

A Life Worth Living at Any Age
Ecclesiastes 11:5-12:8
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 11, Ecclesiastes chapter 11. A life rises or falls based on its worldview. It is either worth living or worthless for all of eternity. And this is determined in large part based on one's view of the world. We all have a worldview and it is simply the lens through which our soul looks out onto the landscape of life to try to make sense of it all. What we have seen over and over again in the book of Ecclesiastes is that a worldview which limits its view to the here and now stuff of life will only be able to conclude that it is all worthless. We simply are not able to take the things of life and the experiences of life and the accomplishments of life and the wisdom of life and the wealth of life and put it altogether into a scheme which makes sense of it all. That is a message we need to hear because we are prone to adopt this secular and human-centered worldview which tells us that the important things of life are the here and now realities. This alarming message of vanity of vanities, everything is vanity – has come to us from a preacher we should listen to. Solomon had all the experiences of life that we could ever dream of having and all the wealth you could ever want and even all the human wisdom to try to figure it all out – and he comes to the end this search for meaning and reports back to us – don't follow my path – it is worthless.

If you were here last week you've probably noticed that we are jumping from chapter 5 to chapter 11 in our study of Ecclesiastes. This is not because those chapters are unimportant, it is simply because the style of writing in those chapters lends itself to individual study and not particularly to extended exposition in a sermon. The chapters are filled with proverbial advice from Solomon as he adopts this secular and humanistic – “under the sun” – worldview. In assuming that worldview he intends to disenchant us from that worldview by repeatedly showing us how hopeless and worthless it makes life. Along the way in those chapters he gives us glimpses of hope as he foreshadows a better answer to the great perplexities of life, but overall he maintains this hopeless “under the sun” perspective. His theme for this section is found in 7:27-29 where he says – “Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things – which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. . . See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

In Solomon's own words here, he tells us that he has sought out a way to make sense of it all. He has tried to put together his own schematic of life, but however he puts it together he finds that it is all worthless and meaningless. His search has left him empty handed. The one thing he has found in every place he has looked is the residue of the Fall of man in the Garden. We were made upright, but we quickly turned from God's scheme of all things and went our own way seeking out our own scheme. And this has left us in a position of not being able to make sense of it all.

There is mystery which we are left with as to the why's and what's of life, and we simply can't make up a scheme that solves it all. This is what we see summarized in the first verse of our text for this morning. So, chapter 11 verse 5 says this.

This mystery leave us in a bit of a predicament. Are you just going to forget about figuring it all out and go on with your vain life, or are you going to seek for truth from the One who made it all and knows it all? Solomon's conclusion to his sermon is going to call us to look to God to make sense of life and to help us figure out why it all does actually matter. This conclusion begins in chapter 11 verse 5 and carries through to the end of the book. We will limit our focus this morning to 11:5 through 12:8. Let's start reading at 11:5.

Did you pick up on one of the main contrasts in the text – that of life and death? It pervades the whole section as the Preacher tries to bring us home to a right view of our life and of the world in which we live. So, to do that he points us to 3 practices we must pursue in order to live a life that is worth living in this here and now kind of world. We are to rejoice, remove, and remember. Now, it's pretty cool when the text itself gives you an alliterated outline – it is truly inspired then!

I. Rejoice – 11:7-9

- a. So, we are first called to rejoice in verses 7 through 9. The terms light and darkness are used throughout these verses as euphemisms for life and death. In verse 7 then the point is being made that life is sweet and full of pleasant things from the simple to the profound. Verse 8 tells us then that if we live many years we ought to rejoice in all of them because each year is a new opportunity to experience more of the sweetness of life. But this is immediately countered in verse 8 with the reality of the days of darkness that are coming and will be many. This is not a cynical statement or one that is intended to rob the joy out of life which he has just commended, but it is a statement of fact that is meant to actually increase our joy in this life. Realizing that this life with all of its experiences is a passing vapor should turn our hearts to want to enjoy it all the more as we receive each moment as a gift from our good Heavenly Father. The longer you live, the more opportunity you have had to experience the vastness of sweet joys in this life. You ought to rejoice in those the preacher tells you.
- b. He says this on the basis of verses 5-6 where he made clear to us that we are not in charge in this world. This is a huge problem for those who want to make sense of all things in this world by looking merely to human ways and human understandings. We simply cannot understand it all. We have no idea how it is that the bones in the womb of a mother are given the life of a human spirit. This statement validates the truth of a human fetus being a real life which cannot be simply removed like it is some lump of tissue – no developing baby in the womb is a life. But we have no idea how that happens. We can't explain it. So, in verse 6 we are told to sow our seed from morning to evening because we don't know which one will prosper. In other words – we are to be good stewards of all that we are given and we are to work hard in all of the tasks of life, but we must remember that we are not the Lord of the harvest – only God is. So, we work and

labor and toil and sometimes that ends in a pile of seemingly worthless mush. But other times we work and it is blessed and prospers. We don't get a say in that because there is mystery in the Providential hand of God. The secular humanist doesn't give credence to this and they are frustrated with life as they try to scheme and plan and make their own way in this volatile world. But for the man or woman of faith in God, we can rejoice in this. Because we are not in charge we are freed to do the part God has given us and to be faithful to our calling in life and then to leave the results to the Sovereign King of Heaven. This relief of responsibility ought to cause us to rejoice. As much as we think we would like to be in charge of the harvest of our labors, in reality we couldn't handle it. The moving parts of life are too many and the decisions come at us too fast. We would never survive being in charge and we certainly wouldn't be able to actually make any progress in the world. We should rejoice because God is sovereign and that is mysterious and for that we are grateful.

- c. Having directed the older among us to rejoice in verse 8, now in verse 9 he turns his attention to the young. 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. In other words – youthfulness provides many unique experiences and tremendous blessings and so you should rejoice in those while you are in them. As a young person you have boundless energy, increasing strength, almost limitless opportunity and potential for life, passion to live and change the world, good cheer and easy laughter because you are often absent of so many of the cares of adulthood. You aren't an adult yet, and in some ways, you don't have to live like one yet – and in this you should rejoice. Don't squander those opportunities or that strength or that passion – but rather turn it into praise for your Creator God who has geared and designed you for this particular moment in life. Take joy in what God has given you rather than longing to move on to the next stage. Slow down enough to be thankful that you get to play that sport or learn that instrument or study that subject or go to that camp or get to know that new friend. Those and so many more are unique experiences in the season of youth – so enjoy them by allowing them to turn your mind to a good God who designed life to be sweet in every season.
- d. But this command to rejoice is also based upon the reality of our impending death and eventual judgment. So, whether young or old we should rejoice in the sweetness of life today while it is still light because we don't know when the darkness is coming and when we will then have to face the judgment of God upon our life. This is counter cultural to the thought of so many today. So, their motto is to live like there is no tomorrow – give it all you have today with no thought of tomorrow. Carpe Diem – seize the day and don't get hung up thinking about how that will affect tomorrow. But the Preacher in Ecclesiastes says that this automatically renders your life as worthless and vain. If you live this way you are living a worthless life because, in fact, there is a tomorrow. His point here is to live like there is a tomorrow – an eternal tomorrow upon which you will give an

answer to the Judge of Heaven for how you operated in the present. So, if your life today matters to God on that day, then your life today should also matter to you. Don't live with reckless abandon, but rather live with joyful submission and stewardship. Rejoice, young and old alike in the unique sweetness of life in your stage of life.

II. Remove – 11:10

- a. This is coupled with the next command found in verse 10. We are to remove vexation from our hearts and put away pain from our bodies. This vexation is anything that angers or grieves us. It is the irritations of life which zap our joy and lower our focus from anything eternally significant to those things which are ankle-biting nuisances. The examples of this are too numerous it seems to even begin naming them. The car that won't start to the baby that cries at inopportune moments to the strange co-worker who bothers you in every way – to a million other examples. Your life is full of nuisance level annoyances. But, in chapter 7 in one of his proverbial statements the Preacher tells us that this vexation of spirit is lodged in the heart of fools. So his advice there is to not be quick to become angry or vexed. That is what he is repeating here. To live a life that matters as we seek to employ a biblical worldview then we must remove these vexing responses. To put this in New Testament language we are to be quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to anger.
- b. I am prone to anger. I know that you probably are not, but I can easily lose the focus on what truly matters in almost any situation by letting my irritations vex my soul. What I have learned over the years of God's gracious growth in my soul is that this quickness to anger is directly related to my worldview. I started asking myself why this or that little thing was making me so angry and what I found out is that it was making me angry because I was not getting my way. This betrayed a worldview that had me squarely in the center of all that was important and valuable in life. My way mattered most because I mattered most. Therefore, when that other driver was too ignorant to care about my importance and nonchalantly pulled in front of me so as to prevent my very crucial progress, causing me to slam on my brakes and get to my destination a whole 30 seconds later than what I would have – well, that was a moment which was ripe for my unmitigated vexation of spirit which usually propelled words out of my mouth of vile self-worship. What Solomon is saying here to you is that those moments of vexation of soul are a result of your secular humanistic worldview which has you as the most important puzzle piece.
- c. He couples this in the verse with removing pain or evil from your body. This is admittedly a difficult thing to know exactly what he is pointing us to, but if we take it as a form of Hebrew parallelism, I think he is adding another layer to the first phrase. So, don't be vexed by the physical problems and evils of life. They are going to be there, and as we will see in chapter 12, they will increasingly be there as we age. Some people are so caught up in how they feel physically or in how they are struggling physically that you can't hardly talk to them about anything else. What Solomon is saying to you, is that this is no way to live in this

temporary physical life. You are going to struggle and there are going to be pains. And you should do everything in your power to deal with them, not just ignorantly accept them as the new normal – but don't obsess over them either. Your life is not made up of your physical problems any more than it is made up of your stuff. This isn't said to diminish the reality of some very serious physical problems, but it is to say that we will never rejoice in life like we should if we do not remove from our hearts our inordinate valuing on feeling good. There are joys and sweetnesses in life even within the physical pain and problems we face, and if we are seeking to grow in operating under a biblical worldview we ought to remove our vexation and replace it with rejoicing.

- d. The New Testament way through that – from focusing on anxiety and pain to being able to rejoice in peace – is through prayer. So, you know the passage in Philippians 4 really well – but listen again with fresh ears.
 - i. ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:4-7 ESV)
- e. Don't be anxious – remove it from your heart by praying with thanksgiving about all of your concerns. Then the peace of God, which goes far beyond your ability to put it all together and make sense of it, will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. In other words, you will enjoy spiritual and mental and emotional health if you correct your worldview through prayer.

III. Remember – 12:1-8

- a. The last command in the text is to remember. It is upon this foundation that the first two commands are built. You will not rejoice and remove if you are not remembering. This remembering your Creator means more than simply musing upon Him and His reality. In the context it is a humble understanding of God's position of greatness as the Sovereign Lord over all Creation. So, back in 11:5-6 we were reminded of our inability to know the work of this Creator God in even one of the most basic of life's functions – the development of a baby in the womb. And we were reminded of our inability to control the fundamental tasks of life of work and its harvest. God is the Creator who is also then the Sovereign Lord of all, and you and I are not. So, to remember our Creator is to humble ourselves before God's exalted position and look to Him for all things. This is a key aspect of the life of faith – an acknowledgement of the many things in life that we cannot explain or fully understand. As Michael Eaton says, "The life of faith does not remove the problem of our ignorance; rather, it enables us to live with it. Faith flourishes *in* the mystery of providence; it does not abolish it."¹ So, to remember your Creator is the language of faith.

¹ Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 143; commenting about verse 5; emphasis original.

- b. It is also the language of action based upon that faith. And this is really what it means to live by faith. It is not just a mental or emotional agreement to some set of facts, but it is a life-altering and life-shaping confident trust that what God has said is indeed true. So, just think of Abraham in the book of Genesis. When he was commanded to offer Isaac to the Lord his actions of obedience were rooted in his deep faith in the promises of God. So much so that Hebrews 11 tells us that he was confident God would keep his promises to Abraham by raising Isaac from the dead if necessary. This faith was based upon Abraham's constant consciousness of God's role as the Sovereign Lord of His creation.
- c. The Preacher is calling you to this kind of God-consciousness in your youth before the evil days come and the years draw near of you which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them." Here we see again the stark honesty of the Scriptures. God is not hiding anything from you about the realities of life. Here he tells you how it normally goes for most humans. As your life progresses this slow decline and decay leading to death is what you have ahead of you. And if you forget God in your youth and make decisions and choose paths that are absent of Him and His truth then you will later completely regret life and will find yourself trying to turn back the clock of old age to return to your youthfulness.
- d. This is what we see in so much of our Western culture. People cannot cope with the reality of aging and so they are doing everything humanly possible to stop a process over which we have no control. In her book entitled *Drinking Problems at the Fountain of Youth* journalist Beth Teitell explains how not even the rich are free from the process of aging. She says:
 - i. I know women who worked hard to get into good colleges, worked their connections to land enviable jobs, married well, produced children who could pose for Ralph Lauren ads, vacation on the right islands with the right beach towels and the right heiresses – they have fractional ownerships in Cessnas, for heaven's sake – and yet if they have furrows and hints of upper-lip lines and puppet mouth when those around them are smoother than freshly ironed Pratesi linens, what's it all worth? In a word, nothing.²
- e. No amount of money or plastic surgery will stop this process from coming to the most youthful among us. This is a somber and sobering reality, and yet it is described to us in the most gentle of terms. So the poem which explains this decay of body in verses 2-7 is really a beautiful description of a very difficult process. Verse 2 describes old age as a storm gathering again before the sun has a chance to shine – which is simply pointing to the constant barrage of physical issues in older age. Verse 3 describes arms and legs that are weakened with age and teeth which can't grind as much because they are few, and eyes which dimmed. Verse 4 describes the missing out of work and commerce and the uncontrollable reality of waking up at the earliest of times in the morning, and

² As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 263.

having a voice which no longer can sing as it used to. Verse 5 shows the result of this weakened physical state in that older folks are cautious and scared of being high and of obstacles in the way because they will be more prone to fall. The almond tree blossoms refer to their gray or whitening hair and the grasshopper who used to leap and jump is now dragging itself along as old age zaps us of our desire and our physical ability. This is all true because man is heading for his eternal home as verse 5 says. Death is described in verse 6 as the silver cord being snapped or the golden bowl being broken or the pitcher being shattered at the fountain or the wheel being broken at the cistern. These analogies all point to a useful and important thing breaking and no longer being usable. And once this body gives way then it returns to dust and the spirit departs and returns to God who made it. This careful and gentle description of the difficult process of aging lets you know that God looks upon this process with care. Psalm 116:15 tells us that the death of His saints is precious in the sight of the Lord. This is speaking not just of the moment of death, but of the whole process. And that is what aging really is – it is a slow onset of death. Your physical weaknesses and pains are harbingers of impending death. God has been honest with you about this for the very purpose of calling your attention to what matters most. “C.S. Lewis famously said that pain, suffering, and death are God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”³

- f. The time to listen to the cries of God in the megaphone of pain and suffering and death is when you are young. On a side note – parents – have your children ever been to a funeral? Don’t shelter them from this reality – they need to see and have it explained to them that this where all life ends – in physical death. They need to learn in their youthfulness to remember their Creator, because some day their bodies will give way and their spirits will return to the One who made them. As Charles Bridges has said, “Many have remembered too late – none too soon.”⁴ So, young and old alike – pay attention to this text and heed its call to remember your Creator. There is no greater thought you can have and no greater attention you can give than to the One who made you and placed you into this life. The most important reality about your life is your view of the One who made you.
- g. This remembering of God is the key then to a life worth living in your youth and in your old age. In your youth, this right understanding of God and of the course of human life in this sin cursed world will keep you from adopting a worldview which will make life worthless. In other words – this is a call to reject the way of Adam and Eve in the Garden who spurned the reality of God and His Word to adopt just for a moment a worldview which moved him from front and center to simply a part of the puzzle. And this cost them everything. As the grace of God is at work in you to draw you to Himself, make it your one aim in life to know God through Jesus Christ. Set yourself to the studying of God because in your old age, this is what will matter most.

³ Tim Chaddick, *Better*, pg. 208.

⁴ As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, pg. 271.

- h. But also, for those of you in your old age, this remembering your Creator is key to a life worth living. If you adopt a secular and humanistic worldview then you will place too much value on health and beauty and physical strength and you will find that this is an unwinnable battle. But the collapse of this physical house in which our spirits dwell does not have to leave us in despair and without hope. This is where the Gospel rescues us from hopeless depression about old age and dying. Though this earthly tent is wasting away, 2 Corinthians 5 tells us that we have a building from God which is not made with hands and is eternal in the heavens. This resurrection body will be brought to those who are in Christ and this dying and decaying body will be swallowed up by the immortal and imperishable reality of a resurrection body which will not grow old and will not pass away. This is guaranteed for us through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead. And those who have already died in Christ will rise first at His return and all this death and decay will be dealt the decisive blow as we pass from death into life in Christ! Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus!
- i. But until that day, we have the ongoing reality of living in a slowly decaying body which, if the Lord delays his return, will eventually end in death. This does not mean that you have to be bitter and depressed and constantly discouraged and consumed with physical trouble in your old age. Those hard physical realities will be present, but you can be like the aging saint of Psalm 92 who is described as a tree who still bears fruit and is full of sap and is still green. In other words, the believer who remembers their Creator can thrive emotionally and spiritually even in old age as their inner man is renewed day by day even as their outer man is wasting away. Your life at the age of 80 is just as worthy of living as it was at 18 even though you cannot do all that you did back then. It is worth living because your Creator God is worth remembering.

Conclusion: So, how about you? Are you rejoicing, removing, and remembering? This triad of practices will allow you to thrive in this sin-cursed world! Let's pray.