

## In Youth and Old Age: Rejoice and Remember

### Ecclesiastes 11:7 – 12:8

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*<sup>7</sup> Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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.*

*<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<sup>[d]</sup> from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.*

***12** 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”; <sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, <sup>3</sup> in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, <sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— <sup>5</sup> they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along,<sup>[d]</sup> and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— <sup>6</sup> before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, <sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. <sup>8</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*

- Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8, ESV

### *The Advantages & Disadvantages of Youth*

“Youth is wasted on the young.” So said Oscar Wilde or George Bernard Shaw or maybe Mark Twain. No one remembers for sure because everyone got old and forgot. When I was younger, I was insulted by this saying, but every year I see better the wisdom and accuracy of it. Youth has definite advantages: Strength, flexibility, endurance, mental acuity and retention.

I used to have dozens of phone numbers memorized. Many people have observed that I know a lot of hymns by heart, and I do – but they’re almost all the ones I learned when I was younger. And when I was young, I never understood why old people grunted or groaned when they got up out of a chair or got into or out of their cars. I used to be able to palm the floor. I can still touch my toes, but I have to work up to it.

And yet, when I was younger, I lacked perspective on the world in so many ways. I didn’t appreciate the value of time or money, but I wasted both thoughtlessly. I also didn’t appreciate the value of people and relationships; I took them for granted. I didn’t think it was important to be disciplined or organized.

The problem is, now that I’m older, I do appreciate these things, but old habits die hard and it’s hard to change the ways I’ve been living for decades. It’s not just our bodies. Our brains are more elastic when we’re younger, too. They adapt and grow, developing new neural pathways with relative ease. It’s not that we can’t adapt and change and grow when we’re older, it’s just like trying to make something out of old Play-Doh that has lost its Play-Doh-iness.

So, here we have Old Man Solomon telling a bunch of younger people not to waste their youth. But what he says is not what our stereotypical picture of an old man preaching to young people would envision. Instead, he

emphasizes the call to enjoy life, to take delight in the good gifts of God, and to remember God with a clear understanding that darker and harder days are coming. In fact, we can summarize this whole section of Solomon's lesson in these two words: Rejoice! & Remember.

## A. Rejoicing

<sup>7</sup> *Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.*

<sup>8</sup> *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.*

<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.*

We're told twice to rejoice – “Let him rejoice” and then “Rejoice, O young man” This second one, a clear command, is followed by another strong command, “Remove vexation from your heart.”

If we really read the Bible carefully and clearly, we may be surprised by how seriously God takes the issue of our joy. He calls us, urges us, and commands us to rejoice and to remove all obstacles and impediments to our joy. He says to rejoice, be glad, sing for joy, and give thanks with joy, and He also says to remove vexation, not be anxious, not to worry, and not to grumble – all of which kill our joy. In fact, not only does God repeatedly call us to rejoice, but He says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” In Philippians 4:4 and then again “Rejoice always” in I Thessalonians 5:16.

Why is this so important to God? Well, one reason is that when we're rejoicing – specifically when we're rejoicing in the Lord – we're actually seeing life rightly. We are dust of the earth, made alive by the King of the Universe, who has breathed His life into us and called us to live. As verse 7 says, “*Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.*”

It is good to be alive as God's creation, made in His image, and placed in His world, a world of sunlight and snow, of colorful leaves and abundant life. We live in a world where God didn't just make a butterfly and a flower, but He made about 17,500 different kinds of butterflies, including 750 different kinds here in American alone, and about 400,000 different plant species, including about 151 types of flowers common in the United States, some of which He has given us the ability to cultivate and develop as we reflect His image. We live in a world where people have been cooking for thousands of years, but we can still come up with new flavor combination and new recipe ideas. We didn't create any of this, although God allows us to play with much of it. We don't deserve any of this; in fact, the truth is we more than deserve to have it all taken away.

Because we're always breathing God's air and walking on God's earth and eating God's food and drinking God's drink, we always have reason to rejoice in the Lord for His goodness to us. More than that, we're commanded to rejoice and remove vexation, because when we're vexed we're deceived. Why do we get vexed? We get anxious and we worry because we think we gave these good things to ourselves and we might lose them for ourselves. We grumble and complain because we don't think we have enough of these good things, and we think we deserve more. Both of these perspectives – the anxious and the entitled – are delusional. We gave ourselves none of it and we deserve none of it.

So, when we see things rightly, our lives should be continual rejoicing and giving thanks, and we should remove and shun vexation – anxiety and complaining.

Yet even as Solomon calls and commands us to rejoice, he remains relentlessly realistic. Days of light are pleasant, but we know days of darkness are coming. That should be part of our enjoyment of the days of light now. We enjoy Thanksgiving because we know it doesn't come every day of the year. (Can you imagine how unhealthy we would all be if it did?) We enjoy Christmas because of the anticipation and excitement but also because it is fleeting and goes quickly, so we need to make the most of it while it's with us.

This helps us also understand Solomon's definition of youth. In a sense, all of us here are youths, because we're still able to enjoy good things in life that, some day, we may no longer be able to enjoy. We're still able to delight in relative health, strength, vitality, and pleasure, all of which may fade from us some day. So, "*Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth*" is not just a command to those under the age of 30. It's for all of us here today who are still able to enjoy the blessings of life under the sun, knowing they will quickly pass, for they are but vapor and smoke, after all.

"*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.*" What does Solomon mean by this? Is he really telling us just to do whatever we like? Isn't the heart of man deceitfully wicked above all else? Yes, but God is still good above all else, including above our hearts.

Psalm 37:1-5 says:

*Fret not yourself because of evildoers;  
be not envious of wrongdoers!  
For they will soon fade like the grass  
and wither like the green herb.  
Trust in the LORD, and do good;  
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.  
Delight yourself in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him, and he will act.*

If we're rejoicing in the Lord, delighting in Him, then we can trust Him to act on our behalf as His dearly loved children, and we can know that He will give us the desires of our hearts – that is, He will both shape our desires in a way that pleases Him and He will grant what He has given us a desire to see – in some way – though perhaps not in the way we expect.

So if we are delighting in the Lord, if we are rejoicing in Him and His ways, we can "*Walk in the ways of our heart and the sight of our eyes.*" But we always do so knowing "*that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.*" God will judge; and while this should keep us from sinful, self-indulgent, extravagant wickedness, it should also keep us from what Dale Ralph Davis calls the lemon juice and vinegar school of Christianity, from thinking that the way to be really holy is to walk around mad at the world and looking like we're always sucking on a lemon or have just drunk a dose of vinegar. [By the way, I don't care what the health benefits of Apple Cider Vinegar are or might be, that stuff is gross and I refuse to drink it.]

## B. Remembering

In addition to rejoicing, Solomon also calls us to remember our Creator. *“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”*

What does it mean to remember our Creator? Well, “remember” is a covenantal word in the Old Testament. God remembers His people when He keeps His covenant commitment to them, and His people remember the Lord when they remember their covenant relationship with Him – that He is our God and we are His people.

Thus, to remember our Creator is to remember and live in light of the reality that the God who made us is also the God who saves us and who has entered into covenant with us to be ours and to make us His.

In Nehemiah 8, we’re shown a powerful picture of what it looks like for God’s people to gather together and remember the Lord. The gathering takes place 500 years after the days of Solomon. The people of God had been sent into exile in Babylon as a discipline for their idolatry and unfaithfulness. Nehemiah, who was serving as governor, gathered all of the people together and had Ezra the priest read the Law of Moses aloud to them. For six hours, Nehemiah read the Law and the Levites stood among the people to translate and explain the Law. What happened in response to this remembering of God and His covenant with His people was remarkable:

*And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” <sup>11</sup> So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” <sup>12</sup> And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. – Nehemiah 8:9-12, ESV*

The people wept as they heard the Law, for they realized how completely they had ignored it for so long. They had been unfaithful and ignorant for generations. Yet God had rescued and redeemed them. He had restored them to the Promised Land. He was calling them back to Himself and establishing them by His grace, despite their ignorance and unfaithfulness. And so, they were commanded to rejoice as they remembered the Lord. Because the day was holy, they were not to fast and weep, but they were to eat and drink and rejoice!

Remembering God should cause us to rejoice!

J.I. Packer, who loves Ecclesiastes and says it is his favorite book of the Bible. In his wonderful classic, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer writes: “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.”

Packer then says that each of us should ask ourselves the following questions:

- Do I, as a Christian, understand myself?
- Do I know my own real identity?
- My own real destiny?

Calling this “the Christian’s secret of a Christian life and of a God-honoring life,” he says that we should take the following truths and “Say it over and over to yourself first thing in the morning, last thing at night, as your wait for the bus, any time your mind is free, and ask that you may be enabled to live as one who knows it is all utterly and completely true.”

1. I am a child of God.
2. God is my Father.
3. Heaven is my home.
4. Every day is one day nearer.
5. My Savior is my brother.
6. Every Christian is my brother too.

[I got that summary of Packer’s teaching from an article by Justin Taylor on the Gospel Coalition.]

This is what it means to remember the Creator, covenantally, as our Father, in the days of our youth – in a sense, on every day in which we are still able to remember these things. Toward the end of his life, John Newton – the former slave-ship captain turned pastor and hymn-writer, who wrote “Amazing Grace” and “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” – began to lose his eyesight and his memory. He said, “*Although my memory’s fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.*”

He was able to remember this in old age because he had spent much time remembering it and rejoicing in it when he was younger.

### **C. Aging**

But we do all get older. This is what Solomon explores in the first half of chapter 12:

*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”;<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,<sup>3</sup> in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed,<sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—<sup>5</sup> they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails.*

This is a pictorial representation of our bodies getting older. As we age, our bodies get weak and our limbs tremble. We can’t see or hear or eat or sleep as well. We are afraid of falling, and our desire fails.

### **D. Dying**

And then, at the end of the aging process, when all light fades and all desire fails, we die: “*because man 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 broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*”

Notice how these lines about death begin and end with hopeful language – “Man is going to his eternal home” and “the spirit returns to God who gave it.” Yet in between, this is very sad language - *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*. Death is an unnatural invader of God’s good creation, the last enemy, to be finally and gloriously defeated when Jesus returns again, as we will see together next week, in our final message on Ecclesiastes.

On his blog ([fightoffaithblog.com](http://fightoffaithblog.com)) last month, Doug Eaton wrote something beautiful and powerful about death, “The Art of Dying as a Christian” –

*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

– 2 Timothy 1:7

It seems your time has finally arrived. You knew it was inevitable, but it never seemed real until now. All signs are indicating that your appointed time to go home will be here soon. Never before have your days seemed as precious to you as they do now. As you walk the road ahead, get ready because the Lord will be walking with you in ways you never imagined. You do not walk alone.

As you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, remember who you are. You are a child of God, and his Spirit is living in you. You have the Spirit of Power dwelling in you, not fear. No matter how weak your body may become during this ordeal, it is not your strength that needs to be at work, it will be his strength.

In Christ, he will give you all that you need to face even the most difficult challenges of our lives. In your entire Christian walk, you may have never experienced the Holy Spirit’s power to the extent that you are going to need it in the coming days, but that is because you have never faced anything this daunting. Our Lord does not give us his power before we need it, but when there is a great demand, there will be a great supply. His strength is made perfect in weakness. Though there are a million things you may dread in the days ahead, you have this to look forward to; the power of God will be at work in you in ways you have only dreamed.

The Spirit of Power is not all he has given us. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of Love as well. There are two things to remember in this regard. First, he loves you. In times like this, Satan will bring every sin to remembrance. He will tell you, you deserve this and more. He will tell you God has abandoned you. When he says this, he is only half-right. Our sins deserve so much worse than we will ever experience, but Jesus has not abandoned us.

Christ’s love for us is so great that he took every one of our sins and bore the punishment on the cross. Through faith, the cup of his wrath is empty because he drank all of it. The bow of his anger is at rest because the Father took the arrows we deserved and pointed them at his Son and let them fly. His love is overwhelming. There is not a single drop of God’s wrath in what you are facing. It is only his love that is at work toward you, and his Spirit of Love in you will press this home as you need it.

The second thing to expect with the Spirit of Love, is that the love of God will be shed abroad in our hearts. That means, not only does he love us, but he is our first love as well. You love him and you love others. This love is a result of the same Holy Spirit that gives you power.

This love will serve you well in the coming days. First and foremost, the Holy Spirit will use it to keep you from despair. As Martyn Lloyd Jones points out, despair and depression are the result of self: self-pity, self-concern, self-reliance, etc. What you can expect as the Holy Spirit works in you during this time is that your love for him and others will grow tremendously. There will be many tears because your love will be so strong, but it will be an outward focused love which is God's way of conquering self during this time.

He has not only given you a spirit of power and of love, but also of a sound mind. This is another aspect of the Spirit dwelling in you that is going to lift your head during this time; a spiritually sound mind. The natural man does not have this. He cannot see beyond this life. Crossing the Jordan, whenever that happens, is not the end of our story. It is only the beginning. Eternity awaits all believers. What we experience in this life is only the introduction to our stories, and the most glorious part has yet to be told.

The Holy Spirit will be writing eternity on your heart in ways you have never thought possible. It will be this spiritual insight that will be the most Christ-exalting gift you will be able to share with others who are still bound to the things of this world. It will be powerful. However, this will not be without opposition. At times like this, the enemy will come to you and remind you of how we failed to redeem the time in the past, but the Lord will restore the years the locust has eaten (Joel 2:25). This blazing bright eternal perspective he will give you will be a means to multiply the fruit in your life which will more than recover any lost time.

The sorrow will be great and the difficulty beyond imagination, but as you are in the valley of trouble, he will speak tenderly to you (Hosea 2:14). He has filled you with his Spirit who is infinitely greater than anything in front of you. Get ready because, in this darkness, you are about to see the brilliance of Christ's glorious light and love like never before. He is a good Shepherd, and we can trust him wherever he calls us to walk. This will be your final fight of faith, and he will make sure you are victorious because of his children, he will not lose one of them. You will soon be in the presence of your king who loves you dearly.

-D. Eaton

For those of us who have lost loved ones in the Lord, we do rejoice for them that they are in the presence of their King, whom they loved and who loves them far more. Yet we also feel the ways in which death is a truly a snapping, a breaking, and a shattering.

### **Seize the Day? YOLO?**

So, I've been struck by how much Ecclesiastes can seem like some of the pop culture hedonism of our contemporary culture – *“Rejoice . . . let your heart cheer you . . . Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. . . Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body”*

The kind of advice we get from Solomon can almost sound like “seize the day” and even like “YOLO”! You know: “Life is short, and then you die. You only live once, so make the most of it. Or, in the words of beat poet Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Is this what Ecclesiastes is saying?

No. There is, in fact, a deep and vital difference: God.

The difference between our culture's hedonism and the call of Ecclesiastes is a bit like the difference between a strong belief in a sovereign God who has ordained all things and a belief in fatalism. Many people have accused Calvinists of being fatalists. They say, "For you to believe that everything is predestined and controlled by God is just blind fatalism like the ancient Greeks, who believed that all the lives of men and the events they encounter were spun out by three blind old ladies called the Fates." But it's not.

What's the difference between a robust view of the sovereignty of God and blind fatalism? In a word, GOD.

What's the difference between the call of Solomon in Ecclesiastes to rejoice and enjoy life and the philosophy of the secular hedonists? In a word, GOD.

God makes our eternal destiny and our daily lives not blind fate but a loving destiny and a widely determined plan.

And God makes the goodness of life not a game to be won or a chance to be taken but rather a gift to be received and enjoyed.

Hedonism shakes its fist at the heavens, but Ecclesiastes calls us to raise up open hands to receive and give thanks.

Will we answer the call to receive, rejoice, and remember until this life is over?