

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 November 2024

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Please open up Ecclesiastes 11, page 559, and we'll try and bring this plane into land this evening. The end of a journey with Solomon. It's been quite the journey.

Well, you might have seen in the media recently that Sir Chris Hoy has been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. Britain's most decorated Olympian, we're told, is terminally ill.

And Chris Hoy has written a book, it's called All That Matters, and it tells the story of the last 12 months or so. From the point of the shock of the diagnosis, he had no symptoms at all except a sore shoulder, and he went to the doctor and he had it scanned and it revealed a tumor.

All the way from that initial shock to the way that this news changed his entire outlook on everything to do with his life. I listened to an interview with him. He's done lots of interviews recently.

I listened to one recently with Chris Evans, of all people. And Chris Hoy said this, in terms of the way his perspective has changed because of this diagnosis.

[1 : 09] It's like he's been reading Ecclesiastes 11.

Ecclesiastes 11 verse 7, Light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So 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. There will be dark days ahead for Sir Chris, but he has resolved that the light of life is to be enjoyed.

And he will enjoy what years he has been given. It's just as Solomon urges us all to do here. Verses 7 and 8 in this section are really a summary of the whole.

It's basically saying this, Rejoice while you can because of what's coming. That's it. Rejoice while you can because of what's coming. It's not just people with a stage 4 cancer diagnosis who should rejoice with the time that they have left, but joy should mark all of us, all of our lives.

[2 : 35] And as Solomon closes this book, he organizes what he says about this, Rejoice now in light of what's coming. He organizes what he says about this around three days. The present day, the coming days of decline and death, and the last day judgment.

That's going to be the path that we follow as we go through. So point number one, Solomon says, Rejoice in these days. Verse 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. He's saying, Enjoy what God has given to you. Do this in your youth. Now the little ones that are here, they don't need us to tell them this.

They're waiting for the benediction already. They've got their eye on that so they can run off, grab some cake, stuff it in their face, and zoom around the place of the big smile on their face. They're okay with rejoicing.

Teenagers, maybe not so much. You need to hear this. God's Word is telling you to enjoy yourself. Do you think about that when you think about the Christian life?

[3 : 40] You think the Christian life, dot, dot, dot, fill it in, fill in the blank. What does God tell me to do? He says, Rejoice. Rejoice. Your Christian faith, according to Ecclesiastes 11, allows you to follow the desire of your heart and the sight of your eyes.

Being a Christian is a cause for joy, not grumpiness, not aloof coolness or any of the ways you might describe what teenagers are kind of characterized broadly.

If you name the name of Christ teenagers, you should be joyful. When I ask you, how are you? Don't reply, yeah, all right.

Yeah, fine. Say something like, I'm very well, Reuben. Today's a good day. All right, try that out. Try resisting the temptation that the culture tells you to be cool and aloof and grumpy and a bit sullen.

Joy. Joy. Joy. But, of course, it's not just for teenagers. It's an exhortation to—it's not just an exhortation to young men, because if we go back to verse 8, just have a look at this.

[4 : 49] Verse 8, we see that this youthful joy is something that we can have even into later life. Do you see what it says? If a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.

All the way through. The adjective, I think, young or youth here is a relative term, and it applies to anyone who hasn't reached the state described in 12, 2 to 7.

We'll come to that in a minute. He's talking about anyone who's still going. Anyone who could rejoice should rejoice. Let's be honest.

We need to hear this. We fuss about what we have and what we don't have. We stress about the future.

And so much of our lives is characterized by not rejoicing in the here and now. Not rejoicing in these days. There's so many things.

[5 : 52] There's so much small stuff that we choose to sweat. You know the saying, don't sweat the small stuff? We sweat the small stuff very easily. And yet Solomon has repeatedly told us, in this book, God is in control of everything.

Everything, you remember chapter 3, everything is fitting in its own way. And when we understand that God is in control of everything, we are free to be grateful for what we have and to trust Him with what we don't and to rejoice.

Do you see that God actually really cares about this?

It isn't just like something that happens in passing. Look at verse 9. God really cares, but know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment.

Now this verse 9 in the order here is often taken as a check on what he's just said. In the first part of verse 9, he's saying, so walk in the ways of your heart, but don't forget that God will judge any sinful decisions you make.

[6 : 59] But I actually don't think that's what it's saying. He puts a check on ungodliness in verse 10. Do you see that? Remove vexation and put away, the translation is better there, put away evil from your body.

That is a check on following the desires of your heart. Don't follow the desires of your heart to the point where you do evil, put away evil. But the mention of judgment in verse 9, I think, concerns God holding us to account for not living lives that are marked by joy.

One commentator says this, quote, End quote.

Now, look, you could say that in a way that sounds a bit superficial, a bit cheesy.

How are you? I'm doing fantastic. Never been better. Absolutely brilliant. When actually life's a bit difficult. He's not talking about that, which is why 12 verse 1 is so important.

[8 : 18] 12 verse 1. And you see there, he gives us grounds for this joy. He doesn't just say, rejoice, get rid of annoyance, get rid of evil. But he says also, he says, remember also your creator in the days of your youth.

And how does that relate? Well, it's important we see again this isn't a correction, a kind of, oh, and by the way, don't forget that God needs to be central in your life. Rejoice and make sure God's central in your life.

No, he refers to God here as creator because he is making a point about what kind of God he is. He is actually giving us grounds for why we can rejoice. Remembering your creator is remembering that God made the world that we live in.

And we take our place in that world as creatures, not as gods. It means that we know we're not in charge of our lives and we therefore release our grip on trying to control everything.

One of the threads, it's run all the way through the book. But it also means that remembering God created our world good. And that he gave us all the gifts that we possess.

[9 : 27] And that that is the root motivation for the joy that we're being called to here. Remember that God is the giver of all of our gifts.

That's what it means to remember your creator. And we're to do this in these days, in the present, now, whether young or old.

Not to live joyfully. That is not to be glad in the abundant goodness that God has lavished on us. It's sin. And it's sin because it is a denial of who God is as our generous creator who has given us everything that we have to enjoy.

Now, one challenge we face with this, I think, is a spirit of envy. Our culture has trained us to think that if someone else has more of something than we do, we are hard done by. And that means we can't enjoy what we do have because we resent others who have more than us. That is prevalent all across our culture.

[10:42] On the other side, we're then made to feel guilty if we are the ones with more. Again, we are not able to enjoy what God has given us because we feel guilty that we have more than other people.

We need to remember that we have what we have and we don't have what we don't have by the sovereign will of God.

And it is all gift. More or less is God's design. So, don't judge others. Enjoy what you have. Don't worry about what you don't have. Enjoy what you have. Don't worry what other people say about what you do have. Enjoy what you have. Steward what you've been given. Another challenge, this Solomon pushing on us that we must rejoice, another challenge comes when life is hard, when it doesn't feel like we have much reason for joy.

But again, remembering God as our creator means we can rejoice even when things are tough. Because however hard life is, we're in a relationship with the one who made us and we are here under his care to experience it.

[12:02] The author N.D. Wilson makes this point in typically colorful fashion. He says this, Rumor has it that most normal men send at least 8 million forward swimming sperm looking for an egg every sexual act.

Don't even bother adding in egg variation or the total number of sperm that may have had a fighting chance during your mother's days of fertility when you were conceived or the possibility that she might have taken her friend's advice and shunned your father.

Keep it simple and wildly conservative. Your chances of being here were about 1 out of 8 million.

The chances of you and me both being here, 1 out of 64 trillion.

We are a world of lottery winners. For every one of us here right now in every begetting, there were at least 7,999,999 losers.

And they don't even know how almost they were. I wish I'd never been born, the adolescent moans. Shut up, Randy. There are 8 million other kids who would be wishing they could be here right now if only they were here to wish.

[13:08] When we find ourselves grumbling, remember we're the ones who got to play the game. There are 7,999,999 others who could take our place.

And our Creator has adopted us in Christ. He isn't just our Creator. He is also our Redeemer. We are in Christ. And that means that we know that our struggles are always on the clock.

There is a day coming when the struggles that we face will come to an end. That in itself is a reason to rejoice. But what Solomon is concerned with here is that we should rejoice because we are here, because we got to play.

But he's concerned with more than that. He goes on, you see, We're also to rejoice now in these days because the full-time whistle is coming. Yes, we got to play, but the game will be coming to an end.

It will one day be over. So here's our second point. Recognize the coming evil days. Recognize the coming evil days. That's 12 to verse 8. 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.

[14:25] Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after rain. The days of darkness in 11 verse 8 have become the evil days of verse 1, days of decay and death, the ultimate proof that this life is vapor.

And the wise man knows this and faces it squarely and honestly. A day is coming when we won't be able to enjoy the gifts that God has given. We won't be able to eat our food and drink our wine and enjoy the wife of our youth, as Solomon has told us to do throughout this book.

And Solomon tells us this by way of a poem in verses 2 to 5. It's a somber, but it's an all-too-realistic portrayal of the decline that happens to us all. You see that?

Verse 2, first of all, the metaphor is of nightfall and winter and storm. Then verse 3, Solomon is taking us around an old house that is just cracking and falling down, portraying the problems that come with old age.

Hands and arms become weak and tremble. Legs buckle under men who were once strong. The grinder's teeth, they fall out and eyes lose their sight.

[15:49] Now in verses 4 to 5, there's the problem of sleep. Once they could sleep through anything and now they waken with birdsong. I was thinking about this this week.

The IRA blew up the police station not far from my house when I was growing up. I slept through the whole thing. Like, the smallest noise in the house now wakes me up in the middle of the night.

That's what happens as you get old. And then new fears take hold. Verse 5, Oh, I won't do that.

No, I can't do that. I could have a fall or something like that. All of a sudden, normal things become fearful. And then the almond tree blossoms.

Hair turns gray. The grasshopper drags itself along. Once agile and energetic, now stiff and slow. And desire fails. The libido vanishes. Because man is going to his eternal home.

[16:52] And the mourners go about the streets. Keep hearing that RFK Jr. is on an anti-aging protocol. I mentioned before Brian Johnson, the tech billionaire, spending two million quid a year trying to reverse his age.

None of these will ultimately work. We slow down. We creak. And we break. And then we die. The dust of our bodies will return to the dust of the ground.

And our spirits will return to God. Verse 7. And Solomon is saying that wisdom requires that this is something we need to recognize.

It is all going to happen. We need to be honest about that. And we need to rejoice while we still can in the good things that God has given.

And these can be the most simple things. In making the mind shift to enjoy the here and now, Chris Hoy said that he enjoyed the small things more. He said he was done with his bucket list.

[17:57] He said, quote, It's time with the kids, doing the barbecue, making a coffee, riding my bike. So, play with your children.

Eat your food. Drink your wine. Ride your bike. Enjoy the simple things. Because one day, the kids will be grown. Your hands won't be able to work the barbecue. You'll not be allowed caffeine anymore.

And riding the bike will be a distant memory. And then, you'll hear the final whistle and you won't even be able to watch others do those things. Solomon says, we need to receive these words as goads.

Verse 11. Goads are painful, but they're necessary.

And this is how the message Solomon has given us in this book should work. It's not been a comfortable message. This life is vapor.

[19:01] You can't control it to serve your wishes. It's all under God's control. He's working his purposes in the world according to his desires, not yours. Reality is hard. Life is often painful.

And we will all one day die. Wise people receive that as a goad to provoke us to live wisely, to order our lives around this reality.

That is how we live well. Receive the gifts that God has given. Say thank you and enjoy them before time is called on your life. And Solomon says, verse 12, don't think there's better wisdom anywhere else.

He says, it's all here indeed. If you have, as one author says, if you have not been mastered by a short book like this one, the long line of remaining big fat books will be nothing but weariness in the head.

Verse 12 is not about the endless array of books that you can get at the Christian bookstore. It is about the fact that you won't find this wisdom anywhere else.

[20:07] Recognize the coming dark days. Solomon concludes with another day. Takes us a step further. Point number three, remember the last day.

Rejoice in these days. You can do that by recognizing the coming dark days and also remembering the last day. Verse 14, the end of the matter.

Here it is. Solomon is summing up.

Here is the essence of the whole message. How do you live well in a world of vapor that we can't control? Fear God and do what he says. Because a day is coming when you'll give account for everything.

Every thought, every word, every action, the good and the bad and the ugly. Now, to fear God is to remember your creator and vice versa.

[21 : 14] And what that means is that we give God all the devotion and respect that he is due, and we do it with joy and thankfulness. Because of the God that he is, the generous God who blesses us in so many ways, and because of what he's done in giving us those blessings.

It is therefore certainly a warning to those who reject God. The truth is that a day is coming when you will answer to God for your actions.

If you're rejecting God in your life, you'll have to give an account for that one day. But the reality is Solomon is the teacher of God's people here. That's where we started all the way back in chapter 1. So he's reminding us of our proper place in God's world.

And as a conclusion to this book, this verse, these two verses, 13 and 14, they do three things. Fear God and keep his commandments because judgment is coming.

Three things. First of all, they motivate. Secondly, they liberate. And thirdly, they bring comfort. First of all, they motivate obedience. They motivate our obedience.

[22 : 20] In one sense, Solomon is simply returning to a theme that he has brought through the whole book. Chapter 3, verse 14, Whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it.

God has done it so that people fear before him. 5, verse 7, God is the one you must fear. 8, verse 12, Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him.

Fearing God, giving him the reverence that he is due, living your life under his instruction, fearing God in general requires us to fear before him specifically.

As I said in an earlier sermon, this means coming before him in worship as we're doing this evening. What Solomon is calling us to here to motivate us is to the pattern of the Christian life.

Gathering in God's presence on the Lord's day for worship and going out into the week, keeping his commandments in all things.

Motivates. Fearing God also liberates. Here's a paradox. When we fear God, it frees us from the fear of anyone or anything else.

[23 : 35] Fearing God is the way we live without fear in the world. Because when we submit all our anxieties about a life that we can't predict or control, when we submit those to him who controls it all, we can trust him with the outcome.

A life submitted to God liberates us from the controlling influences of anything else in the world. Jesus tells us this in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6.25, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. 6.32, The Gentiles, the unbelieving people, they seek after all these things.

And your heavenly Father knows that you need them all, but seek first the kingdom of God and all his righteousness. That sounds a lot like fear God and keep his commandments. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. When we fear God, we don't need to fear anyone else. We're freed from every other fear.

[24 : 46] That's liberty. That's true freedom. And then finally, our knowledge of the last day judgment also comforts. Solomon, you'll know all the way through this book, has been crystal clear about the pain of life under the sun.

He's also been clear about the reality of injustice and oppression under the sun. Chapter 4, verse 1, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

What do you say to someone whose experience in this life is that? What do you say to them? Well, there's only one thing that you can actually say that will be helpful.

God will one day put it right. A day is coming when every wrong will be made right, and for the Christian every tear wiped away.

A day of great justice lies ahead. Every deed, good and the bad, will be weighed, and the judge of all the earth will do right.

[25 : 51] And that means that every decision that, as a Christian, you have taken to fear God and to keep His commandments, to choose the good, to be wise in this world, will be vindicated.

So, question, what is your only comfort in life and in death? Answer, that I am not my own, but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He is fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.

In fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

In a world of vapor, fear God and keep His commandments. Let's pray.