



# Ecclesiastes

## (22) Youth, Old Age, Judgment and Death

Ecclesiastes 11:9 – 12:8

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Ecclesiastes is about living life in the light of the fact that there is a lot about life that is hard and unpleasant and dark and sometimes just plain awful. We have travelled through the pages of this meditation about life and we have reflected with the author on the fact that sometimes life can seem pointless and futile and unjust and random. We have looked at the reality that often there seems to be no moral order so that it really makes no observable difference whether one is good or evil or wise or foolish. The author of Ecclesiastes reflects some very dark moods and one of the helpful things about this book, which says some shocking things at times, is that we sometimes find ourselves thinking similar shocking things about God and his way with the world and it is a relief to know that this too belongs to the experience of God's people.

But then there are those passages that enjoin us to eat and drink and enjoy life. And the interesting thing is that this too is part of our experience of life. Life can be very good and enjoyable. There is much that is wonderful about just being alive and enjoying work and rest and relationships and the many legitimate pleasures of life.

And our lives consist of both the dark times and the happy times in varying degrees. Some people have more trouble than others. Some periods of life may be more difficult than others. But for all of us there is a mix of darkness and light, of despondency and pleasure. The very helpful thing about Ecclesiastes is it deals with this dual characteristic of life.

Last week we looked at Ecclesiastes' instruction about how to live life in the light of the fact that things do not always turn out the way that we hope they will. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes disasters happen. And the point of that passage was that in spite of the fact that success is not guaranteed we should still live life with gusto and take risks instead of being so careful because of the possibility of failure that we disengage from life.

The passage we are going to look at this evening is another one which deals with how to live life in the light of the fact that some parts of life are dark and hard and not very enjoyable. I have given this sermon the title, "Youth, Old Age, Judgment and Death." These are the subjects that these verses bring before us and what they deal with is how to live life in the light of death and they grapple realistically with the fact that the process of death begins long before life on earth is over.

The text is addressed to young men, but the lessons apply to us whether we are young women or even if we are a little further down the road to old age. And indeed, what it says is relevant to us even when we are old, but not yet dead. Basically, what this text is saying is "enjoy life while you can because one day you will die and the process of dying begins before you are dead so that your body wears out and it becomes more and more of a burden." It also makes the point that as you enjoy life do so in the light of the judgment of God.

Ecclesiastes 11:9–10, "<sup>9</sup>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 God will bring you into judgment. <sup>10</sup>Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."

The text is saying that we must live in the light of the judgment of God, but it is also saying that young people should take advantage of their youth and enjoy their lives while they are young and healthy, and the troubles of age are not yet upon them. An important part of the message of Ecclesiastes and of the Bible is the enjoyment of life as a gift of God and that enjoyment is to take place within the parameters of God's laws and in the light of the reality of God's judgment. The

judgment of God is not intended to take the joy out of life, it simply requires that we enjoy life in ways that God approves of and, at the end of the day, life lived in harmony with God's will is more enjoyable than a life of sin anyway. So, this text is a genuine exhortation to young people to enjoy their youth.

The next verse makes the same point by saying that young people must remember their Creator as they enjoy their lives and they must make sure that they do that when they are young before the evil days come. Ecclesiastes 12:1, "<sup>1</sup>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'"

The Bible here is affirming that youth is a good time to be alive and that youth should take advantage of this period of health and fewer burdens and have a good time in ways that are pleasing to their Creator. This is not to say that all young people live trouble free lives, but it is to say that generally speaking young people are healthy and strong and relatively unburdened and hopeful about the future and they should take advantage of this period and live life to the full.

These verses are telling young people to embrace the joys of life that God makes available to them. Hear again some of the language of these verses and let it permeate your soul. This is what your Maker is telling you. Ecclesiastes 11:9–10, "<sup>9</sup>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.... <sup>10</sup>Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."

"Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes...." He is saying here that you should follow your heart and explore the possibilities that you see with your eyes. The world is a wonderful place and the possibilities are endless and God has given us appetites and desires and Ecclesiastes is saying that you should follow them and see where they lead. There are, of course, sinful desires and appetites and Ecclesiastes is not encouraging you to follow those, but we are created with hearts that seek satisfaction and fulfillment and pleasure and joy. That belongs to our humanity. We have desires to learn things and

experience things and accomplish things. There are things to do. Places to go. People to meet. Relationships to nurture. Experiences to try. Subjects to investigate. Skills to learn. Tastes to experience. God created the world and pronounced it good and there are ways to participate in life and its potentials that are in harmony with God's intention and Ecclesiastes is saying that when you are young you should seize the day.

"Remove vexation from your heart...." Another translation is "Banish anxiety from your heart." Don't worry too much. Don't dwell inordinately on what may go wrong. Do not be weighed down with cares and concerns. The time will come soon enough when there will be plenty to worry about. Lighten up and enjoy your life when you are young.

"[A]nd put away pain from your body...." The ESV Study Bible interprets these words as follows, "Whatever woes or ailments one has, one should not dwell on them excessively." The overall thrust of these verses is clear enough. Don't dwell on the negative. Take full advantage of this period of your life and live it to the full.

Iain Provan has a good summary of this point in his commentary. "The young man is to make the most of his brief moment of youth (11:10). He is to banish from his heart "frustration" (ka'as; not "anxiety," as in NIV; see comment on 1:18). He is also to cast off "troubles" (ra'a; lit., "evil") from his body. In other words, he is to embrace with his whole being (his inner and outer life) the pathway through life that Qohelet has advocated throughout the book (e.g., 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 9:7–10), rather than conforming himself to and defining himself by the world of frustration and evil that has also been described therein (cf. ka'as in 1:18; 2:23; ra'a in, e.g., 5:13, 16)." (Provan, Iain. *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (The NIV Application Commentary) (Kindle Locations 4605-4612). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)

There is something exhilarating about this. Because of our sinful nature we tend to see God as a killjoy. This conviction is reinforced by the fact that God forbids us from doing many things that we are sinfully attracted to. And obedience is hard even if it is empowered by the Holy Spirit who applies the salvation that Christ has accomplished for us. But the reality is that God has created us and the world in such a way that

there is incredible legitimate pleasure and joy and fulfillment and delight available to us and it is so freeing to understand that a huge part of the way that God wants to be glorified is by us delighting in his gifts with thanksgiving.

Here in this passage God is encouraging young people to take advantage of the great possibilities for joy and pleasure and satisfaction that he has built into life. If someone gives you a gift one of the key ways of thanking and honoring the giver of the gift is to enjoy it with a spirit of thanking to that person. It certainly will not please or honor the giver of a gift if you do not use the gift and enjoy it. And just because we are prone to misuse God's gifts because of our sinfulness does not erase the fact that God has given us so much that is enjoyable and honoring him as the giver requires that we enjoy the gifts.

Paul addresses this issue in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. The ungodly thing that he is dealing with in that passage is the practice of some people of forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from certain foods. So, he was addressing the problem of religious leaders who were teaching that holiness consisted in not enjoying God's gifts. And he considers those who teach such things as having departed "from the faith" and "devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teaching of demons." Clearly it is a very bad thing to forbid people to enjoy things "that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." And Paul continues there "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer."

So, you really can't be godly and please God without enjoying his gifts. And it is this spirit that is behind the exhortations of our text which are specifically addressed to young people. "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."

We need to really hear this and let it sink in. There is more to come. There are warnings. There is darkness on the horizon. Ecclesiastes is not going to let us forget about that. One of his purposes in the book is to lead us in grappling with the dark realities of life. But an important part

of his message is that we should not let the darkness dominate everything and crowd out the basic enjoyment of life.

Let me remind you of one of the other enjoyment-of-life passages in this book. Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, "7Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. 8Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. 9Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. 10Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." In this passage the relationship between light and darkness is similar to the text we are looking at this evening. Enjoy your life even though life is vain and at the end you die. Even though there are really hard and unsettling things about life and, at the end of it all you die, enjoy your work and your food and your family. Do not let the negative to overwhelm the positive.

So young people – get what you can out of life when you are young. Live it to the full. Sample God's gifts widely.

But there are a number of caveats that Ecclesiastes brings to our attention. Things to keep in mind alongside of the exhortation to drink deeply of the pleasures of life.

The first is the reminder of the judgment of God. Now the way that this part of the verse sounds and the way it is translated can give it a sense that neuters what has come before and turns it all into a warning. These verses have been interpreted to give the sense: "if you enjoy youthful pleasures you will be judged for it." It is possible to give the word "but" a sense that turns the whole thing into a warning. "Rejoice O young man in your youth, but, know that God will get you for doing that." Do you see how you can interpret the reminder of God's judgment in such a way as to make the whole thing into a warning. But that is not what is going on.

The interpretation that I have given, that young people should enjoy their youth is the intention of this text. It fits with the other "enjoy-

your-life” passages in the book and therefore with the overall message of the book and it is consistent with the overall message of the Bible on the goodness of the creation and the many legitimate pleasures of life. That is a hugely important theme in the Bible and helps us both to see and to experience the wonderful richness of life as God has given it.

But there is the reality of sin and that means that we are tempted to seek pleasure in life in sinful ways and that reality is also a significant part of the biblical message and it is an important part of Ecclesiastes’ message as well.

I have a very helpful set of handbooks on each book of the Bible which are designed to help translators do their work and so it focuses simply on the sense in which the various words and sentences in the Bible are to be understood.

And this is how it suggests the Hebrew of this sentence be understood. So “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, do not forget that God is going to judge everything that you do.” The translation handbook gives this as the sense. “God will bring you into judgment indicates that the wise person must consider how God will view things. Here Qoheleth calls on his students to follow wise instruction because at some point God will pass judgment upon them and the lives they lead.”

So, the call to rejoice in your youth and enjoy those precious years is in no way muted, but it comes with the reminder that there are ways to enjoy life that are pleasing to God and there are ways to enjoy life that are not pleasing to God. Therefore, make sure that you are enjoying your life and pursuing its potential in ways that God will approve of. And when we put this idea in the context of the rest of the Bible teaching, including wisdom teaching, living in harmony with God’s standards is the way of the most profound enjoyment of life anyway. To experience the fullness of life is to live it according to God’s design and any pleasure-seeking that contradicts God’s ways is superficial and ultimately destructive and the path to ruin.

But this is something for young people to keep in mind. The Bible urges you to pursue the potential joys and satisfactions of life when you are young with energy and vigor. But God also warns you not to forget about him and his wisdom in that pursuit. Sin is a thing. We have sinful inclinations even as people saved by grace. So, keep that in mind as you throw yourself into the experience of the joys and satisfactions of living. There is a right way to do it and there is a wrong way to do it and there is a God in heaven who is going to judge us all. And so, keep that in mind. When you decide what paths you are going to pursue and which of the delights of life you are going to sample, do not forget that God will either approve or disapprove of what you do. Do not forget that - for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

That is not a bad thing for the people of God. We face God's judgment in the light of the provision that God has made for our sins in Jesus Christ. In the light of the New Testament we are already declared righteous in God's sight. So, the judgment of God is not about earning salvation. But it is about evaluating what we have done with our lives and that is a sobering reality. It gives a certain seriousness to life knowing that our lives are going to be evaluated by God. But at the same time, it is this that gives our life meaning. If there were no judgment by God, then how we live would ultimately make no difference and so our lives would be meaningless. The greatest satisfaction in life is to live in such a way that is pleasing to God and so while the judgment of God is serious and sobering, it is also what makes life worth living.

So young people, keep that in mind as you follow God's delightful directive to enjoy your young years to the full. Live your life with enthusiasm. Pursue the wonderful potentials for pleasure and growth and satisfaction, but as you do that remember that it is all going to be judged and so make sure that you stay within the boundaries that God has given for our good and never forget that we are under God's authority and he is going to judge our lives.

The command in 12:1 to remember your Creator is part of this same point. "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;" Yes, enjoy life. Yes, do not waste your youth. Take full advantage of that wonderful period of your life, but as you do so do not forget that you have a Creator who is the source of your life and all of its gifts and you must live according to his priorities. We are tempted as sinful human beings to worship the creation rather than the Creator. We are tempted as sinful human beings to enjoy the gifts and forget the giver of the gifts. Ecclesiastes is reminding young people not to make that mistake. As you pursue the richness of the joys of life remember whence they come and remember that the enjoyment of life is intended to have had its center a relationship of love and thanksgiving and delight with our Creator and our Saviour. The joy that is enjoined for young people is a joy in which the source of the joy and the giver of the joy is the primary focus of the joy. Any joy that is divorced from our relationship with God is empty joy and it shrivels our humanity rather than fulfills it.

Now I have not given much attention to the negative in this passage. But the background to this whole exhortation to enjoy your youth is the fact that once you get older, the troubles increase and what is on the horizon for all of us is the weakening and disintegration of our bodies and then death. He is saying, enjoy your life "before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say I have no pleasure in them."

He does not paint a very rosy picture of aging. The general thrust of the imagery is clear even if not every aspect of it is clear. The imagery describes the weakening of the human body. I'm not going to go through this line by line. His point is that the eyes grow dim, the teeth fall out and hearing fails, the back is bent, and the spirit becomes anxious and afraid. And the enjoyment of life diminishes. The days and years come in which it is said, "I have no pleasure in them" and desire fails.

It is a very pessimistic view of old age. Like so much of wisdom it captures part of our experience but not all of it. In our day and in our part of the world some of these things are mitigated because we have better health care and diets and are healthier longer. But in those days

the life expectancy was much lower, and the ravages of old age came earlier.

But we know what he is speaking about. With old ages comes the weakening of our bodies. It happens in different ways and at different speeds, but we all begin to shrivel, and creak and more things go wrong, and we gradually become weaker and weaker and at some point life is not as enjoyable as it once was and often life itself becomes a burden. There are many variables, but we all experience the decline of our bodies and the descent towards the time when they fail altogether, and we die. “[M]an is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets – before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain or the wheel is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to the God who gave it. Vanity of Vanity, says the Preacher, all is vanity.”

Death looms over our lives. We live in the valley of the shadow of death. The reality of death has haunted the author of Ecclesiastes and it has been a dark theme in his thinking and his experience of life. And he is reflecting reality. The coming of death is a massive shadow that hangs over life and inserts an undercurrent of sadness into every joy. We see that in this passage where he exhorts the young to enjoy their youth, but the reason for this exhortation is that life is short, youth is shorter and before all of us is this process of dying in which our bodies slowly or quickly break down until they stop working altogether and we die.

Life has a lot of joy about it. But it is all tinged with sorrow and sadness because it does not last, and we gradually lose everything that made life enjoyable.

Now there is not a lot of hope in this passage. And even in the whole of the Old Testament the hope is dim and only hinted at here and there. Here the hope is that the spirit returns to God who gave it. There is a seed of hope there that death is not the end, but it was little understood or celebrated by the Old Testament people of God.

That of course changes in a remarkable way in the New Testament with the resurrection of Christ and the certainty of eternal life and the

resurrection of the body. This is one of the ways that the Old Testament leaves us with massive human problems and only hints of the ultimate solutions that God was working towards. It is one of the ways that the Old Testament points to Christ because Jesus is the solution to the many problems that the Old Testament describes. And in connection with this text, the victory of Jesus over death gives old age and death a much more positive character than this passage does.

What this passage describes is certainly part of our experience. But the gospel of the resurrection and eternal life in Christ gives a comfort in the midst of dying and death that gives the whole process a more hopeful character for God's people. There is the sadness. As we age we lose much that made life enjoyable. There is a very profound sadness that the losses associated with aging and dying bring to life. But there is also a hope that is the ultimate comfort in life and in death and that hope is the resurrection of Jesus. Death has been conquered. This life is not the end. When we die we will be with the Lord and at the end of the age we will rise from the dead.

So when you are young, enjoy your life. Live it with gusto. Enjoy it as a gift from God. But face the reality that the time of youth is very short and that life itself is short. And all of us must live in the light of the reality of death. There is a way to do this in which hope mitigates the sadness and that is through the gospel of the defeat of death and the glorious future for God's people beyond this life. And so let the sadness with which this passage ends cause you to look to Jesus and our salvation in him to give us comfort and hope as we live in the shadow of death.