

Search for Wisdom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 July 2022

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] And if you have a Bible, you can turn with me to the book of Ecclesiastes, that wisdom book that we find in the poetry section.

We're going to read from chapter 6, verse 10, to chapter 7, verse 14, as we hear the preacher teach us how to live wisely in the time that God sets for our lives.

So chapter 6 and verse 10, let's hear the Word of God once again. Whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known.

No one can contend with someone who is stronger. The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone? For who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow?

Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.

[1 : 10] 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 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.

[2 : 20] 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. And so we will leave our reading there. Perhaps you are familiar with the expression, the best laid plans of mice and men.

From Rabi Burns to a mice, the best laid plans of mice and men always go awry. It was a theme picked up by John Steinbeck in his book of mice and men.

For those of us who had to read it in school, you might remember George and his big friend Lenny and George's great plans for their security and prosperity.

[3 : 25] But it all goes wrong. Things tragically unravel at the point of the book, the best laid plans of mice and men always go awry. It resonates with many, I guess, because we know it by experience.

We come to discover that so much lies out of our control. We discover often that we are taken by surprise, by events and circumstances.

Humility teaches us that we cannot explain everything. And that injustice and sadness are a feature of life. And the preacher in Ecclesiastes has been showing us these things.

But the question for us then is, how should we live in light of that? And that's where the preacher is going to take us. He's going to give us practical advice. He's going to say to us, the way to deal with the fact that we lack control and times are confusing and uncertain is not escapism.

It's not parties, not video games, not amusing ourselves to death, however we might choose to do that. So it's not escaping reality, nor is it despair.

[4 : 37] We're going to see in chapter 7, he says there are still good things, there are better things to find, even in troubling times. He's going to invite us to wisdom once again.

And a particular wisdom, a wisdom that recognizes who God is, one who recognizes that the times of our lives come from Him.

And we can see this, here's our first point, that God sets the times for our lives. And we can see this because of the way the text is put together. You can identify two brackets or two bookends.

So think of a bookshelf, think of some bookends, okay? And those bookends are going to emphasize for us God's control and God's knowledge in the face of our uncertainty and smallness.

So the first bookend, chapter 6, verses 10 to 12. So as we've seen, and as you'll see if you read the book of Ecclesiastes, often, because of the particular point that the preacher is trying to make, as he imagines what would life be like if this was all there was, if there was no God, often God goes unnamed.

[5 : 51] But look at verse 10. It says there, whatever exists has already been named, and what humanity is has been known.

Our preacher has in view God, the Creator who names all that exists, including us. It goes on in verse 10. No one can contend with someone who is stronger.

And who is the someone who is stronger? It's God. Job, another wisdom figure, came to realize that. You can go down to verse 12.

Another question. Who knows what is good for a person in life? Well, often we don't, but God does. He is the one who made us. Therefore, He knows what is good for us.

Another question. Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone? Who is capable to tell the future? Who is capable to tell the future beyond ourselves?

[6 : 48] Obviously, we can't. God can't. And so, He's going to give us lots of practical wisdom for living. But first of all, He wants to remind us, here's our God.

He is our Creator. And He knows everything. Now, why does He tell us that? I think He tells us that. To humble us. So that we would submit to Him. So that we might depend on Him.

There's a couple of conclusions that the preacher draws towards the end of the book. Chapter 12, verse 1. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

Or chapter 12, verse 13. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments. In light of the ups and downs of life, we fear God.

We remember our Creator. So that's one bookend on the one end. But then we go to the end of the section. And you see the second bookend there in verse 13 and 14.

[7 : 50] Now, notice it's a wisdom book. So we're called to consider. So here is something to reflect on. Who can straighten what God has made crooked?

And to reflect on the fact that God made the good times and God made the bad times. In other words, our times are in God's hands.

So to the preacher, He is our Creator. And He is also our King. He establishes the times for our lives. And that we do not have the ability to straighten what He has made crooked.

Maybe it makes us think of that language in Isaiah and the book of Romans. God is the potter. We are the clay. And so as the objects, we have no right to say to our Maker, Why did you make us this way?

And again, what the preacher wants for us is that we would live with trust. That regardless of circumstances, we would rest knowing God is God.

[9 : 03] And we are not. That God understands and has a purpose when we do not see and understand. And to accept that is what will enable us to receive the times that come into our lives with trust and with worship.

As we would aim to live wisely in whatever comes our way. That we might pray with Jesus, our Savior. Not my will, but yours be done.

As we recognize the goodness of our God and King. That we would be able to pray daily into your hands. I commit my spirit today. I want to trust in you today.

And understand too that we can trust in Jesus, our Savior. As we sang at the beginning, He is the one who gives us strength and peace in the valleys of life.

And ultimately, He is the one who has given us Himself. He is the one who went into the valley of the shadow of death for us. So that nothing can separate us from the love and goodness of our God.

[10 : 07] So God sets the times for our lives. That's our bookends. How then should we live? It is the theme of chapter 7 in the first 12 verses.

It's almost like a bookshelf of practical wisdom. And we're going to see there's a few different volumes on the shelf. All with the theme of living wisely.

So chapter 7, verse 1 to 6. Here's our first book that the preacher pulls out from this bookshelf. Live wisely by listening to death.

There is a way in which death can function for us as a preacher or a teacher, inviting us to receive wisdom.

That our preacher here reminds us. There's more wisdom to be found at a funeral than there is at a festival. There will be more depth to our lives when we live considering the reality of death rather than in consuming pleasure and trying to ignore the inevitable.

[11 : 16] I think the first six verses want to drive home. Remember that we will all die. That's reality. So live well today.

And of course we as New Testament people would say that since the resurrection of Jesus, remember to live for eternity. So let's look at verse 1.

Verse 1's got a very interesting, perhaps perplexing contrast. We maybe understand the first. A good name is better than fine perfume. You know, being known as a person of integrity and character, being respected, that's worth more than some luxury product.

But then he goes on to say the day of death is better than the day of birth. What's going on there? I think the preacher is wanting us to understand that the day of life and the day a baby is born is a wonderful day.

It's a day to celebrate, of course. But looking at a newborn baby will not teach us anything about their life because it's all still to come. But the day of death is different because the day of death reveals, think about a funeral.

[12 : 34] We discover, don't we, what a person valued, what a person lived for. And so the preacher is saying to us to live in light of that, to choose a good name.

To understand that what matters isn't my collection of fine perfumes. It's the lives that we touched. It's our generosity. It's our values and priorities.

It's our faith in Jesus. Verse 2. Again, not our natural instinct. Not the natural instinct of our city.

It's better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting. There is more to be gained from a funeral home than there is from a party.

Why? Because it keeps the reality of our own death in view. And when we live aware of our mortality and of eternity, often that serves to fix our focus.

[13 : 40] It can be very easy to drift and to prioritize things that don't really matter. But as we consider what really matters in life, doesn't it help us to treasure life more?

To make more time for family. To be able to be content and to enjoy the good gifts that we receive. It's an invitation to us to stop. To stop chasing the wind.

It's also an invitation for us to consider, am I ready to meet with God? Am I ready? Am I right with God? Am I trusting in Jesus? Speak, am I tilting in Jesus?

Am I outfit my skinning? Am loothand? Am I Jac mourning? Am I feeling like that? Am I noticing thou? Am I veil is a sign of sin Anyway? Am I trusting there. Where am I m■i lugar with God?

Am I letting sweat back all my Essenians? tragedy has happened or there's been some terrible situation that's taken place, often in the media, maybe if families are being interviewed or people are responding, often they will include the message, you know, remember to treasure your loved ones. Hold your loved ones closer tonight.

[15 : 02] And that's one of the values of sadness, I think. It serves that wake-up call for us to recognize what really matters. It's all about living with wisdom. Look at verse 4, the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

The wise person wants to live with depth, not the short-lived escapism, not just empty froth or laughter, but wants to live life forward. If I know that one day I will die, what legacy do I want to leave? Not chasing and stressing over the stuff that doesn't matter, but rather as the New Testament encourages us that we'd be treasuring heaven and storing up treasures in heaven, that we'd be trusting in our Savior, the one who conquered death. So even as we do reflect on death, we do so with eternal hope when we're trusting in Jesus. Verse 5 and 6 tell us the wisdom of choosing the right preacher and teacher. It's better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. The songs of fools, the laughter of fools, it's like the crackling of thorns. Have you ever burned up thorns or brambles in your garden? You know they go up in a whoosh and then it's done. There's no substance there. Wisdom pursues substance and death rather than empty laughter. It's an invitation to consider, to listen to listen to the reality of death so that our trust would be in Jesus ultimately, the resurrection and the life. The one who has gone to prepare an eternal home for his people, the one who will return to take his people to be with him forever. And so we live wisely when we listen to death and we're aware of our own mortality.

Okay, let's put that book to one side and let's pick up the next volume. There is a much thinner volume. It's there in verse 7. Live wisely by guarding against the love of money. Extortion turns a wise person into a fool and a bribe corrupts the heart. And so we just finished. Last week, there was a big section on the love of money and he returns to it here because it's such a big issue.

Another way that the love of money shows itself is it turns people to extortion and to bribery and corruption. Payday loans company, phone scammers, pursuing the love of money and extorting others in the process. But the warning here, did you notice the warning? Extortion turns a wise person into a fool. Even the wise. Even someone who wants to walk God's way can be sidetracked. The pool of money is so strong that even the wise can fall into the ditch of looking to get rich quick, of stepping on others to get ahead. And so we need to hear the preacher's wisdom. To borrow from last week as well, remember, God is in control. God's in control of our lives, including the wealth that we have, the career we have, and our lot in life in general. That's all in God's hands. And so again, this is an invitation to choose the wisdom of contentment rather than pursuing the love of money at the expense of other people. A couple of days ago, I was reading Psalm 4. And I'm going to turn there. I'm going to read what David has to say towards the end of that psalm. He's discovered true contentment.

Listen to how Psalm 4 finishes. He prays, David was going through a very hard time, but he had joy. He considered it joy to have the Lord shine on him, to be revealing his love and his mercy to him. He was living in that peace that comes from knowing God's presence and protection, and he wouldn't swap it for all the money in the world.

[19 : 52] That's wisdom. That's true wealth and treasure. So live wisely, guard against the love of money. Okay, here's the next volume in this practical wisdom. Live wisely, choose the path of patience.

Now, I think for many of us in the 21st century, this is a really challenging one, because everything seems so much quicker than it used to be. And the expectation is that there is a key, there is a life hack for everything, there is instant success to be found wherever you turn. So on holiday, we had a nice beach holiday, and we decided it'd be fun to rent a surfboard for a day. So we did what everybody would do who couldn't afford to pay for lessons. You go to YouTube, you watch a YouTube video that was called Learn to Surf in 10 Minutes. That's great. 10 minutes in your living room, and you've got it mastered. Well, guess what? We didn't learn in 10 minutes. I doubt we would have learned in 10 years. But that's the temptation and the tendency and the age that we find ourselves, there must be instant success. That's not the wisdom of the preacher. Look at verse 8, the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. What's he saying to us? He's saying give things time. It takes time to complete a project. Don't expect to master something in a moment. It takes patience and effort and discipline and perseverance with anything in life to raise a family, to grow in biblical wisdom, whatever it might be. And he says that might challenge our pride. Maybe we expect this will be easy. I'll be able to do this, no problem. Wisdom is willing to plod patiently over time. So give things time. He changes his focus in verse 9.

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools. What's he saying there? He's saying take your time. Take your time in how you respond to someone else. Now, we live in a day of the hot take and of social media. Our preacher has a lot to say to us. He's saying it's folly that flies off the handle. It's folly that turns to instant anger and venting. You know, maybe we know that experience. It feels good in the moment, then we're left with regret. Wisdom takes a different path.

Wisdom chooses to think the best of the other person. Wisdom is ready even to receive the grain of truth in any criticism, even when that criticism was not sought out. And wisdom exercises patience.

You can remember what Jesus taught in Matthew chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. As he equated anger with murder, the command, do not murder. He spoke against being angry.

[23 : 02] He spoke against calling someone a fool in the heat of the moment. And then he called his people to aim for reconciliation. So, we take our time in how we respond, that we respond graciously and wisely.

And then verse 10, there is this invitation to read the times wisely. Do not say, why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions.

Now, I don't know if this has always been the case, but we're definitely living at a time where there is a fascination with retro and with nostalgia. We seem a particularly nostalgic culture.

It seems that you can't watch a TV show or a movie, even going to fashion, to music, without there being some reference to definitely to the 80s and absolutely the 90s. I'm quite happy there, because I grew up in the 90s, and that's my happy place. But there can be a real temptation with nostalgia. And we put on our rose-tinted glasses, and we say, well, everything was better.

Everything was wonderful in the good old days. Perhaps we find ourselves doing that. Everything that you can look back and say, well, there was this time, there was a season in my life where everything was just wonderful. And we can forget all the difficulties, and we can just, you know, kind of keep it in a glass, and it can seem perfect. We can do that in our country. We can do it in our church as well. Look back to glory days. More people, more knowledge, more respect, whatever it might be. The danger, of course, there may very well be some truth in that, but the danger is that if we're always looking backwards, two things at least. There could be a temptation towards sort of bitterness and despair on the one hand. You know, the good old days were past, but also we can ignore God's presence in the present.

[25 : 03] There's a real danger if we're always looking back with nostalgia to forget that God is still on the throne today, and He's still working today. We can forget to look for Him, even in the day of small things. So wisdom, our preacher says, chooses the way of patience, even in hard times. Like David, Psalm 40, I waited patiently for the Lord. Okay, here's the last volume in our bookshelf of practical wisdom. Live wisely, because wisdom is the best protection. Maybe you've noticed as we've gone through that there's a series of better-thans in these verses. A good name is better than fine perfume, better to go to the house of mourning than feasting, better to heed the rebuke of a wise than listen to the song of a fool's. And here's the last one in verse 11 and 12 where He says, wisdom is better than wealth as protection, as security. Wealth is an inheritance, but wisdom is a better inheritance.

This is interesting, isn't it? Because the preacher has just spent probably a chapter and a half warning about the love of money. But this preacher knows life doesn't exist in black and white. So he can say to us, on the one hand, don't live for money. You're not going to find gain if you make money into your God, into your idol. But he can say money provides shelter. Of course it does. We need money for our security. It provides for us. It provides for our family. But the thing of it is, I guess, many in the world stop there. Working to earn, working to provide, trading and investing for property and prosperity and security. It does offer a measure of shelter, shelter. But it is not a savior. And especially as we consider all He's taught about the reality of death. We understand that to build on money, and Jesus would say the same, it's like building on a house of sand. It will not stand in the judgment. That's why He says in verse 12, wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter. But the advantage of knowledge is this, wisdom preserves those who have it.

God's wisdom is that good inheritance. It is that shelter that preserves, it protects us in life and beyond our death. So living with God's wisdom, the preacher concludes, is the way to get through difficult times, is to find shelter in the storm.

And from our vantage point, there are certain things that the preacher could not know that we know. That we live since the coming of Jesus. We come since His death and resurrection.

And so wisdom trusts in Jesus, who is described as the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 30, Jesus has become for us wisdom from God. That is our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption, our standing, our standing, our eternal standing, our welcome from God depends on the Lord Jesus.

[28 : 42] And wisdom trusts in Him. The one who said in John 11, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even though they die.

So by way of conclusion, what has the preacher been telling us? He's been telling us that wisdom lives through uncertainty, knowing life is under the rule of God.

Verse 13 and 14 is a good summary. He makes plain life is in God's hands. We can trust God. Life is uncertain to us on the other hand. Therefore, what should we do?

Verse 14, when times are good, be happy. Enjoy the good gifts that God gives. Enjoy food and drink.

Enjoy our work and our rest and our family and our friends. Enjoy this world that God has made. And when times are bad, consider this. God has made the one as well as the other.

[29 : 54] When we know that we can trust God, the preacher has come to discover we can seek for the good even in bad times. I've been following a blog called 30 Days of Hope by a former pastor called John Onwuchekwa. And most of the blog, honestly, is reflections on his own personal grief and coming to discover, after many years, hope and joy through pain. And I discovered he'd recently brought out a new book called We Go On. And so I decided to find out more about what it was about. And one review caught my attention. So this book, We Go On, is very much grounded in the book of Ecclesiastes. I suspect it's going to be a very helpful book. Well, one reviewer said this. He said, after I finished the book, I sang a hymn to my young son and I danced with my dog.

That's it. That's wisdom. Not necessarily the dog part. But when we trust in Jesus, we know that we have security. We know that we have hope. Therefore, we can enjoy the good things of life. And we can trust our God in the difficult days of life. There is always, our preacher says to us, good to enjoy in life, even in the hard times, because we have the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I'm going to go back and finish where we began our service, or almost began it, in chapter 8 of the book of Romans and verse 37. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray once again. Father God, we thank You for the wisdom that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes.

[32 : 20] And we pray that as we reflect, You would give us wisdom to apply His lessons to our lives. Help us to understand that You are our Creator, and that You are our King, that nothing is hidden from You, and that we can trust You, even when we are confused, even when we are struggling, even through the doubts and the difficulties. Lord, help us to know what it looks like to live wisely, to live wisely in the light of our own death, that we would be ready to meet with You, that our priorities would be right day by day. Help us to live wisely in not living for money. Help us to live wisely by practicing patience in our own lives and with the people around us. And help us to understand the security that is found in You and with our Lord Jesus, and the love that You have shown to us, so that we might be able to receive well from Your hand whatever You choose to give to us. Help us to enjoy the good things of life, and there are many, and we thank You for them. Help us to be able to receive wisely and humbly the difficult things, seeking to know how to live with faith and obedience and humble trust, even as we walk through dark valleys and the shadows are deep and dark.

So Lord, go with us and take Your Word and plant it deep in our hearts, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. All right, let's bring our time together to a close, singing the hymn called Grace, and we'll stand together to sing.

Amen. Grace that leads the sinner home from death to life forever, and sings the song of righteousness, thy blood and not thy merit. Your grace that reaches far and wide grace that reaches far and wide, and has called my heart to enter in the joy of Your salvation. By grace I am redeemed, by grace I am restored, and now I'm free.

Grace that leads the sinner home from death to life forever, and I'm free to sing to life forever, and I'm free to sing to life forever, and I'm free to sing to life forever. Grace that I cannot explain, not by earthly wisdom, the Prince of life without a stay, was traded for this sin.

By grace I am redeemed, by grace I am restored, and now I freely walk into the arms of Christ my Lord.

[36 : 26] Let praise rise up and overflow, my song resound forever, for grace will see me welcome all, to walk beside my Savior.

By grace I am redeemed, by grace I am restored, and now I freely walk into the arms of Christ my Lord.

By grace I am redeemed, by grace I am restored, and now I freely walk into the arms of Christ my Lord.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.