

The Joy Command  
(Ecclesiastes 11:7 - 12:8)

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 Kind of Desires and Enjoyments does Ecclesiastes Mean?

In 2 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy to flee from youthful desires. But Ecclesiastes tells us to follow our heart when we are young. What's Ecclesiastes talking about?

Ecclesiastes assumes all the way through that the readers are God's covenant people, and live in line with the covenant. The Teacher assumes we all live by the ten commandments, for example. Several times he says that God will bring everyone to account, and will judge every good and bad action (3:17; 5:1-7; 8:12-13; 12:13-14). He ends with a call to fear God and keep his commandments.

But within covenant life, it is possible to pursue goals that are uncertain, it is possible to assume we always get what we work for, and that this life will go on and on. It is entirely possible to be too diligent and focused about life.

For the Teacher, the tragedy is that we would not savour the enjoyments of the day, the satisfaction of work accomplished, the satisfaction of food we enjoy, and of our warm relationships. The tragedy is that we would deliberately ignore these things because we are pursuing what we think is more important.

He will tell young people to follow the impulse of your heart and the desires of your eyes. At the end, the greatest tragedy is that young people would think God's call takes us away from these things, when in fact they are gifts from God to us, and he will call us to account if we ignore them. The loss is greatest for young people, who also have such great capacity to enjoy life.

In chapter 12 we find a lament about old age. Other OT Scriptures make old age a honourable pleasant time, but our Teacher is far too honest for that. When we get old, he says, almost everything is a burden, and almost nothing is enjoyable, so God tells us to enjoy our youth.

### Responses to Ecclesiastes

People can respond two different ways to Ecclesiastes. Some will experience freedom in a couple different ways. One is that they always found life random and disappointing, and they are relieved to find out that the Bible says the same thing.

Another reason for freedom is that they thought God didn't care about enjoying life. They thought 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, and that life is this unpredictable. I want to defend this response as well.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes himself found his conclusions painful and discouraging. The Teacher himself is not happy about what he teaches. Ecclesiastes 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 a specific *obedience*: 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. We're called to enjoy daily life, because joy in daily life is the gift of God.

Our text has three separate commands 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 Imperative – Enjoy all your Years (11:7-8a)

*Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.  
However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.*

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

"However many years anyone lives" – most of this section has to do with youth, so let's take this seriously. *As long as we live*, enjoy what's enjoyable. This is an imperative. Taste every sunny day. "*Let them enjoy them all*," all the years one lives.

First Reason – Old Age is Coming (11:8b)

*And let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. [Days when we won't enjoy life anymore.] Everything to come is meaningless.*

Most translations begin this with "but" - "*but* remember that the days of darkness will be many." In most translations "but" occurs twice in today's Scripture, in the middle of v8 and the middle of v9. In Hebrew, it does not say "but." In Hebrew, it reads exactly the same as the word "and" which you find in v7, and 2x in v9, and v10.

In v8 and v9, the Hebrew words give no reason to use "but." The translators assume that the line contrasts with the earlier line, so they use "but." There is no contrast, however, and I suggest you ignore the word "but" in v8 and v9.

I have an old Jewish commentary that I use for Ecclesiastes, and he's great. And I do know enough Hebrew myself to know that there's no reason in Hebrew to translate it "but." Hebrew has ways to say "but." There are none in 11:7 – 12:1. If anything, this line should begin with "because": "enjoy all your years *because* you remember the days of darkness to come, for there will be many."

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 Imperative – Be Happy while Young, Let your Heart give you Joy (11:9a,b)

*You who are young, be happy while you are young,  
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.  
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see,*

In Ecclesiastes, this is tragedy: that a young person would 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. In Ecclesiastes, that's a wasted youth. There are three imperatives here: be happy while you are young; let your heart give you joy in your youth; and follow the ways of your heart and eyes.

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. Ecclesiastes knows we need to work, it's not trying to get us out of responsible living. Ecclesiastes thinks good people are more diligent than they need to be, and are squandering God's daily joys.

Second Reason – God will Hold you to Account if you Ignore This (11:9c)

*And remember that for all these things God will call you to account.*

I began this line with “and.” Almost all translations begin the line with “but,” as if these lines are to warn us against listening to the first part of v9. There is no reason from the Hebrew to translate this “but.” “And” is an entirely literal translation.

More importantly, Ecclesiastes has said several times that chances for daily enjoyment *are gifts from God* (2:24-25; 3:13; 5:19; 9:9). Here are a couple examples: “*A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in their work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? That every person may eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil -- this is the gift of God.*”

*When God gives any person wealth and possessions, and enables them to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their work -- this is a gift of God.*

God will hold us to account for all the chances for joy he gave us. 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.

The way v9 reads in many translations it sounds like Ecclesiastes says, “be happy while you're young, let your heart give you joy, but God will judge you for every time you do that!” That's awful, but that's how it sounds, and it has been preached like that.

Again, “because” would go nicely in here: “*be happy and let your heart give you joy when you are young, because if you don't, God will call you to account for wasting his gifts.*”

Third Imperative – Banish Anxiety from your Heart (11:10a,b)

*So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body*

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, a third call, to enjoy life. So the warning in v9 is 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 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.” Jesus would say, “banish any anxiety that is not about today.”

Third Reason (Both Combined) – Honour God, For Old Age is Coming (11:10c - 12:1)

*Youth and vigor are a fleeting breath.*

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them." [By the time that happens, it's too late to honour God by enjoying what he gave you in your youth.]*

We've had two reasons so far for enjoying the daily pleasures of life. The first in v8 was that life does not last, and when we get old, these joys will no longer be possible.

The second reason to enjoy daily life (v9) was that these chances are gifts from God, and so it is our happy duty to make use of them and not waste them. God will call us to account for all these gifts of his.

This third "reason" in 11:10 and 12:1 repeats both of these. The last line of v10 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 has been taken to go the opposite 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.

But that is not the call of Ecclesiastes. Let's read the rest of 12:1 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 remember our Creator. So it makes better sense to take the verse as calling us to enjoy what God has given to enjoy, and do it now before it's too late to find satisfaction in these things.

The way we remember the Creator in the days of our youth is to obey the three calls to enjoy life. That is honouring our Creator, and it is important to start young, because that's when God gives the most 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.

**PRAYER:** God, we're not used to hearing things like this. This is a very different kind of responsible living. You are still giving these ordinary chances for satisfaction and enjoyment. You have richly provided us with many things to enjoy. May we not waste your gifts. O God, may our anxieties not spoil the day. Thank you for this refreshing call. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.