

Is it worth being wise?

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[0 : 00] Okay, the comedian Woody Allen said, I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens. And he also said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality through not dying.

I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen, I want to live on in my apartment. Now, it's never easy to talk about death, is it? There's far less experience there, whether it's someone close to us or even just on the news.

But just as the book of Ecclesiastes gets us to consider meaning in life, it also forces us to take into account the reality of death. And so the teacher of Ecclesiastes wants us to explore life, and he wants us to look death straight in the eye, so that we can make sense of our existence as human beings.

Because it's only when we're able to face death head-on, that we will really only be able to live life. And so, Ecclesiastes, when the teacher talks about death, he's not being morbid at all, he's just being real.

Because there's no point in trying to deny death, when death is really the only fixed reality in life. And so whether you're here today or watching online, and you call yourself a Christian or not, the teacher wants us to have the tools to be able to live life in the light of our coming death.

[1 : 32] And so chapter 7, the teacher has basically got one simple point, and that point is, wise up. Wise up. Be wise. Don't be a fool.

And so he does this by bombarding us with a series of proverbs. Proverbs that contrast wisdom with foolishness. And so wisdom is the thread that connects all of these, what seem like random verses or bits of advice together.

They're all about being wise. And so we see three things. First of all, wisdom about death, verse 1 to 6. Secondly, wisdom in life, verse 7 to 22.

And then thirdly, wisdom is limited. Verse 23, 29. Wisdom about death, wisdom in life, and wisdom is limited. So first of all, wisdom about death, verse 1 to 6.

It is wise to remember that one day you and I will die. We won't just go on forever. And so just in the end, the teacher communicates this in verse 1.

[2 : 37] He says a good name is better than fine perfume. And so it doesn't matter if you splash on perfume, and you dress up well, and look good, because we all know that it's your character, and it's your reputation that matters most.

It's who you are that counts, more than how you come across, or what you wear, or how you smell. And so we can get that. But then see what he says next.

He says, And that sounds quite cryptic, doesn't it? Why is the day of death better than the day of birth? Well, surely the joy of a newborn baby is better than someone's death.

But the point he seems to be making is that just like a good name is a better indication of who you are than your Chanel Coco Mademoiselle, so the day of your death is going to get a better indication of who you are than the day of your birth.

Because when a baby is born, there's not really much we can say about the baby, except maybe, oh, he looks like his dad. But he's so cute. But you can't see much else. We don't ask, the person who has breathed their last, their life tells us what they were like.

[3 : 53] David Gibson, in his book, *Destiny of Ecclesiastes*, says that a coffin is a better creature than a cot. Coffin is a better creature than a cot. So a eulogy and a funeral can reveal a lot about a person.

It can sum up their character, and it can reveal what was most important to them in their life. I sat with so many grieving families after the death of a loved one and I asked them, what would you like me to say at the funeral service?

How do you want me to tell a story of their life? How would you best describe them so that we can sum them up as they were for the people who'd be there to pay their respects?

I want to speak to the funeral of an 18-year-old man in Edinburgh and I didn't know him so I asked his family to describe him to me to sum up his life. And he really struggled to say anything about him, even though he liked the age they take him.

And so I gently pressed them and they said, oh well, he liked to watch TV. And so I said, okay, is there anything particular that he liked to watch on TV?

[5 : 01] Sports, football, westerns, the news. And he said, nah, just whatever was on. And I thought, okay, how can you sum up a life that is all that can be said?

And it's such a contrast to the tributes that I read this week about a man called Edward Nelson. Edward was a French-American church planter, church planting in Paris.

And earlier this month, he lost his life when he was climbing with his son in the French Alps. And he was 45. And so the age just struck me because I'm not too far away from 45.

Well, a lot lower than 45. And listen to what this friend said about Edward Nelson. He said, Edward was a key leader in Paris and in France he gave the primary leadership to a movement of church planting in the city.

At last count, 10 churches have come into being because of his work. And then his wife said that each morning he would walk in their local park in Paris and he would pray for members of his church and neighbours by name.

[6 : 09] And so she said, well, he'd love to hike in the Alps and he would be tempted to move there but he always said Paris would draw him back because he was longing for the crowds in the metro or in the packed apartment blocks to come and know Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

And so can you hear what the teacher is saying here? He's saying a birth can't sum up a life like a death can. And so the challenge for us is what we need to ask ourselves is how will I live in the light of my intending death?

Or put another way, what are they going to say at my funeral? What will they say at your funeral? How will our lives be summed up? Because it often takes a death to think seriously about life.

And so see what the teacher says in verse 2. He says, it's 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 case is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of the fools in the house of pleasure. He's saying that you learn far more from mourning than you do from partying because death stops us in our tracks and forces us to take a hard look at life.

[7 : 29] And that's why a funeral reminds us to take life seriously. And so the wise will go to a funeral aware that one day they will be dead. There is foolish people who want to get out the door as quickly as possible because they don't want to think about death.

They just want to get ready to the next party. And so the crematorium or the cemetery will be a far better classroom for us than the pub or the party to teach us about what really matters.

And so the teacher wants to wake us up to the reality of our death because it's not something that we ever want to think about. When I was a theological student in Edinburgh our class got to go on a field trip to the city of Edinburgh mortuary.

Other students got to go to nice places for their field trips and see nice things. But we got to go to the morgue. And I distinctly remember seeing this mashed up rain which the pathologist had taken from a bucket of water.

And it belonged apparently to a 13-year-old man who had died in a tragic road accident and one of our classmates was sick but it forced us all to confront the reality of death.

[8 : 41] That was the point of the exercise. And that's the teacher's point too because if we are wise we will let death cause us to take stock of our lives because it's in times of sorrow sadness and mourning that we'll learn.

And so the wise will let the coronavirus teach them that life is fragile and we aren't in control. And the fool just laughs at often says where's the next party? So even if we live with the motto have a blast while it lasts the reality is that we will still die.

And of course we should enjoy the pain times in life. Ecclesiastes is clear on that. But we shouldn't let them numb us to the fact of our own mortality.

It is only a matter of time before the music stops for us and the party ends too. And that's why the teacher says it is wise to learn from the experience of death.

Life is too significant and life is too serious to laugh off what matters most. And so he says wisdom about death is what you need to get. Secondly he says you need wisdom in life verse 7 to 22 and this is his emphasis wisdom in life and so he gives us this bunch of proverbs to show how wisdom is better than foolishness.

[10 : 03] There are some courses of action which are definitely better than other ones. And so he starts with money verse 7 extortion turns a wise person into a fool and a bride corrupts the heart.

This is bribery and corruption. He's saying that even the wise can become foolish because of money because money has this power to corrupt our hearts. It can make sensible people resort to doing stupid things.

And then there's patience in verse 8 the end of a matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride. He's saying be patient take the long term view of things because most things in life just take time to develop those things and things often make best sense at the end not at the beginning.

The second piano lessons nobody plays like their paninoff after their first lesson do they? Or scientific research it is all about the end result which right now is the vaccine for COVID-19.

That's what matters the end at the beginning. Or perhaps the best example is marriage. It doesn't really matter if you at the wedding of the year and you've made it into Hello Magazine plenty weddings have and yet they haven't lasted.

[11 : 19] What matters is that you make it to the golden or the dying of the anniversary and you still love each other and you all tend to speak open hands in your 80s or 90s or whatever it is.

And so we're urged to be patient and to give thanks the time they need. Patience is a virtue. And then he speaks about anger in verse 9 Do you not be quickly revolted in your spirit for anger resides in the land of fools.

We all know how foolish it is to lose it. Probably some of us more than others to get angry to shoot our mouths off to slam doors to do things that we later regret.

Some of us might think we really need a long fuse or to develop a long fuse instead of a short one. So for you do you lose it in the car perhaps or play a sport at work with your spouse with your children?

A quick temper is never the sign of a wise person. You can see the way by how you behave with those around them. And then he speaks about nostalgia.

[12 : 25] Nostalgia verse 10 Do not say why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions. He's saying don't keep harping on about the good old days because taking a holiday in history is never a wise thing to do because we tend to look back with rose-pinted spectacles on and think that things back then were somehow better than they are today but probably things back then were just as bad as they are today.

It's just that we've got selected memories. Every season has good and evil because human nature doesn't change. It never changes and so the only good old days the world has ever gone are way back and right and the beginning and the creation of the world.

That's when God said all that he had made and he said it was very good. those are the really good old days but ever since then ever since the fall of humanity in Genesis chapter 3 it's just been a series of bad things and so nostalgia doesn't help because it's escapism and it fails to take into account the reality of the world that we live in and so we need wisdom.

So he says in verse 11 wisdom like an inheritance is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money as a shelter but the advantage of knowledge is this wisdom preserves those who have it.

So wisdom preserves those who have it so living wisely does have its benefits. Verse 13 consider what God has done who can straighten what he has made crooked.

[14 : 03] So wisdom is not just about knowing the best thing to do in a certain situation wisdom is about being aware that there is a God and that God is the creator of the world and he is at work and so it's foolish trying to do like or type the God who made us because this world is broken and it's clear and only God can fix it and so we are to live with an awareness of this.

So he says in verse 14 when times are greatly 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.

He is saying God is in control of the good and God is in control of the bad and so we just don't know how some things will turn out and yet his tone here changes to one of cynicism because he says verse 15 in this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these the righteous perishing in their righteousness and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

so he sees bad things happening to good people and good things happening to bad people and it doesn't make sense to him because he's saying well it doesn't really matter how wise you are because life just doesn't always work out the way that you expect it should and so he says verse 16 do not be over righteous neither be over wise by destroying yourself do not be over wicked but do not be a fool by dying before your time it is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other whoever fears God will avoid all extremes what does he mean well these verses are hard to interpret but he's asking he's saying rather commanding don't be over righteous and don't be over wicked so he could be saying that some people take great pride in their good works great pride in their religious performance and love to show off and love to look better than other people and Jesus intended plenty over righteous people in the gospels that were called the Pharisees and they had this holier than thou attitude sort of like

Robert Burns' poem Holy Lily's Prayer a poem about the elder of a church who's happy to comment on the sins of other people but fails to see his own sin and so Burns wrote that poem to condemn religious hypocrisy and self righteousness because we know that is never a good thing and so the teacher here isn't just condemning this kind of religious moralism that's not how we should be but he's also condemning a kind of irreligious relativism that says you are free to do whatever you like it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks and so what's the solution well the solution here is to fear God and avoid these two extremes avoid religion on the one hand and avoid irreligion on the other hand because both are ways of trying to do life without God both are ways of trying to earn our own salvation because God isn't looking for us to get more religious or less religious

[17 : 26] God is wanting us to see that actually we are more wicked than we ever realise and yet more love than we could ever dream at the same time and so we need some help we need the gospel of Jesus Christ to save us because we can't save ourselves with religion or with irreligion and so that's why verse 20 says indeed there is no one on earth who is righteous no one who does what is right and never sins that's why it's wise to fear God because we are all guilty before him and without the death of Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin then we must face God's punishment and so wisdom in life means knowing where we stand before God but also to know that this God shows grace towards us grace for foolishness in life as well as for the ultimate folly of rejecting him and so the wisest thing that any of us could ever do is to listen to God and respond to Jesus the one he has sent into this world to save us and so that's the second thing wisdom in life we need wisdom about death we need wisdom in life but thirdly wisdom is limited so wisdom isn't the total solution and answer we see this in verse 23 to 29 so we do need wisdom when it comes to life and when it comes to death but we also need to realize that wisdom does have its limits and God has made it this way and so the teacher shares this discovery with us in verse 23 and 24 he says all this

I tested by wisdom and I said I determined to be wise but this was beyond me whatever exists is far off and most profound who can discover it so in his search for meaning in life he's found that being wise does help but it isn't enough wisdom can take us so far and yet no one can fully comprehend everything there's so much in life that is beyond our human wisdom and knowledge we just don't know why some things are the way they are and we wish we did but we can't know because only God knows and that is what the teacher between the athletes wants us to get he wants to drive from the fact that we are limited and so we must look to God we can't fully explain everything in life and death ourselves and this is clear from his closing comments verse 25 so I turn my mind to understand to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly so he tried to make sense of life but he struggled and he said

I find it more bitter than death the woman who is a snare whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains the man who pleases God will escape her but the sinner she will ensnare or he's saying here he's not just saying watch out for a dangerous woman he's saying don't be that guy don't be the fool who gets tapped or ensnared because being wise doesn't help you or doesn't stop you from being led astray in life and so he goes on with some strange words Luke says the teacher this is what I have discovered adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things while I was still searching I'm not finding I find one upright man among a thousand but not one upright woman among them all now he's not making a sexist remark here he's already saying in verse 20 that there is no one who is righteous and no one who never sins so he's simply reporting on his own experience at the time but his basic point is clear yes it is better to be wise than it is to be a fool but the reality is that we are all fundamentally flawed as human beings and that's why he concludes with these words in verse 29 this only have I found

God created mankind upright but they have gone in search of many schemes so during his quest for meaning in life he's made a vital discovery and it is part of the Bible storyline because he takes us away back to the beginning again back to Genesis back to the creation and then to the fall where God made the world including human beings and it was all very good and so our first parents Adam and Eve were upright they were morally good and yet they sinned by disobeying God and so they weren't content with the life God had given them and so they rebelled against him and the history of humanity is the story of the human race deciding to go its own way instead of going to go his way so humanity is broken and it touches every single one of us from the very depths of our being and our hearts right throughout our whole lives because there's no one on this earth who always does what is right and who never sins and so no matter how wise we become we will still always be a rebel against the

God who made us and that's why the world can't so easily be divided up into the wise people and the foolish people or the good people and the bad people or the righteous people and the wicked people because we're all guilty by nature we have all turned away from the God who made us and so we're all fools because we're all going our own way instead of going his way and that is the bad news and what adds to that bad news is that we try to save ourselves by the way that we live our lives and yet the good news is that we can be saved not through anything we do but by grace the grace of God towards us how does that work well God has provided Jesus Christ to save us from our foolishness from our rebellion and from the condemnation that we deserve and so we can only be saved through the death and the resurrection of Jesus

[24 : 08] Christ through his death on the cross and so the apostle Paul says this in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 he says for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God and then he goes on for since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached save those who believe and so the death of Jesus Christ does seem so foolish the message seems so stupid and yet what Paul is saying is that this message the message of the cross and Jesus lying there is the only hope for your life and my life and for the world we live in because Jesus restores our broken lives and he is renewing this broken world and that's why we can't boast in any wisdom of our own because Jesus has the comfort us wisdom from God and so the wise thing that we must do as a human being is to accept what Jesus has done for us on the cross and we do this by repenting that's admitting our foolishness and turning away from our sin and by believing in Jesus so we're not trying to save ourselves but we're trusting in Jesus to save us and that's why

Christianity is such good news and why it is our only hope I am so foolish and flawed that Jesus had to die for me and yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me and so we should wise up and we should use our life to follow Jesus Christ let's pray thank you God for your word to us thank you for reminding us that none of us are ultimately wise but we are all foolish because we turn away from you our loving creator and yet we thank you that you have not left us in such a helpless and hopeless state that you have sent your son Jesus Christ into this world to save us because we can never save ourselves either through religion or irreligion it's not about our performance but it's about the performance of Jesus Christ on the cross and so we thank you that he was willing to take the punishment that we deserve for our foolishness and rebellion upon himself on the cross so that we can be set free and brought into a relationship with you to discover meaning and purpose and satisfaction in life and hope in death and so we thank you in Jesus name

Amen