

The Emperor's New Clothes

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[0 : 0 0] Well folks, great to see you this morning. By way of introduction, let me just speak about three books. The first one is your Bibles. Let me encourage you to grab that Bible.

If you don't have one, grab one round about you and turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 7. Turn back there. Just remember, this is how I've remembered it over this series. It's Isaiah and back to, okay? If that helps anybody, you can do that.

So Ecclesiastes 7. Let me also, the second book, tell me about the book from yesterday's day away. Called Honest Evangelism. We ordered 40 of these yesterday and I think we sold three. So there are plenty to buy at the back of the hall. Particularly if you missed yesterday, it will give you a really good idea of some of the things we're speaking about. So that's a fiver at the back. You can grab one of them.

And the final book, as you're turning to Ecclesiastes 7 and to get us in, is the story that I read with my four-year-old the other day. And I love it when you read the story and you think, oh, that would make a great sermon illustration.

[1 : 0 0] So here we go. See if you can name this book, okay? And bear in mind this is for a five-year-old, okay? So it's simple language. We'll get there. So here's the book.

At last, it is the day of the royal parade. Daddy really goes for it when he reads, okay? The two tailors help the emperor into his pretend clothes. The emperor stands in front of his mirror.

He is very happy. These clothes are the best in the land, says the emperor. But there are no clothes. It is all a trick. The two bad tailors have gotten away with it.

But the emperor walks down the stairs wearing nothing at all. Two servants hold the pretend corners of the emperor's pretend cloak. Lots of important people are waiting. The streets are full. People have come from all over the land to watch the royal parade. The crowd begins to cheer when they see the emperor's horse coming. But as the parade comes closer and closer, the crowd goes quiet and starts to whisper.

[2 : 0 0] Know the story? What's the story? The emperor's new clothes, originally written by Hans Christian Andersen, let me get on the screen, in 1837, features a king who thinks he is the bee's knees.

He fancies the best clothes in the land. He employs two tailors to make them for him, and the tailors sense an opportunity to pretend that they've made clothes when actually they've made nothing.

So the king's in on this. He loves it. And nobody has the bottle to tell the king that actually he's wearing nothing. So the king, the emperor, goes on a parade down the street, and everybody sees the truth, but no one wants to point the truth out, except this little boy in the crowd who points, and he says, the emperor's got no clothes on.

And we kind of get the motto of the story. There's a few mottos in that story, I think, if you look hard enough. It is a five-year-old story, but there are a few mottos. And one of the mottos, one of the points, is that there are certain things in life where it is actually better, and it's easier, just to kind of go along with it and not talk about what the reality really is.

Now, if you think about it, I love it in our culture. We've got many phrases where we kind of talk about this kind of thing. See if you've heard some of these. We talk about the elephant in the room. Yeah, I heard that one. Or dumbbells in the house, that's what I like to say.

[3 : 2 5] The elephant in the room. Dumbbells in the house. Something that's really obvious, we don't want to talk about it. We talk about kicking the can down the road. If you were watching any politics over the last year, it was what Theresa May, people kept saying about her, wasn't it?

She kept kicking the can down the road. She didn't want to deal with the issue. We're kind of paying a little bit of the price for that now. We talk about burying our heads in the sand.

We don't want to deal with something. We talk about home truths, things that somebody tells us that we don't really want to hear. If you're into films, one of my favourite films is A Few Good Men. It's got that line from a vintage Jack Nicholson in it.

What does he say? The truth, you can't handle the truth. It's one of the lines of our generation growing up. You can't handle the truth. Well, here's what we're going to see in Ecclesiastes chapter 7 today.

You probably read it and you thought, what on earth is that all about? But actually what we see is it ties so well in with everything we've been thinking about this morning. Because here is Solomon, who we believe is the teacher who wrote this.

[4 : 24] It's probably easiest to understand that. Here is the teacher offering all of us his readers, the gathered ones who come to hear his wisdom. He's offering wisdom and life.

Everything that life has taught him, here he is pouring it down in the pages of Scripture. And he's going to say, here is wisdom. And wisdom comes not with running away from the hard truths of life. Actually, true wisdom comes when you face up to the true realities of life. So Solomon's like the wee boy in the story. That's how our story connects.

He's like the wee boy in the story in Ecclesiastes chapter 7. He's pointing at things. And he's saying, do you see it? Do you see it? So we've got four of these truths today.

They're going to come sharp and fast at us in these verses and follow along. Because they've got so much to teach us about life. And what we're going to see is actually what this guy is saying all those years ago is so relevant for us today.

[5 : 24] So here is the first one. He says, think about four things. First of all, would you think about death? Here is his take in it. If you've got the text there, verse 2. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

There's what he's saying again in verses 4 and 5. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.

Now you think to yourself, what is that all about? I have such a challenge this week trying to wrestle with this stuff. What is this guy saying? But it really gets you to think, what is he saying?

Well, think about what he's not saying. He's not saying that there's more joy in the death of a person than there is in the birth of a person. Because we would just say, no, that is not true. That is not our experience of reality.

What are you on about, mate? Jog on. It's not what he's saying, though. What he's saying, and if you think about it, he's absolutely spot on. What he's saying is that, friends, we will learn more about life when we ourselves and when others that we love, when we see them go through hard times and come out the other side.

[6 : 39] We will learn more about life in those times than we will when life is plain sailing. Right? Because nobody's thinking about the big questions of life when they're at the party.

No one's thinking about the big questions of life when they're lying on the beach in Florida. Are they? I was thinking about it this week. I remember going to the gym a few years ago and they had, as they do, a music video on in the background and listened to this song thinking it's quite catchy.

Do you know who it was? It was One Direction. Okay? One Direction. In the video, you've got people singing away. You've got people by the pool, having a pool party.

They're on the beach. They're playing volleyball. They're driving in limos. They're singing at concerts. It's full of beautiful people singing and smiling to the lyrics. And I hate myself that I can remember these lyrics, okay, but they're in my head.

You and me, girl, we've got a whole lot of history. We can be the greatest thing that the world has ever seen. You and me, darling. Got a whole lot of history.

[7 : 41] So don't let it go. Let's, what was that line? Let it go. Let's keep on going. We can live forever. We can live forever. This is what they're singing.

Everybody in this video is singing. I'm watching it thinking, that is escapism. Is it not? That is escapism. And we've got a whole generation of teenagers, and I'm sure a few adults in here as well, singing.

They're singing this song, believing that this is what the good life is all about. Just not thinking about the big things of life. You see what Solomon warns against?

Verse 5. He warns against listening to the songs of fools. He's not prophetically talking about one direction in this passage here, right? But what he is talking about is how so often we just absorb cultural norms about what life is all about, and we base our outlook on life so often just on songs, don't we?

If somebody was just putting that forward in a debate, that kind of outlook on life, he'd be like, no, I don't think that's right. But you sing a song, and all of a sudden you kind of absorb that way of thinking, don't you?

[8 : 51] This is what he's saying, the song of fools. True wisdom is all about when you see others around you and when you yourself have to face up to the limitations of life.

I can tell you one of the greatest privileges I have in life and in this job is seeing people go through some of the hardest times in life. I can honestly say that I've learned more about life when I've walked with some people through the hardest seasons of their lives, and I've seen them face up to the reality of death, and I've heard them say that Jesus holds me.

Jesus holds me. Let me just confirm the rumors as well that nobody gets to the hospital side bed and thinks I wish I'd picked that holiday in Crete and not Sardinia last year.

Nobody sits there thinking, I wish I'd spent more hours at the office, but what they do sit there and think is, what have I done with my life? What is it all about? What have I spent myself for?

And particularly they think of their loved ones, and they think of the people who they will probably leave, and they think, what have I passed on and modeled to them? And when you see, friends, when you see somebody go through those hard times, it makes you think, doesn't it?

[10 : 09] See the stuff that I'm stressing out about in life right now? Really isn't that all important, is it? He's saying that wisdom comes when you face up to your own limitations and your own mortality.

You can sing along with One Direction, right? You can bury your head in the sand. You can sing along to the pool party. You can do it all. But see, when the tragedy comes, friends, you will be faced with that decision.

Solomon's saying it's wisdom that listens. It's wisdom that learns. It's wisdom that looks. Secondly, he wants us to think about our hearts and to admit to ourselves that we struggle in so many different ways when we look inside to our hearts, right?

And he's going to flag a few things, and it's almost like the button on your car. You know that feeling when you buy a new car, you're in a new car, and you see a warning light flash, and you think to yourself, what is all that about?

I don't understand it, but I know something's not quite right. This is what he's going to do here, is he points out a few of the things that we struggle with. That's wisdom. Verse 7, do you see where he kicks off?

[11 : 18] Oppression and bribes. He says they're not good for the human heart. On a global scale, you'll be able to think of people, won't you, who have taken bribes, who have opened to a backhander.

I think of the tragedy that we saw in the news this week with those 39 people in the back of that lorry. And you watch it, and you think, what is going on in somebody's heart, down somebody along that chain?

What is going on in the human heart that somehow someone has made that decision that it's a good thing to do? Now, we don't know the full details of it, but it probably looks like human trafficking, doesn't it?

Of course, as Christians, we want to be at the forefront of seeing that stamped it, because we believe all human beings are made, beautifully made in the image of God and are precious to him. But it makes you think, doesn't it, the other side of the coin, the human heart.

What is going on that's caused that? In verse 8, he keeps on going. He says that pride isn't good when we see it in our hearts, and patience is better. Okay?

[12 : 21] Patience is better. Why would he need to say that if it wasn't for the fact that our natural inclination, right, is not to be patient, it is to be proud. Pride says I want my own way.

Pride says I am right all of the time. Now, I don't know if you find this when you go driving. I find I'm reminded of this all the time. All I hear, I see it myself coming out at times, all you hear, right, particularly this time of year, is horn, horn, horn, horn, horn, isn't it, in the streets?

Horn, horn, horn. Now, they teach you when you're learning to drive that the horn is a way of letting somebody know that you're there. But that is not why we use our car horns, is it? I always think it's a way of saying, I am right, I am right, I am right every time that we hit our horn.

But we know this is true in our own lives, don't we? Talks about anger, doesn't he? I love the image he uses it. Do you see the phrase? And we know this is true. He talks about the anger that lodges in the heart.

What a lovely turn of phrase, lodges in the heart. It's in there, right? It's making itself a cup of tea. It's getting comfy on the sofa. It's planning on staying.

[13 : 27] It's lodging. And he says, the problem is, how often do we say, do you want a chocolate biscuit with your cup of tea? And we let it fester, don't we, anger?

And we see it come out in our own hearts. That's what the fool does. Verse 10, say not, why were the former days better than these?

For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. What's he talking about here? He's talking about nostalgia, isn't he? Nostalgia that says, do you remember those good old days? Do you remember how good it was back then?

Do you remember those days? Friends, I'll admit to when life is tough, I so often find my mind wandering back to my student days. And I think three lectures a day, 10 o'clock start, sport on tap. What would I give to be back in those days? But this passage says, what a fool. Because if I'm honest, you know what? As a student, I was saying exactly the same thing about my school days. And I am certain that when I'm in my 40s, I'll be saying exactly the same thing about my 30s.

[14 : 29] And he's saying it's not good for the human heart to do that. When you see it, what's going on there? It's discontentment, isn't it? About what God is doing in the present.

Discontentment in the human heart.

And it's distrust, actually, about who God is and what he's doing in this moment. And it was a sin, isn't it? If you know the Bible story, it was the sin of the Exodus generation as they wandered in the wilderness.

What did they say? Remember how we had cucumbers back in Egypt? Oh, we were slaves. But do you remember how we had cucumbers back in Egypt? And it's held up, isn't it, to us as the danger of grumbling and discontentment.

He says discontentment is not a wise thing to do. So do you see he's just flagging these things about the human heart? Flagging these things about the human heart.

We know what he's talking about. We see the warning signs that are there. We've got to think about what is going on there? Where is this stuff coming from? Thirdly, we're going to rattle off, keep shooting these things about control.

[15 : 34] Because we love to think of ourselves as those who are in control, don't we? It's our whole advertising industry based on what giving us control, giving us what we want.

Remember Virgin Media, it was have it your way. That was, when I signed up to it, that was the motto. And I thought, I'm having some of that, having it my way. It's the generation that we live in, people promising us control.

And Solomon's saying, I'm sure there's ways that you are in control. But if you think about it, your life, friends, you are not in control. It's kind of what Naomi was talking about earlier, wasn't it?

The times when she realizes in her life where she's not in control. Remember that film when we were growing up, Forrest Gump? What did Forrest say that life is like? A box of chocolates.

Why? You never know what's coming next. And I think the teacher, I think Solomon would say that's absolutely right. Because it's true, isn't it, in our own lives, that we don't know if tomorrow is going to bring tears of joy, or whether it's going to bring tears of pain.

[16 : 38] We don't know whether we'll be celebrating tomorrow or mourning. It's impossible for us to fully know what tomorrow holds. And nothing should humble us like that. Nothing should teach us our utter dependence on the God who is in control here.

Now, here's a little exercise I want to do. Okay, God's in control here. Now, the teacher's made already this point. If you've been through this series, we've seen him make this point before. If you want to flick there, you can turn to chapter 1, verse 15.

That's what I meant. Because here's what Solomon's writing here at verse 13. He's saying, Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked?

In a day of prosperity, be joyful. And in a day of adversity, consider. So think about it. That God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. And I think it's in chapter 1, he said exactly the same thing. Do you see it? Verse 15. The same truth. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. So, but when he said it in chapter 1, there was no mention of God.

[17 : 54] Right? No mention of God. And yet here he is at chapter 7 saying exactly the same thing, and yet he adds that even though his circumstances haven't changed, here's a man who looks back and says, I learned that God was sovereign in control, no matter what came my way.

And so he says the good days enjoy them, because they are a gift from God. And your bad days, do you see the word he uses there, consider that God is in control in that day as well.

He is in control of the good days. He is in control of the bad days. And Solomon's learned that even though we don't know what will come, we do know in life who is in control.

Now it's worth just pausing and asking ourselves at this point, do you see how here is a man who has grown in his understanding of and trust in the good sovereignty of God?

And this is exactly what Naomi was saying, and I couldn't have teed it up any better for us to think about, is as a church community, as a body here, are we growing in our understanding for and trust in the goodness and the sovereignty of God?

[19 : 06] It's what the songs have been teaching us really this morning, haven't they? About who this God is. Who this God is. And you know people in your life, and I'm thinking of people in my life who I've met, and in this congregation as well, who when the rollercoaster of life keeps on going, there's a steadiness to their life.

There is a steady trust in this sovereign God. Remember one of the first hymns that we sang when we first ever came to Brunfield. When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot you have taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.

And this is what he's saying. God is in control. You are not in control. God is in control. And lastly, he wants us to think about what it means to be good.

So he's talking about righteousness here. In other words, our standing before a holy God who we thought about in chapter five. And he seems to have two groups of people in his mind here.

He's thinking about those who are firstly, who think who are overly righteous. Referencing those who think they've got life morally sussed. Case in point, I guess, being that the Pharisees who we meet in Jesus's day.

[20 : 26] What do you mean I need a savior? What do you mean we're not good enough? Those who are overly righteous in their own eyes. Solomon says that's not a good thing. And secondly, he's got in mind those who are wicked, who have no intention of doing anything other than serving themselves.

And Solomon says, don't be a fool. Don't be a fool. And so he looks out on all humankind, all mankind, and he starts with his very own heart, the depths of his sin that he knows.

And here's what he concludes, verse 20. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. That's what he perceives as he looks out on mankind.

And the thing is, what he's saying here is really just a consistent thread that runs through the Bible ever since Genesis 3, when sin entered the world, that we are not righteous. We see Paul picking up on this in the New Testament, Romans 3, he quotes Psalm 14, where he says, there is none who does good.

And all fall short, right? Like an arrow, they miss the mark. They're aiming at something, they miss the mark. That's what he's saying. All fall short of the glory of God. And Solomon says, when I see mankind, I cannot figure it out.

[21 : 38] I can't figure out why humans behave sometimes the way they do. And I think that's what, you're probably all wondering this, right? I think that's what the reference is to men and women at the end of this chapter here. He thinks himself, do you know what?

One in a thousand men, I think I get. One in a thousand, I think I understand how they tick. And as far as the female of the species is concerned, I don't have a clue. That's what he's saying, right?

You don't really know what's going on inside a person.

I can't really figure it out how we operate, but here's what I do know, that we all fall short of the glory of God. And there is not one who does good in the sight of the eyes of this holy God.

So Ecclesiastes 7, here's this wee boy pointing things out, saying, I see death. I see heart problems. I see a lack of control.

And I see people who aren't good. And you think to yourself, boy, I'm so glad I came to this church to hear this sermon this morning. What do we do with this stuff, right? He's absolutely right.

[22 : 37] What do we do with this stuff? Well, first of all, friends, we face up to the reality of what he's saying. We know that's true in our own hearts, right? We know that's true. But let me just tell you, secondly, what we do.

We were on holiday a few weeks ago, and our girls love it. We're at the beach. That's context to this. We're at the beach. And our girls love nothing more, and despite the fact that it is mid-October, running in and out of the sea, right?

So they're in and out of the sea all the time, and they've only got pants on. That's the context of this story, right? Just in and out of the sea, in and out of the sea. And they do it so often that they get... Chloe, certainly our four-year-old, got really confident that she was nailing this.

So she would walk into the sea, and she would come up to her, just below her knees. And the first wave hit her, and she kind of looked at me as if to say, I'm still standing. I'm still standing. A couple of waves go past, and a second wave hits her again.

Oh, little wave. No, I'm still standing. I'm still standing. And a third wave whacks her over, right? And we're in there trying to pull her out. She took a bit of a hit.

[23 : 39] Whacked her over. And the thing is about Ecclesiastes 7, friends, if we face up to what this is saying, it should be just like those waves. Bash, it should knock us over. Bash, it should knock us over.

But here's one of my favorite quotes I've found helping me understand, and this is Charles Spurgeon, and he said this. He said, in my life, I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me back against the rock of ages.

Friends, we get smashed as we face up to our limitations. But friends, as we get smashed this morning, let's get smashed by this wave and end up at the feet of the Savior.

Let me just take you, as we wrap it up this morning, let me just take you to a man in the Gospels who we meet. And he's a man who had, I'm sure, everything going for him in life.

Life is plain sailing. Everything's going well. And all of a sudden, life just changes for the worse. And all of a sudden, he's hit with home truths. He's hit with the fact that he is not in control of life.

[24 : 47] And he's hit with the fact that death is a reality for him. And all of a sudden, the man who's in control doesn't have a clue what to do. And he's a man who we meet in Luke's Gospel called Jairus.

Now, Jairus, we get in the text, you'll see it there, is a synagogue leader. Okay, so he is a religious man. He would have been a respected man. And the other detail we get in the text is he's a family man.

So he's got a family. And he's just been hit with a massive wave because you know what's happened to this man? His only daughter. Now, if you're a parent in here, you will feel the weight of that.

His only daughter is sick. And she is dying. And she is 12, which is a way of saying that she has got her whole life ahead of her. We look at that and think she died too early, before her time.

She's 12 with her whole life ahead of her and she is about to die. And this man is powerless. A man who's used to being in control his whole life. And here he is faced with a situation and he thinks, I am not in control of this one.

[25 : 48] And what does he do? He hears that Jesus is in town and he throws himself at the feet of Jesus. And he begs Jesus, would you come and heal my daughter? He's got nowhere else to go.

Nowhere else to go. And the text tells us that as Jesus was going, in other words, Jesus chose to go. You see, here is God in the flesh.

Here is God incarnate. And here he is in the messiness of life. Here he is listening to Jairus' plea. And I'm sure he could have said, listen Jairus, I get it mate, but I'm too busy.

But Jesus goes, Jesus cares, Jesus loves. Here is a Jesus who is with us right there in the hardest days. Here is a shepherd who is with us and walking with us and protecting us and leading us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

And after an encounter with another woman, by the time Jesus is back on track, word has got to Jesus and to this party who are walking back that Jairus' daughter is dead and they say, do not

bother the teacher anymore.

[26 : 51] But Jesus takes control and goes to the house and enters that room and with his inner three disciples and is with Jairus and his wife, the girl's parents, he says, the girl is not sleeping.

What do they do? They laugh. She's sleeping. Which is some of the most unkind words you have ever heard. If she's dead. And yet Jesus says to those listening, believe in me, look to me, come to me in your hardest moments.

Because then Jesus proceeds to say two words, child arise. And she gets up and the first thing Jesus says is get her something to eat.

Child arise, dead girl lives. Now I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall in Jairus' household that night. Would you not have? I think they're sitting there talking about the weather, the three of them.

Sitting there, do you wonder if Jairus is saying, now did anybody do anything interesting today with their lives? No, do you not think they're sitting there thinking, this man, Jesus, what on earth has happened there?

[27 : 59] This man, Jesus, has just blown our minds. He's just blown life as we knew it, wide open. And I bet she had a wonderful story to tell at show and tell the next day at school, right?

Jairus' daughter was dead. Jesus is alive. And friends, see the thing is, as we face up to these four truths, that we are so true for our lives today. Friends, we need to let the wave hit us back against the rock of ages.

As we face up to our deaths, here is Jesus, the man who conquers, conquered death and rose on the third day. As we face up to our hearts, here is Jesus, God in the flesh.

Here he is living a perfect, sinless life before God, his Father. As we face up to our lack of control, here is Jesus who is in control. Here is Jesus who right now is holding the cosmos together with the power of his word.

Here is a man who is in control. As we think about the fact that we are not good, let's remember Jesus. Solomon says, there is no one good. Friends, there was one good, fully good.

[29 : 08] And as he takes the penalty of our sin on the cross on himself and in him by our faith in him, friends, we are clothed in his righteousness.

Let's learn to kiss the wave that throws us back against the rock of ages. And let me just finish with these lines by the old hymn by Augustus Toplady, who you have to say has just got the best name ever, okay?

But he's famous for writing this hymn. Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure, save from wrath and make me pure.

nothing in my hand I bring simply to the cross I cling naked come to thee for dress helpless look to thee for grace foul I too the fountain fly wash me saviour or I die.

And that's where we should end this morning. Ecclesiastes 7 don't trust in our own wisdom.

Friends, let's throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus and look to him.

[30 : 22] Let's pray. And so Father, in the quiet now we would want to bring to you our own struggles. Father, realizing that many of these truths as they come home this morning Father will bring many memories and feelings for us.

And Father, we thank you for the wonderful news of the gospel. Lord, that we are those who fall short of the glory of God. We are those who violate your commands.

And yet in Jesus what a wonderful saviour we have. And so Lord, I just pray that you would help us all Father by the power of your spirit. Lord, not to lean on our own understanding but into all our ways and trust our ways to you.

Lord, would you help us to look to Jesus and to find our all in all in him. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.