

The End of the Matter

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12 ⁱ

You Only Live Once (or, All Is Vapor and Chasing After Wind)

If you were to read through the book of Ecclesiastes with a highlighter in hand, you'd discover very quickly—the exercise only takes about 20 minutes—that variations on the theme “Vanity of Vanities” occur about 30 times (3 times just in the second verse of chapter 1). As we saw a few weeks ago, the phrase is closely related to that used in James 4, 14:

¹⁴ ...you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. James 4:14 (ESV)

This isn't surprising when you consider that in addition to “vanity of vanities” (and its variations) being used 30 times in this relatively short book, another expression, “under the sun”, also comes up about 30 times. I say it's not surprising then, because when life is considered from this perspective—life lived “under the sun”; life lived exclusively in this world—then it's not only true, it's somewhat obvious, that,

¹⁷ ...all is vanity and a striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 2:17 (ESV)

Hence the expression “You Only Live Once”, or YOLO, as some of you (you know who you are) used to say. The thing is, to those who truly believe that you only live once—that this life is all there is and that when you're dead then you're just dead—it really can't matter if you are good or bad, right or wrong, a saint or a sinner, because in the end, you're just compost, and that really shouldn't bother you anyway, because, well... “It's the circle of life,” as Elton John once sang, “It's the wheel of fortune.”

Of course, it's worth remembering that the Book of Ecclesiastes was written by a man who was very cynical and jaded at that point in his life, so, if you're a young adult (or a child, or an older adult for that matter), don't let this perspective get you down, instead, learn from it, as Solomon did. Learn from it, as I believe he desired that his sons would, and whether you're old or young, the first thing you need to learn is to rejoice in life as the blessing of God.

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth...

In Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verses 7 and 8, Solomon wrote:

⁷ Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. ⁸ So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all... Ecclesiastes 11:7–8 (ESV)

And verse 9 too:

⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes... Ecclesiastes 11:9 (ESV)

If you prefer a New Testament Apostle to an Old Testament King, Paul simply wrote,

¹⁶ Rejoice always... 1 Thessalonians 5:16 (ESV)

which is pretty definitive if you stop to think about it. In other words, enjoy life while you have

it, especially while you are young. It is the gift of God, so take it, and all the blessings that God may give you; rejoice in them and be generous. Ecclesiastes 11, 1 – 4, reads:

¹ Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Ecclesiastes 11:1 (ESV)

And this is kind of Solomon's version of "pay it forward". As he wrote in Proverbs 19, verse 17:

¹⁷ Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his deed. Proverbs 19:17 (ESV)

And he goes on in Ecclesiastes 11, 2 – 4:

² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. ⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. Ecclesiastes 11:2–4 (ESV)

Even so, "do not be anxious about anything,"ⁱⁱⁱ to borrow another phrase from the Apostle Paul. Give generously. Receive graciously (and sometimes that's the harder part). Hold all of God's blessings with open hands, rejoicing in them while you have them, and being thankful even when they are gone, because one day they will be gone. The whole of verse 8 reads:

⁸ ...if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; **but let him remember** that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Ecclesiastes 11:8 (ESV)

Remember and Repent

"All that comes" is like a vapor, or a breath. "All that comes" merely appears for a little while and then vanishes away, and we need to remember this. But there's something else to remember here as well. See, these verses also speak of consequences for the choices we make. Again, the *full* text of verse 9:

⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. **But know that for all these things...** Ecclesiastes 11:9 (ESV)

(whether the ways of your heart or the sight of your eyes, as Solomon knew so well)

...for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Ecclesiastes 11:9 (ESV)

Even so, "rejoice...and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth..." but since everything that we do is done before the face of God, verse 10:

¹⁰ Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Ecclesiastes 11:10 (ESV)

Or, as we have it from the Septuagint, and other translations as well:

¹⁰ ...remove **anger** from your heart, and lead **evil** from your flesh, for youth and folly are vanity. Ecclesiastes 11:10 (LES)

In other words, “repent”, because in light of the second clause—“for youth and the dawn of life are vanity”—it seems unlikely that the first clause is essentially saying, “Don’t worry, be happy.” Quite the opposite. Since youth and the dawn of life are vanity, along with everything else “under the sun”, we’re called to “remove” or “put away” anger and evil—those things that we can so easily stumble into when following the ways of our heart and the sight of our eyes.

So, rejoice and remember; then, remember and repent, but repentance is a turning, and it can’t consist in simply turning from. It has to include a turning to, and Solomon has that covered as well.

Remember also your Creator

Chapter 12, verse 1, at the beginning of the text that we read earlier this morning:

¹ Remember also 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 12:1 (ESV)

What follows is simply a description of what it can be like to grow old. Some of us know this from experience.

¹ Remember also 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”² **before** the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,³ in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed,⁴ and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—⁵ they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—⁶ before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Ecclesiastes 12:2–7 (ESV)

“So,” as one commentator has written,

we come to the fall of a great house. Solomon brings us to an extended analogy, depicting the problems associated with the onslaught of old age. He compares the body falling apart to the distress of a great house in increasing disrepair.ⁱⁱⁱ

Then, one last time, with all the feeling the old king could muster as the end of his life drew near; if this is all there is to life, then:

⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. Ecclesiastes 12:8 (ESV)

The End of the Matter

Still, all is not lost if we remember our Creator—if we know the Lord our God—in the days of youth, or whenever we hear His call, for:

¹¹ The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. Ecclesiastes 12:11 (ESV)

Commenting on this verse, the old Puritan, Matthew Henry, wrote:

That which is written, and thus recommended to us, is of divine origin. Though it comes to us through various hands...yet it is given by one and the same shepherd, the great shepherd of Israel, that leads Joseph like a flock... God is that one Shepherd, whose good Spirit [inspired]...and assists...in opening and applying the scriptures. These words of the wise are the true sayings of God, on which we may rest our souls.^{iv}

Of course, Solomon went on to write,

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)

And indeed, this is

¹³ The end of the matter... Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)

When the One Shepherd—the Lord our God—has spoken, then

...all has been heard. Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)

The thing is, the One Shepherd, known under the Old Covenant as The LORD, the Shepherd of His people Israel, has, “in these last days”

² ...spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things... Hebrews 1:2 (ESV)

²³ And this is his commandment... 1 John 3:23 (ESV)

wrote the Apostle, John,

...that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 1 John 3:23 (ESV)

The same Jesus who said,

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. John 10:27 (ESV)

And this, above all, is the answer to the vanity—the vapor-like nature—of life in this world, for Jesus went on to say

²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. John 10:28–29 (ESV)

“Under the sun” then, all is vanity and striving after wind; but in the Son—in and through faith in Jesus Christ—we are

³ ...born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ^{1 Peter 1:3-5 (ESV)}

So, here is the end of the matter.

Fear God... ^{Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)}

—reverence Him; worship Him in Spirit and in truth—

...and keep his commandments... ^{Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)}

—believe; trust in the name of His Son Jesus Christ—

...for this is the whole duty of man. ^{Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV)}

i All Scripture Citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii Phillipians 4: 6.

iii Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press), 115.

iv Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1056.