, like what we smell like, we can't do great, we're on board. Nothing too surprising here.

And then suddenly, we're in off the deep end, the second part of that verse. And the day of death better than the day of birth. Sitting up and taking notice, aren't we? And that's how the future continues. It is better, verse two, to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

[3 : 3 8] So this is the end of all mankind. And the living will lay it to heart. It's not really what we're used to, is it? Orpest three and four. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face, the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

The preacher is unrelenting here, about pointing us to our death, and the importance of that, the importance of considering that. Why has the preacher got this focus?

When I was at school, one of the big subcultures in our school, at least, was being a god student. You get as many dots anymore, it's a shame. But it's kind of black hair, black trench coat, black boots, black nail varnish, and you could colour them in with a pencil if you weren't committed to the whole thing.

And there's a lot of times, I mean, for the goth, kind of thinking about, and generally looking like, kind of death, basically. A morbid, negative scene, not a lot of fun going on there. And you might be tempted to read this passage and think, well, it's a preacher, just a bit of a goth.

Yeah, this morbid guy, kind of moping around, obsessed with death and funerals. What's his problem? That is not what this is. This is not the preacher saying, look, we're all going to die, so what's the point?

[5 : 05] This is the preacher saying that recognizing you're going to die, recognizing we're all going to die, enables us to see the point of life. Facing up to our death helps us see better how life should be lived. One writer puts it like this, the day of your death is a better teacher than the day of your birth. The day of death is better than the day of birth, not because death is better than life, it's not, but because a coffin is a better preacher than a cot.

We live in a world that is constantly trying to avoid death, or even talking about death, don't we? We've heard about Brian Johnson, he's a tech millionaire, investing all his wealth in trying to stop himself from aging.

The Netflix documentary, Don't Die, all about it, all about the length he's going to, and encouraging others to follow, to try and keep death away.

That's a pretty extreme example, but in some ways it's just kind of like the cosmetic industry or fitness culture turned up to 11, where eternal youth is the goal and death is something to be avoided and not thought about at all costs.

So often very deliberately, little space in our lives just to ponder the reality of the fact that one day our lives are welcome to an end. We'd rather distract ourselves, we'd rather go to a party, we'd rather watch another box set, we'd rather scroll through social media, anything, rather than think about the fact that one day we'll die.

[6 : 49] And the preacher is saying that when we do that, when we try and block death out, as our culture does, it's like having access to the greatest teacher or the best coach that you could ever imagine.

It's like turning up into your kitchen and there's Paul Hollywood giving a bread master class. But instead of stopping and listening, we put our fingers in our ears to block out what he is saying, we ignore him.

Because actually, and this is for all ages, however near or far away you might think your death is, actually it's realising that we will die.

It's facing up to that which shows us what is truly important in life. It's only looking ahead to that day when our life will end. And really taking that seriously, dwelling on that, that enables us to start thinking wisely about how we should live now.

And what do you want people to say at your funeral? Didn't it be work all hours? Didn't you have lovely skin? Wasn't he great on the PlayStation?

[8 : 02] Weren't they always up to date with the latest celebrity news? Wasn't their house tidy? When we realise one day our life ends, it shortens our focus on what is of true and eternal significance.

And so put yourself there in the house of mourning, the preacher said, at the funeral service, at the back of your life. And what do you want it to encounter for?

And that is what the preacher is encouraging us to think about in order to find true wisdom in how we live. The six or as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools.

This also is vanity. The idea that we can try and drown out that voice by just having a laugh. And we can seek always after kind of fun and games, parties, comfort, entertainment.

But just like that kindling or straw in a fire, all that will burn away at world and last. And the great book on Ecclesiastes is by a guy called David Gibson.

[9 : 06] I've been meaning to recommend it for a while. Some people sound very familiar. If you go and read it now, he got there first. But he calls his book, Living Life Backwards. And this is his big idea of the book.

It's when we consider our death the end of our life and we'll look back from there. And that is how we find wisdom in day to day life. And not only in day to day life, but that shapes the biggest choice of all that we have to make, doesn't it?

What about our death? What about that day? How are we going to face that? We can just try and drown that out, pretend it will never happen. But the Bible offers a far better answer because it promises that actually in the gospel, through Jesus, we can look ahead to death.

We can take it seriously and allow it to shape our presence, but also recognize that it is not the end. That in the resurrection of Jesus, God has defeated death once and for all.

And so death is not just a teacher, but another author says, death is an evangelist. A death that is pointing us toward our need for Jesus. Death is saying, don't put your fingers in your ears and try and numb yourself with all the things that our world provides.

[10 : 25] Instead, get real wisdom by looking to Jesus, hoping in him. That unavoidable day when all of us will come face to face with death itself.

Not only will we not have wasted our life, but also death will have ended our life. And we look forward to eternity with God through Jesus.

And so there's the first big point in this great passage, face up to your death. Again, as we said earlier, that's not the world's approach, is it? But that is a wise approach.

And I hope we see that that is the approach that actually fits with, that accords with reality. And moving on then, the second thing we see is this, face up to your limitations. And in some ways, I think that's this kind of whole chapter, so death is the ultimate limitation, isn't it?

But point two, face up to your limitations. From verse seven onwards, really, these various proverbs, these are all about how in life we constantly come up against our limitations, and against our weaknesses, and against the struggles of living in a full world where things are not perfect.

[11 : 40] I think if we were to summarize these verses, we could do it like this, that there is not some magic way of living, where if we just got everything right, things would just go really smooth.

And so, following on from that, rather than constantly being disappointed, or surprised, or frustrated, that things aren't going as we expect, rather than spending all of our energy, our time, our lives, and manufacture things to be exactly as we hoped they would be, and that actually, we would have trust that in all things, that God is in control.

And in all things, God will work out his purposes. That actually, the world is not a kind of a Disneyland fairy tale, with a happy ending where we all get what we wanted.

And yet again, I want us to say that understanding that, it's not supposed to be a miserable thing, and it's not a defeatist attitude, it's not supposed to make us despair, but actually, the preacher wants us to grasp that, to point us toward a fruitful life of meaning, rather than a life of endless frustration.

Now, let's take a look at a few of the examples he lays out. First, in terms of money, verse 7, really, is saying that when things are going wrong, don't just look to spend your way out of trouble.

[13 : 05] The idea there of paying a drive, unjustly spending just to get our way. Because the preacher says that corrupts the heart. What could be more important than that? What could be more dangerous than that?

Wisdom, on the other hand, is that he's willing to go through hardship, rather than try and unfairly pay its way out and get a free pass. The second example the preacher gives is patience.

Verses 8 and 9, when things aren't going our way, it's called to be patient. Again, how do we do that? Well, we need to simply accept that sometimes things are hard.

We don't always get what we want, when we want it. And rather, as we read out of this verses, rather than getting angry, rather than flying off the handle because we don't get our way, wisdom means patience as we accept that being realistic about the struggles of life.

The third example he gives is a great kind of timeless example, isn't it? Just general dissatisfaction or nostalgia, some people have called this. First Ken say not, why were the former days better than these?

[14 : 22] In that idea, things aren't what they used to be. People have been saying around the family for thousands of years, how many times have we heard? Or said that, oh, they don't make them like they used to. Well, the picture doesn't actually say whether that is true or not, whether things were better or not.

What he actually says, well, don't say that because that is a pointless question. And that is a pointless discussion. Because this is the world. This is the era that we live in.

We need to accept that, to face up to that, rather than wishing things away, wishing things were different, wishing we lived in some other imaginary era when everything was great and everything went smoother.

Don't wish your life away. Be realistic about the times in which we lived. And this whole idea that is actually summed up, I think, in verses 13 and 14.

I did have a look there. Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider God has made the one as well as the other.

[15 : 32] So that men may not find out anything that will be after him. And God made our perfect world. We read about that Genesis 1 and 2.

Sin has come into our world. We read about that Genesis 3. It is no longer perfect. And that the preacher is making the point that still God is in control. God is God when things are going well.

And God is God when things are hard and not going as we want things to do. And the key to wisdom, to living well, especially when things are tough.

It is not just to try and do anything for an easy life. Not to get angry with God or others because things are hard. It is not to think there is some way that we can take a shortcut or we can figure everything out if we are smart enough.

Or make the right books or listen to the right podcasts or online guides or make the right decisions. And life will be a big picnic. And it is not the way to wisdom.

[16 : 36] I think it is to face up to our limitations. I want to figure out, isn't this so different from so much of what our world tells us.

What is the world's message? We can do anything. We can overcome anything. We can change anything. We can achieve our dreams, whatever they might be.

Nothing limits us. Whether that is our biology or our genetics. Whether that is what people think of us. Or how other people respond to things. Whether that is stuff that is going on in our life.

Whether that is our natural gifts or situations that God has placed us in. Our world tells us that we can overcome any of those things to become as we want. And that sounds great, doesn't it?

Doesn't it sound far more inspirational? Luckily for me, if I stand here and tell everyone, look, because you can be and you can do whatever you want. But actually it is not fair to say that.

[17 : 41] Because that simply leads to more disappointment and frustration. It doesn't take longer if you are sitting there now. It doesn't take longer to think about that. And to see however nice it might sound, that it simply cannot be true.

It doesn't matter how much I want it or desire, how much I dream about it. My NBA basketball career is never going to happen.

There are various, countless reasons for that. But that is the reality. And for us, we can think, well here would be a nice dream, but it is not going to happen. And the key here is to see that wisdom embraces these limitations God has set.

So we are able to live according to his will for us. Not impatiently, not angrily, not discontentedly, but wisely according to God's plan.

And I want to say before we move on to our last topic, but if we are here as Christians, really grasping this and living in light of this can be an amazing opportunity to witness to the goodness of the gospel to those around us.

[18 : 50] And I want to say to you here, if you are here in another person, but you are wondering what it is all about. We hope that you are able to grasp what an attractive picture this is.

To be able to have a life that says, well here is something that offers real contentment, real peace, real satisfaction, because it is not constantly pushing against the reality of life.

To be able to model a way of life that accepts our limitations and therefore we are not constantly frustrated or dissatisfied when we are speaking to people. But we can model satisfaction and joy.

We are able to face and accept our limitations and know that God is in control of all things. Why statistically have so many people both struggling, but also in their struggles looking for spiritual answers, whether in the church or elsewhere.

I think it is in part because they have been constantly sold this way of life. You can do whatever you want to do. Life is yours to make of it whatever you want.

[20 : 01] God is entirely unnecessary, maybe even unhelpful for a happy life. And people are getting to a certain stage of their life and finding that that doesn't work because it is not true.

They have not been able to achieve all of their dreams. And the natural consequence from the world's approaches is that they are lots of true or hope. You just didn't dream them hard enough. Or you weren't committed enough.

Or you didn't do the work. As those people we have the chance to demonstrate a better way. That doesn't lead people in guilt and frustration and despair thinking they are not good enough.

But a better way that the Christianity isn't everything going as you have always been. And we are able to entrust ourselves to the ultimate reality which is God and his care for us. So that if we have that and not that we have that and not that we have that and not that we have that. But not that we have that. There is not a better way that the Christianity isn't everything going as you have always been.

But it means stability in hard times. Because we are able to accept our limitations. Our identity is not based on what we are able to achieve. But our identity is based on what God has achieved for us.

[21 : 05] able to entrust ourselves with the ultimate reality which is God and his care for us. So if we have that, then we have enough. So face up to your death, face up to your limitations.

Here's the final topic we see in these verses. The preacher says, face up to your unrighteousness. Again, what does the world say? The world says we are all intrinsically good.

There is goodness within you. Listen to your heart. Humanity is just going to progress and become kinder and better and more loving. What does the Bible say? It says, well, actually, just hold on a minute there.

I think actually you could even put the Bible to one side here and say, well, where is your evidence for this general goodness of humanity? Check the news.

Where is your evidence for this general mould progress within humanity? Is that really happening? Rather than pretending that we're all so good, the preacher says it's better to face up to why there is so much wrong.

[22 : 14] We're not going to look at every bit of these verses. Again, as always, as a day-toothed you've not touched on or you're not sure about it. You can find me afterwards. But you see that in verse 15 onwards, the preacher introduces this idea of righteous and wicked.

In my vain life, I've seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness. And there is a wicked man who parons his life in his evil doing.

The preacher said that and looked at things. And the preacher said that he was making these observations. And it's right, isn't it? Well, he said it doesn't always make much difference to your lifespan here on earth, whether you're good or bad.

And he goes on to say, these are surprising words that are here in the Bible, aren't they? Be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

Well, it sounds like the preacher is saying, actually, don't be too good. You know, in this book all about wisdom. Don't be too wise. And as the Father of the Lord said, don't worry too much about these things. That's not his message here.

[23 : 19] He is saying this. Don't think that you will be so wise or so righteous that you are going to know all of the answers. And you are going to save yourself.

And so wisdom is good. Verse 19, it gives strength. But actually, however wise we might be, we all make these things. We all make these things wrong. Verse 20, that surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

And so strive after that, the righteous life that wisdom brings, but never put your hope in righteousness and wisdom. Face up to your unrighteousness.

And this is where the chapter finishes, reading from verse 27 to the end. Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher. While adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things which my soul has saw repeatedly, but I have not found.

He's saying really, here's the limit. Here's as far as I can understand. That word found means kind of figured out or learned or grasped. And he goes on to say, One man among a thousand I found.

[24 : 29] But a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I have found. I have figured out. I have understood. The God takes man up the lights. But they have sought out many schemes.

But I'm going to put it in here. It's not a sexist thing. There's a kind of long guy with no girls. He's basically saying nobody. You know, one out of two thousand. And probably the one man who does understand, he's talking about himself there.

Really, he's saying here, at the close of this chapter, I don't understand the whole of humanity. The preacher, the kingly figure of great wisdom, is saying my wisdom is so limited.

But here's what I do know, says. Verse 29. See, this alone I found. That God made man upright. But they have sought out many schemes.

And so I want to be wise. Yes, face up to your death. Yes, face up to your limitations in life. But finally, face up to your unrighteousness. And that all of us have wandered from the design that God has for us.

[25 : 37] All of us have sought out many schemes. All of us have thought that we know better than God. All of us have gone our own way.

We need to face up to our unrighteousness and see that there is this gap between us and God. That is a gap that we cannot cross. And the New Testament teaches us the same thing.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, a very different type of writing from what we've been seeing here in Ecclesiastes, but the same conclusion. And he says, The non is righteous, no, not one.

No one understands. No one speaks to God. All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good, not evil does. It goes on to say those well-known words, For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

And again, that same call there, in our ears, to face up to our unrighteousness. And having done that, we fully appreciate what Paul next writes.

[26 : 46] He says, And are justified by his grace as a gift through redemption that is in Christ. And the preacher identifies the problem.

Listen to me again, verse 20, Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who is viewed and never sinned. Ecclesiastes identifies the problem, and yet God has provided the solution.

Ecclesiastes anticipates Jesus, and we look back to Jesus. And there has not been a righteous man on earth who is viewed and never sinned.

It is not of us, as if Jesus came, under the perfect life that we all failed to lay, under the cross, he suffered in our choice, so that we might be forgiven.

And that we face up to our unrighteousness, and recognize we are given the gift of his righteousness. And the ultimate wisdom there in how to live wisely is to look to Jesus and trust in him for our righteousness.

[27 : 54] Again, the world tells us that the answer is within, that it's all down to us. The Bible, the Gospel tells us that the answer is not in us, but it is in Jesus.

And again, like the rest of the chapter, that can at first seem like a minute of a down, and how does it say, actually, the answer is not in him. It's that very negative, actually, the focus of this chapter, the focus of the Gospel, the outcome of that, is not to be negative, but it's rather to come alive alone, to give us hope.

But it doesn't all depend on us. We haven't messed up, and missed our chance that we do want. But that is offered to us in the Gospel. And we're unable to live life as it's designed.

It doesn't always, it doesn't all depend on us. We are mortal, one day we'll die. We are limited, we're not in control, we are unrighteous, we stay in every day. But in Jesus, we have the rescue, that means we can walk through life, with wisdom and peace, accepting that the struggles of the world, that we will all face, that things are not as we'd always loved them to be, and that knowing, that in the end, we'll be welcomed home, into perfection, not because we deserve it, but because of Jesus' work, in our place, his righteousness given to us.

We'll still enable us to look forward, to that day, when our life here, on earth, will end, to recognize, the great future we have, that awaits us, and to live every day, of our life, in light of that future, and possible, because of the work of Jesus, in the gospel to us.

[29 : 36] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in your word, the Bible, we are shown the world, as it truly is.

Lord, it is often humbling, to be brought face to face, with reality, to recognize that we are awful, that we are limited, that we are imperfect, but in this full world in which we live, things don't always go as we lighten to and constantly wish things into being.

But we thank you that when we are able to face up to that truth, we are able to live with wisdom, going with the grain of reality when we recognise that you are the God who is over all things.

And you are the God who one day we will stand before when our days on earth are done. You are the one who sustains us even when we are confused and don't know why things are going the way they are going.

And you are the God who offers forgiveness. That our unrighteousness, that we are placed with the righteousness of Christ. And that we may stand in your presence with great security and joy.

[30 : 50] So please help us this week to live according to your wisdom and your realism in terms of the world around us. Particularly in difficult times, in terms of disappointment, in terms of sickness, in terms of pain.

We ask as we live wiser in those times that we will show a better way of life. Not a life characterized by frustration or disillusionment or anger, constantly trying to push against the bounds that you have set.

But our life recognising that each day is from you. Our life finding contentment and peace, even in hard times. We pray that this, as we live in the hour, would be an invitation to others as well, to recognize the truth of your word and their need for Jesus.

We pray that he would be our focus today and this week and every day of our lives. Enabling us to live lives with wisdom in light of the eternity of wisdom with you.

We pray all these things in Jesus name. Amen.