

Ecclesiastes 11 & 12

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[0 : 00] Have you ever Googled yourself? You know what I mean. You ever gone to Google and typed in your name to see what the internet world was saying,!

Well, I'll admit I Google myself from time to time. Now, mind you, I have legitimate reasons, some of which are not tied to my personal vanity.

For example, as an author, I want to see if anyone has interacted with the books or the articles I've written. Perhaps someone's written a scathing review on Reformation20warf1.org.

I especially want to see if there's something current. So from time to time, I type in Douglas Sean O'Donnell, make sure my wife isn't looking, and then I click the past 24 hours option.

Sad but true. Well, a few weeks ago when I did this, the first hit I got was, guess what? Amazon? No. Facebook? No.

[1 : 05] The first hit I got was IrishDeaths.com. Well, needless to say, I clicked on the website to see if I was still alive.

And thankfully, I didn't find myself on the list. The long list of Irish people who had recently died. A 57-year-old man has died following an assault in Dublin early yesterday.

A woman in her late 30s has been killed after being struck by a car in County Tipperary last night. Frank Kelly, the actor best known for playing the foul-mouthed priest, Father Jack, has died at the age of 77.

Former assistant county manager George Redman has died following a short illness. Redman was 92. Police in Belfast are investigating after the discovery of a body in a McDonald's in the city center last Thursday night.

A teenage girl has been killed this afternoon following a collision involving a truck in West Dublin. A 13-year-old boy in Kildare has drowned after attempting to rescue a friend who fell in a river.

[2 : 20] Death. It doesn't matter if you're 92 or 13. It doesn't matter if you're Irish, Irish-American, Australian, Welsh, and even English.

It doesn't matter if you're male. It doesn't matter if you're female. Death doesn't play favorites. Illness, car wrecks, drowning, murder, death will eventually get us all.

And therefore, never send a shroud for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee. Now just so you know, before you say, what is this? Who on earth invited this demented and dour American to speak for this otherwise lovely and enjoyable evening service?

Before you say that, before you think such thoughts, I need to tell you that I have been assigned this topic. Well, not precisely. Paul didn't ask me to talk on death, but he approved me speaking on Ecclesiastes.

And it's the same thing as saying, hey, Doug, why don't you come and speak on death? So tonight, per my assignment, if not from Paul, definitely from God, from God's word, from this too often neglected part of God's word, I want to give you a brief sermon, brief meaning less than an hour, on what the book of Ecclesiastes has to say on death.

[3 : 37] What I've entitled, what I've entitled, lively, lively thoughts on death. I say lively because I hope it will make for a lively discussion afterwards. But also lively because I hope that these thoughts on death and on dying will help you and me know how to live.

So if you open your Bibles again, we're going to look at Ecclesiastes. We'll look at all of chapter 11 and then also into 12, verses 1 through 8. The structure, Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to kind of outline, but the structure and the key ideas of this text are actually quite obvious.

Put simply, it is this, if you kind of go backwards. While you're young, that's what's said in chapter 12, 1 through 8. While you're young, then go backwards, verses 7 through 10 and 11.

Fear God, then keep going backwards, 1 through 6. Serve others. I'll put it more precisely, it's this. Before the impending evil days of old age and death strike you like a cosmic thunderstorm, while you're still young, while you're still living, work hard in order to give generously to others. And enjoy life in light of your Creator and your Judge. And we're going to start with the evil days ahead. The real depressing stuff.

[5 : 00] The stuff that is intended to depress us into dependence on God. And so look at 12, 1 through 8. As these verses were just read, I'm not going to read them again.

I'm just going to explain them and apply them. These verses are filled with beautiful imagery about a harsh reality. And the attention of the imagery is emotional engagements.

Instead of merely saying that everyone gets old and dies and it ain't fun, Koalef, or Pastor Solomon as I like to call him, he uses images to get us to see and hear and smell and taste and touch our depressing decay.

He starts with his picture of old age, the image of an impending and vicious storm. Verse 2. Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain. Now the sun. The sun is mentioned up at this point 34 times in Ecclesiastes. Now in its final time mention, its final scene, the sun along with all the other celestial lights, it takes a bow.

[6 : 10] It's done. It's pitch black. That's what we're to see here or not see. Using apocalyptic imagery that is strikingly similar to what the prophets used, describing the last day, Solomon heightens the personal tragedy of a person's death by comparing it to the great day of God's cosmic judgment.

As in the end of the world, creation will be unmade, so the end of our human life is in the sense that our life is unmade. Our end time is like the end time.

When you die, as one commentator put it, a world is ending. Yours. Yours. Now from the black sky in verse 2, the imagery descends down to earth in verses 3 through 6, describing the haunting effects of death.

Verse 7 summarizes the sad situation. We're all going to die. The dust returns to the earth as it was. The spirit returns to God who gave us. But before that happens, bodily frailties increase as we age. What was once vibrant, but now unattended, like an unattended state, our hands and our legs and our teeth and our eyes and our ears, our vocal cords, our hair, they all start to deteriorate.

[7 : 37] In old age, our hands, which once provided for living and protection, they now shake.

Verse 3. In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, our legs can't support the weight of our bodies for long, the strong men are bent.

Our remaining teeth can't chew food like they used to. The grinders cease because they are few. Our vision declines.

Those who look through the windows are dimmed. And if all that wasn't bad enough, there are other awful issues with old age. For example, when we want our ears to work well, they don't.

We can't even hear ourselves chew. And the doors of the street are shut when the sound of the grinding is low. But when we would want deafness, our ears work just fine.

And one rises up at the sound of a bird. Some of you know all too palpable. It's being described here. Moreover, we can't sing like we used to.

[8 : 40] Our vocal cords no longer have the elastic strength to make sweet music, to hit the high notes. And all the daughters of song, that's your vocal cords, are brought low.

Finally, before we die, we go to what he calls our eternal home. And people mourn for us. The mourners go about in the streets. Our hair turns gray or white. The almond tree blossoms. Nice way to say it. We lose our mobility. And we painfully get around. The grasshopper drags itself along. Our motivation to work.

Our appetite for food. Our sex drive diminishes. Desire falls. The fear of falling. And of other dangers increase. They are afraid also of what is high.

And the terrors are in the way. And then, and then the moment comes. What was once beautiful, precious, useful, and life-giving is destroyed.

[9 : 45] 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.

Light crashes to the ground. And life, it spills out like water. Life is broken beyond repair. Death is final and irreversible.

In the movie Rembrandt, Ecclesiastes is featured in the movie's final two scenes. The movie follows the life of the artist Rembrandt.

From the time of his considerable wealth and established reputation to his final years where he lived, as the film depicts, in relative obscurity. Rembrandt lost his wife, his fortune, and much of his fame.

In the second to final scene, he enters a tavern. After the young men in the tavern give their toast, they say, to beauty, to woman, to youth, to love, to money.

[10:50] They turn to the artist who they didn't recognize as Rembrandt, and they ask, they said, what about you, Grandpa? You haven't given your toast. He responds, I can't think of a toast.

The crowd insists, for they had seen him mumbling something into his glass, and Rembrandt replies, that wasn't a toast, and those weren't my words. They were the words of King Solomon. They're the best words I know. And then he quotes four different verses from Ecclesiastes, including 12.8. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

And the tavern erupts in laughter. Now the final scene depicts Rembrandt alone in his studio. He's completing his self-portrait by looking into a cracked mirror.

Through the mirror, the camera focuses on his face. He pauses, he stares at himself, and then he says the film's last words, Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.

[11:52] When my family lived in Chicago, in our upstairs bathroom, there was a vanity mirror. Our vanity mirror had three planes of glass and two on the side, so you can get a whole view of who you are.

Ecclesiastes is kind of like that mirror. Ecclesiastes 12, 1 through 8 especially. It's just two sides of things that we're to see. On one side, we're to see the utter fleetingness of life.

And on this side, there's our reflection of God. We're in the image of God. There's something important about that. It gives both of those truths to us. The first perspective comes post-poem, after the poem.

It's after these verses, 2 through 7. After this brilliant, exquisite, seven-verse sentence, it gives this bleak ending in verse 8. Vanity of vanity, says the preacher, all is vanity.

This is the final time vanity is used. I taught the children today the Hebrew word *havel* is what it is. You breathe in, you breathe out. *Havel*. That's what it's like.

[12:58] *Hevel*. Vanity. Vanity. It's like breath coming out of you and going in the air and disappearing. 38 times. And it's echoed here at the end of the book and at the beginning of the book.

Vanity of vanities, chapter 1, verse 2, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. In light of the description of old age and death, which we were just given, this sense of vanity here is a fleetingness.

Life is going to come to an end too soon. The second perspective, then comes pre-poem, the step before the poem. Perhaps you notice the word before, before the evil days come, verse 1, before the sun is dark and loose too, before the silver cord is snapped, verse 6.

Those three before, they push our eyes to what comes before the before, namely the command in chapter 12, verse 1, remember your creator in the days of your youth.

Remember your creator before you die. You see, meditation, meditation on our end should bring us to in the beginning, God.

[14:05] We're to remember our creator, the one who made us and continually gives us good gifts in the days of our youth before we get to this point in which we're at such a point of old age where everything's sort of falling apart until finally it crashes before we die.

But how do we remember? How do we remember our creator in the days where we have vitality in the days of our youth? Well, we do so by keeping his commandments.

That's how Ecclesiastes ends, chapter 12, verse 13. And especially keeping the great commandments, loving God, the greatest commandments, loving God and loving others. Jesus said, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And Pastor Solomon here gives a very similar summary. He exhorts us to work hard in order to give generously to others, love others.

That's what's said in chapter 11, 1 through 6. And then enjoy life in light of your creator and judge your relationship with God, loving God. That's 7 through 10.

[15:12] Now look with me at chapter 11, 1 through 6. Cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth. If a tree falls to the south or to the north in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. He who observes the wind will not sow. He who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child. So you do not know the work of God who makes everything. In the morning, sow your seed. In the evening, withhold not your hand. For you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. Now notice here, there are four commandments given.

They are, cast your bread, verse 1, give a portion, verse 2, sow your seed, verse 6a, and do not withhold your hand, verse 6b. Notice also the phrase do not know.

[16:17] Do not know. You do not know. It's repeated four times in these verses. We know something about precipitation and gravity. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth.

If a tree falls to the south or to the north and the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. Very impressive knowledge that we have. However, there are some limitations to our knowledge. And three limitations are listed here. Two have to do with the future. We don't know when disaster will strike, verse 2. We don't know if we'll be prosperous or not, verse 6. The other limitation has to do with God.

Just as we don't fully, perfectly understand how a baby is formed inside of a woman's womb. Even with all of our technology, it's still quite a mystery and amazing.

So we can't comprehend all that God does. A few years ago, I took my youngest son, Simeon, on a trip.

[17:18] And we stayed at this old, refurbished granary on a farm of a friend of mine. And at night, we made a fire and we warmed ourselves around it.

Around this cast-iron wood-burning stove, we had a fireside checked. And I don't know how that conversation got to the topic of heaven and hell, but it did.

Stranger things happen when you hang out with me. Anyway, Simeon asked, what happens to babies who die in a mommy's tummy? The question took me by surprise.

Not in the sense that I hadn't heard it before, but that it was coming from my seven-year-old son. So I fumbled around and I said something like, well, whatever happens, remember that God is merciful. And Simeon replied, yeah, maybe he brings them to heaven. Then he shrugged his shoulders and he says, who knows? Wise people learn to say, who knows, to a lot of questions.

[18:25] However, wise people also learn to labor diligently in spite of our lack of knowledge. You see, if you put together the commandments here to work, cast, give, so, withhold not your hand, with these statements of ignorance, you do not know, you do not know, you do not know.

What do you get? Well, you get this, work diligently in spite of your lack of knowledge. Put differently, let God take care of his mysteries and let us take care of our work.

The irony is that our limitations should not lead us to despair or to sloth, but rather they should lead us to investment and to industry. verses 4 and 6 especially touch on this theme.

Verse 4 reads, He who observes the wind will not sow and he who regards the clouds will not reap. And I'll paraphrase, if you're watching the Weather Channel all day for the perfect weather, no wind, no clouds, for the time you're going to plant your crops, well, you will never, ever leave the sofa. So stop the sloth. Put off procrastinating. Ignorance is no excuse for idleness. Trust God, get off your duff and obey. Verse 6, In the morning, sow your seed.

[19:42] At evening, withhold not your hand. Work all day. Put in a full week. Not 24-7, but 12-6. Why?

For you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or both alike. We cannot know all the works of God. The wind blows where it wishes, as Jesus said. But we can know that our sovereign God wants us to work.

So let's work. Now, industry is great, and the wisdom literature persistently rolls us out of bed and pushes us off the sofa. However, biblical industry centers not on self, but on others.

We work for the benefit of others. Note that. Don't forget that. Look again at verses 1 and 2.

Chapter 11. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. The images here are actually of fearless generosity.

[20 : 48] Fearless generosity. The casting of bread upon the waters is an image of complete commitment and courage. It is likely that the image here of tossing a stale, hard, easy to float piece of pita bread on a river is not that of a careless risk, but it's actually that of a calculated one.

You know you're going to find it. And that confidence is expressed in the phrase, you will find it after many days. And many commentators think here actually the bread image on the water represents ancient sea trade.

For example, if you wanted to sail from Palestine to Italy and back, it was a very perilous but a very profitable enterprise. Even if one of three ships you sent made it to port and sold its cargo and received goods and brought them back to trade, the whole venture was worth it.

The profit was enormous. And I think the point here of this whole bread analogy is, in verse one, is nothing ventured, nothing gained. To borrow just the traditional investment slogan.

And then verse two follows. Give a portion then. After you've invested, give a portion. To seven, or even to eight. For you don't know what disaster might happen on earth. Now this verse might speak of just spreading the risk.

[22 : 08] However, I think it deals with diversifying your earnings, not your investments. I say that because it's imperative to give. We're to give a portion of seven, no, even eights.

If we gain from courageous investments, we're to give just as courageously. Why? For you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

And if Jesus' parable here, if the rich fool comes to mind, it should, because it's almost the same point. Instead of making money so as to hoard it, we're to spend it on others.

We're to spend it on others because we never know if this very day our soul might be required of us. So don't lay up treasure for yourself. Be rich towards God by richly giving to others.

Before it's too late, divide your earnings. Seven, no, make it eight ways. It's the better than perfect, seven being the perfect number, seven, perfect way to live.

[23 : 08] It's the perfect way to give. Listen, we don't know much. We do not know, we do not know, we do not know, we do not know. However, as Christians, we do know this.

We know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich.

So as our humble creator, remember your creator in the days of youth, and Savior, humbly served us through the sacrifice of the cross, let us be of the same mind as Paul said.

Let us put first the interests of others. Let us not be wicked and slothful servants as in Jesus' parable of the talents, but good and faithful ones.

People who serve others by sharing, sharing what God has entrusted to us. Let us give bountifully in order to give freely. Let us do honest work with our own hands as Paul puts it, so that we may have something to share with those in need.

[24 : 07] Let us be venture capitalists for the kingdom of God. Let us, as John Wesley put it, make all we can, save all we can, and give all we can. It's industry.

Industry for others. Now, adding to this industry is our enjoyment. Look at verses 7 and 8. Verse 7 says, Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

That is, it's good to be alive. Poetic way of saying that. Verse 8 continues, So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all. And then that theme of joy just continues in the next few verses.

Verse 9 begins, Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let not your heart cheer you, but let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. And verse 10 begins with basically the same command, just said a little differently.

Remove vexation, that is remove unhappiness, sorrow from your heart. And he's not saying here, don't worry, be happy, but he's saying, be happy. He's saying that. Be happy, rejoice.

[25 : 11] Rejoice. In a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, Bill Waters in the cartoonist, he shows the boy, Calvin, and his tiger, Hobbes, they're sitting with their backs on the ground with their backs on a tree.

In the first frame, Calvin leans forward and he says, I don't understand this business about death. In the second frame, the drawing focuses entirely on him and his arms are stretched out like this and he asks, if we're just going to die, what's the point of living?

The third frame shows them staring straight at the reader with baffled looks on their faces. They're silent. They have nothing to say in that frame. And finally, we come to the fourth and final frame that the answer comes from hungry and humorous Hobbes.

He says, well, there's seafood. The answer, well, there's seafood, is not the answer the Bible gives, but it's not as far off as you might think.

In Ecclesiastes, one of the responses to the reality of death is to rejoice in life. Go eat your bread and joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart.

[26 : 25] Let your garments be always white. Let oil not be lacking on your head. Enjoy life. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. You see, in the most depressing book in the Bible, that's Ecclesiastes, you find six enjoyments exhortations, like the one you just heard.

We can, if we trust God, if we trust our creator, the one who is in control of this exceedingly complex universe, we can then rejoice. We can rejoice in what he does and what we do.

In his brilliant poem, Memento Mori, U.S. poet, laureate, Billy Collins, begins, it doesn't take much to remind me what a soap bubble I am floating over a children's party.

Then later, he shifts. He shifts his thought from human transience to human delight. And he concludes the poem in this way.

And the realization that no one who is ever breast of the water of times has figured out a way to avoid dying always pulls me by the rains and settles me down by the roadside, grateful for the sweet weeds and the mouthful, mouthfuls of colorful wildflowers.

[27 : 42] You see, we can respond to the reality of death with cynicism. Life is just a dirty trick from nothingness to nothingness. Hemingway. Or with resentment at the end of it all.

I have time at last to consider my life its stubby, stale, and updike. And updike. Or, we can follow another poem.

We can take joy. Take joy. We can take all the reminders of our mortality and use them to motivate us to rejoice now.

To rejoice in what we see. To rejoice in what we do. To rejoice in who we are. What we've been given. Yes, to rejoice even in seafood and steak and weeds and wildflowers.

You see, the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that death with all of its bitterness can also be an impetus to remind us to celebrate what we have.

[28 : 44] To celebrate life. 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. Remove vexation from your heart. Put away pain from your body for youth and the dawn of life are fleeting.

Then 12.1, Remember. Remember also your creator in the days of your youth before evil days come and years draw near to which you will say I have no pleasure in them.

Why if we know that the evil days are coming old age is coming and with that dying and eventually death why can we enjoy life? What motives are given?

Again, the motive of time is mentioned in verse 10. We should remove vexation because youth the dawn of life is vanity. In other words life is short lived.

[29 : 44] But there is a new motivation and a central motivation also given here and that is God. God is our creator chapter 12.1 but God is also our judge. 11.9 Rejoice in your youth walk in the ways of your heart but know that God is going to bring everything into judgment.

And a judgment here could just refer to death. I think though because in Hebrew there is a definite article it is the judgment I think it envisions the day of judgment the day of judgment.

So what is going on here? Well some people think that the coming judgment of God it stifles it chokes our freedom and our fun. But that's precisely the opposite way that Solomon sees it.

It is rather due to God's judgment that we can live life fully to the end. Because we are all marching towards old age and death and the judgments we can enjoy food.

Ecclesiastes 2.25 Drink wine. 9.7 Love your spouse. 9.9 Take a break. 4.6 Pursue dancing and laughter. 3.4 and 5 Appreciate money.

[30 : 55] 7.11 and 12 Take pleasures in gardens and music. Chapter 2.5 and 8 Put differently because you are marching towards God who is not only your creator but will also be your judge we can rejoice responsibly.

We can pursue with all of our hearts as Paul puts it righteousness and faith and love and peace the attitudes and actions that bring with them genuine joy. Holiness I have this slogan I tell myself over

and over holiness leads to happiness.

When I'm holy when I'm in a right relationship with God and others when I'm loving others when I'm enjoying the life that God has given me it actually it makes me full it satiates my soul as I said this morning an endless indulgence it always leads to misery endless misery eventually.

You see walking the ways of your heart here is not romanticism it's actually biblicism to neglect God is to neglect joy God has designed us for pleasure to enjoy all the pleasures that come from being faithful to him and his rules so remember him fear him and in a sense watch the freedom follow watch the fun follow he's designed us for this that he is our creator and our judge Samuel Beckett in 1969 he wrote a play called Breath if you know anything about it you know that it is unusually short it lasts 35 seconds I'll describe it for you that the curtain opens there on the stage is a pile of rubbish illuminated by a single light the light dims then it brightens a little before completely going out there are no actors there's no words there's only a soundtrack of a human cry followed by an inhaled breath an exhaled breath and another cry and that's it

I'm sorry if it comes to London you shouldn't go see it because I've given away the plot but don't miss this point don't pass on this whether you're a modernist who disliked Christianity like Beckett or you're a post-modernist who likes Christianity whoever you are whatever you are for all of us the dark days are coming life will be gone sooner than you ever imagined it will seem like 35 seconds of breath 34 33 32 10 9 8 3 2 1 0 so then what would it do put on wisdom would it put on the lasting and profound wisdom that's taught here in Ecclesiastes before these days come before the impending evil days of old age and death strike you like a cosmic thunderstorm while you're still young work hard in order to give generously to others and enjoy life in light of your creator and in light of your judge let's pray ending ending ending ending ending ending ending ending