

Final Call to Joy - The Divine Command
(Ecclesiastes 11:7 - 12:8)

- v7 (Call) Sweet is the light,
And it is good for the eyes to see the sun!
- v8 For if a man lives many years,
Let him rejoice in them all,
- (Reason) And remember that the days of darkness will be many,
And that everything afterward is nothingness (*hebel*).
- v9 (Call) Rejoice, young man, in your youth,
And let your heart cheer you in your youthful days.
Follow the impulses of your heart
And the desires of your eyes,
- (Reason) And know that for all this,
God will call you to account.
- v10 (Call) And banish sadness from your heart,
And remove sorrow from your flesh,
- (Reasons) For childhood and youth are a fleeting breath (*hebel*).
- 12:1 And remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
Before the evil days come and the years draw near,
Of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them."

Ecclesiastes has been teaching all the way through that life itself is *hebel*, a mist or vapour, something that lasts only a short time, and something impossible to hang onto.

It has also been teaching that most of what people try to accomplish during their lives is also *hebel*, a mist or vapour, very difficult to grasp.

The solution all the way through has been to do your best to enjoy your work, your family, your food, your rest. God gives chances for joy, and the best way to live life is to take these chances for joy when you get them.

By my count this little refrain happens six times in Ecclesiastes: (1) 2:24-25; (2) 3:12-13; (3) 3:22; (4) 5:18-20; (5) 8:15; and (6) 9:7-10. We went over these in the first sermon.

Our text today is the final refrain. Ecclesiastes ends eloquently, putting in a poem the simple teaching that has been repeated right through the book. First, a question:

What about eternity? Doesn't life after death change Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes teaches that most of the things people want to accomplish during this life are useless. This is partly because life is too short and because the things they want to accomplish are naive and impossible goals.

Or, even if we accomplish them, we find them very unsatisfying. What we worked for promised much, but delivered very little. So, it is better to enjoy life than to work for something we can't do, or for something we won't enjoy even if we succeed.

This does not rule out living now in a way that has eternal value. I don't think Ecclesiastes comments on eternal value one way or the other. From the view of Ecclesiastes, most people are investing too much in *this* life.

Ecclesiastes does seem to assume no life after death. Some use this as a reason to dismiss Ecclesiastes, to say Ecclesiastes teaches what is true *without* real faith in God.

But Ps 88 (for one example) argues forcefully with God, that God should save the psalmist from death, because once the psalmist dies he no longer can praise God.

My point is that other O.T. passages also apparently assume no life after death. We'd have to dismiss a fair amount of the O.T. if we used that reason.

So, the teaching of Ecclesiastes certainly leaves open that we'd live in a way now that has eternal value. It says almost nothing about that one way or the other. What it teaches is that most of what people try to accomplish *now* is useless.

Do your work, but enjoy it and life as much as possible.

And remember that no one book of the Bible gives the whole picture. Every book of the Bible is partial, and every book would leave us with a lopsided faith if that was the only book we had.

The Bible has 66 books. That means that even the longer wonderful books of the Bible, like Genesis or Isaiah or John or Romans - even these longer ones give us a picture that is not even close to a complete picture. So it is okay if Ecclesiastes leaves lots out.

Responses to Ecclesiastes

People can respond two different ways to this teaching. Some will experience freedom. They thought God didn't care about joy, and that someone with faith in God had to always live seriously and intensely. They are glad that God calls them to enjoy life.

Others will hear the same thing and experience discouragement. They find it painful that all the things they are trying to accomplish will not amount to much. I want to defend this response as well.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes himself found his conclusions discouraging. Ecclesiastes itself is not happy about what it teaches. It calls us to joy, but it is not a joyful book.

Both sorrow and gladness are healthy responses to this book. But neither is the response the book calls for. What Ecclesiastes calls for is that we would enjoy daily life as much as we can.

The goal is not to find more pleasure, and the goal is not to get things done. The goal is to enjoy daily life. That's because joy in daily life is the gift of God.

Now let's look at the handout. I'm handing out the text because the chapter break between Eccl 11 and Eccl 12 tends to hide the flow of thought. I have also given a more literal translation, especially at one point, which we'll talk about when we get there.

The main thing to notice is that this passage has three separate calls to enjoy life, especially while we are young enough to do so. And after each call we find an explanation for the call, a reason to hear the call.

I have arranged the text as six little paragraphs to make this more obvious, three calls, each with a reason.

First Call (11:7-8a)

v7 (Call) Sweet is the light,
 And it is good for the eyes to see the sun!
 v8 For if a man lives many years,
 Let him rejoice in them all,

This final poem begins with the simple joy of a sunny day. "It is good for the eyes to see the sun." It makes me wonder of Ecclesiastes knows about the discouragement that comes from long dark days. Light-deprivation has been around a long time.

"If a man lives many years" - most of this section has to do with youth, so let's take this seriously. *As long as we live*, let's do our best to enjoy what's enjoyable. Taste every sunny day.

First Reason (11:8b)

(Reason) And remember that the days of darkness will be many,
 And that everything afterward is nothingness (*hebel*).

Most translations begin this with "but" - "*but* remember that the days of darkness will be many." "But" is possible, but "and" is more literal. More importantly, these lines are *not a contrast* with what's just been said, but *a reason for* what's just been said."

Our chances now to taste daily joys will not last. We know for sure that this will not go on forever. We only get one chance at the joys of today. Only one.

Furthermore, when we are old, the chances for joy today will no longer exist. Now, we still enjoy those things. Then, we will no longer enjoy them.

The first half of Eccl 12 is a poem on old age, and the main point of the poem is that the pleasure of daily life disappears more and more as people's health fails when they get old.

So the first reason to enjoy daily life is that these chances will *not* go on forever.

Second Call (11:9a,b)

v9 (Call) Rejoice, young man, in your youth,
And let your heart cheer you in your youthful days.
Follow the impulses of your heart
And the desires of your eyes,

In Ecclesiastes, a great tragedy is a young person who did not enjoy life because they were too serious, they tried too hard to get things done, and never tried to do what they really wanted to do.

Ecclesiastes does not encourage drunkenness or wild living, seeking pleasure without any boundaries. Young and old do that, but that is not what Ecclesiastes invites.

Ecclesiastes encourages the enjoyment of ordinary healthy pleasures of life. In Ecclesiastes, a wasted youth is being too serious, working too hard, trying to get something done and not enjoying the day.

Think about all those times Jesus was eating and drinking with people. Think about Jesus enjoying the wedding in Cana with his mother and family and his disciples.

Think about Jesus walking through the grain fields with his disciples on the Sabbath, about Jesus telling people it was impossible for his disciples to fast because the bridegroom was with him. Jesus himself lived this out.

Eccl 2:24 - "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work."

Second Reason (11:9c)

(Reason) And know that for all this,
God will call you to account.

The "and" here many translate as "but," as if these lines are supposed to warn us against listening to the first part of v9.

There is no reason from the Hebrew to translate this "but." That is a possible translation, but "and" is the more common translation.

More importantly, Ecclesiastes has said several times that chances for daily enjoyment *are gifts from God* (2:24-25; 3:13; 5:19).

2:24-25 - A man can do nothing better that to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his work. *This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*

3:13 - That every man may eat and drink and find satisfaction in his toil -- *this is the gift of God.*

5:19-20 - When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and to be happy in his work -- *this is a gift of God.* He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because *God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.*

Ecclesiastes teaches that since life is short and difficult, the best thing is just to enjoy it. It adds that chances for joy are gifts of God. *By the end* of Ecclesiastes, it is *our duty* to take these chances for joy. If we do not, we are wasting God's gifts.

God will hold us to account for all our chances for joy. If we ignore them, if we pass them by, we will be called on to explain ourselves, and it won't be a happy conversation.

Third Call (11:10a,b)

v10 (Call) And banish sadness from your heart,
And remove sorrow from your flesh,

This verse is another reason why the end of v9 needs to be taken not as a warning against sin, but a warning against ignoring chances for joy: because right after the warning, we have yet another call to enjoy life.

So the warning is not against sin in the usual sense of that word, but a warning against squandering chances for joy.

Jesus said, "Don't worry about tomorrow. Every day has enough evil of its own (Mt 6:34)." Think about that line. That is actually quite a pessimistic line, don't you think?

That could be right out of Ecclesiastes. Jesus is saying almost the same thing as Ecclesiastes 11:10: "banish sadness from your heart, remove sorrow from your flesh."

Third Reason (11:10c - 12:1)

(Reasons) For childhood and youth are a fleeting breath (*hebel*).

12:1 And remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
Before the evil days come and the years draw near,
Of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them."

We've had two reasons so far for enjoying the daily pleasures of life. The first was that life does not last, and when we get old, these joys will no longer be possible.

The second was that these chances are gifts from God, and so it is our happy duty to make use of them and not waste them.

This third "reason" passage repeats both of these reasons. The last line of v11 repeats the first reason - the time when we can enjoy these things is all too short.

And 12:1 repeats the second reason - God will hold us responsible for these daily pleasures.

12:1 is often taken to go in a very different direction. We take "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" as a call to be serious, be careful what kind of fun we have, and so on.

First, the verse starts with the same "and" in Hebrew as we've been seeing all along. Second, that is not the call of Ecclesiastes. That is assumed by Ecclesiastes, but it is not what Ecclesiastes speaks about.

Third, read the rest of 12:1 slowly and carefully: "And remember your Creator in the days of your youth, *before the evil days come and the years draw near, of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'*"

Once the chances for pleasure are gone, it is too late to honour God. So it makes the most sense to take the verse as calling us to enjoy what God has given to enjoy.

That is, the way we remember the Creator in the days of our youth is to obey the three calls to enjoy life that have been given in this passage. That is honouring our Creator, and it is important to start young, because that's when God gives lots of chances for joy.

This is not how we usually think. But most of Ecclesiastes is not how we usually think. That's why we need Ecclesiastes.

Amen.