



The Conclusion of the Matter – Ecclesiastes 11:7 – 12:14

WCP

Intro

“Just as honeymoons are wasted on couples without children, so too, as the saying goes, is youth wasted on the young.” So says David Gibson in his book on Ecclesiastes entitled *Living Life Backwards*. Or perhaps you’re more familiar with another well-known axiom that we’ve all likely heard our parents/grandparents say to us at some point in our lives, “You don’t know how good you have it.”

But, regardless of how the sentiment is stated, eventually I think we all come to see the truth of it. When we’re young we simply have no context with which to fully understand just how incredible the freedoms we’re able to enjoy *are*, primarily b/c we have no concept of what life would like without them.

Think about it: the child who breaks their shoulder and then, 6 weeks later, is just fine and back to life as usual, can’t fathom an existence where the exact same injury could take over a year to fully recover from; the university student who can stay up until 4:00 AM finishing a paper, sleep for two hours, and then be ready for an 8:00 AM class can’t even imagine an existence where staying up until midnight to celebrate New Year’s Eve is gonna mean your sleep patterns won’t be reset now until sometime in February.

And in one sense, how cruel is that we would have no deep understanding of the sweetness of youth until we are no longer able to taste it? It’s undoubtedly the thing that causes the young person to look at the elderly with a look of curiosity and confusion, and for the elderly person to look at the young and simply shake their heads.

We’re concluding our teaching series today through the book of Ecclesiastes called **A Chasing After the Wind**; an conclusion that – while it may bring relief to some of you – I often find to be a melancholy experience; for whatever reason, a sermon series for me is a little bit like what I understand fostering a child to be, viz. you take them into your life, experience all the joys and struggles that come along with that time together, only to – at some point – have to give them back. Now, no, of course it’s not as though I can never visit the book of Ecclesiastes again, but this sustained time in the book has been deeply meaningful to me and I trust, by God’s grace, that it has been for you as well.

And in our passage today, Solomon - at last - is going to offer us his final conclusions after a lifelong study of everything under the sun. He began this exploration stating his thesis that everything we see/taste/touch in the natural world is *hebel*; this Hebrew word translated here in the NIV as “meaningless” but which - literally translated - simply means mist/vapor/breath; and now, after all has been heard, he wants to bring us the conclusion of the matter after - I think we’d all agree - successfully proving that thesis.

But, before he offers us his final conclusions, Solomon wants to knock over one last house of cards/false hope that many of us look to to try and find meaning/purpose/protection in this life under the sun, viz. **youth/vitality**.



Which I think is incredibly relevant for us here today, particularly living in a city like Vancouver, where – along with wisdom, pleasure, and wealth – youth/wellness/beauty are some of the most highly prized values we have; in fact to be young and have health/beauty in our city is pretty much equivalent to having wisdom/pleasure/wealth.

And so, before showing us where meaning/purpose in life truly *can* be found, Solomon wants to help loosen our grip on this one last branch that might *offer* us the meaning/purpose/protection we all want so badly in life, but that can't actually deliver on that promise.

So, in order to follow Solomon's thought, I want to look at the final verses of Ecclesiastes in three ways. Solomon is going to show us: **The sweetness of youth, the bitterness of aging,** and finally **Finding wholeness in our life under the sun. (x2)**

So, if you've closed your bibles, please open them again to Ecclesiastes 11:7 and follow along with me as Solomon offers us the conclusion of the matter.

So, let's begin by looking at:

1. The sweetness of youth – 11:7-10

Look with me at **vss. 7-8a** Solomon says (**READ vss. 7-8a**). Then look down to **vs. 9a** he goes on (**READ vs. 9a**). Now, by this stage in the game it shouldn't surprise us any longer that Solomon would be highlighting the pleasure/enjoyment in life God that intends for us to have during our days under the sun. Which isn't to say that it's any less stark for those of us who grew up in more conservative churches/those who've always thought that the bible was all about restricting the enjoyment of our lives.

But here, again, Solomon is commending the enjoyment of life which – according to Solomon - comes primarily from contented enjoyment of what God has seen fit to grant us.

And yet, isn't it ultimately redundant to tell the young to enjoy life as they experience it right now/to be happy while they are young? I mean, when my girls were quite young, you throw them in a ball-pit/stick a bucket of Playdough in front of them, I didn't need to remind them to enjoy themselves; when we arrived at Disneyland for a family vacation, I didn't need to say, "Ok girls, now try you're very best to be happy!" In fact - for the most part - when we look at the young and beautiful of the world, don't we *presume* enjoyment in their lives; the real surprise more often being when we encounter a younger person who *isn't* enjoying their life?

But the fact remains that the reason Solomon is commending the enjoyment of life to the young *here*, is not primarily b/c he assumes they're not already doing that, but b/c he wants to qualify the way in which life can truly be enjoyed.

And, as we've seen often throughout Ecclesiastes, the way the Teacher seeks to impress his teaching upon us, is by using comparison. You see that first of all in **vs. 8**; right after stating in **vs. 7** how "Light is sweet" and how, "it pleases the eyes to see the sun," he goes on to say (**READ vs. 8b**). Similarly in **vs. 9b** after encouraging happiness in the life of the young man/follow the ways of his heart and whatever his eyes sees, Solomon goes on immediately to add (**READ vs. 9b**). Which, if you're like me, at first glance makes it sound like Solomon is dangling a toaster oventop of the hot-tub of life, saying, "Jump right in and enjoy yourself; the water is perfect!" Or someone bringing a cake to your birthday party saying, "The cake I made you is incredibly delicious and sweet; just remember that it's about 2000 calories a slice and that it's likely going to clog your arteries and make you obese. Happy birthday!"

But, as **Philip Ryken** points out in his commentary, "*the 'days of darkness' [there in vs. 8] qualify what Solomon says about rejoicing in the light; they don't negate it.*" Additionally, **Stephen Meyers** says in his own commentary, "*The judgment spoken of at the end of vs. 9 is not meant to kill the joy and happiness of life. The point is that our ways actually matter to God and an awareness of God's evaluation both helps us to fear to do evil, and it gives us confidence in doing good things.*"

So, Solomon's comparison shows us two things:

1. The sweetness of youth is not diminished, but enhanced, when we recognize its **hebel-ness**/that it's temporary and will not last forever.
2. That true enjoyment of life in our youth is not about some sort of unhindered, gorging ourselves on anything and everything our heart desires, but about the enjoyment of life within the good boundaries that God has woven into our whole existence.

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And the application of this principle that Solomon offers us in **vs. 10** is pretty profound; let's just read what Solomon has to say and then talk about it for a minute. He writes (**READ vs. 10**). Now, just take a moment and think about your own life for a moment; how many in here this morning would be willing to admit that there are things you've done in the past/choices that you made that brought anxiety and trouble into your life? If you have children of your own/children whose lives you speak into, how many of you would want to protect them from making those same foolish choices themselves if you could?

What I'm saying is that Solomon feels the exact same way when he considers his own foolish choices in life. And in an effort to try and save his young hearers – then and today – from making the same kind of foolish choices that will bring anxiety and trouble into their lives, he's reminding them that even the youth/vitality that they're relying on right now to protect them from those dangers, is also **hebel**. You see there, again, the last part of **vs. 10 (READ vs. 10b)**. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for "vigor" there actually means either "prime of youth"



or “blackness of hair” which is going to be significant in a minute when we look at Solomon’s description of the “days of trouble.”

But, again, the point is that Solomon is seeking to help the young/young at heart truly enjoy their lives under the sun; he’s not raining on our party here, he’s trying to help us enjoy it to the fullest! And although there are billion dollar industries today that will try and tell you otherwise, it doesn’t matter how many Pilates classes/Kombucha juice cleanses/Kelp, petal extract, powdered deer antler lotions you moisturize with twice a day, your youth, says Solomon, is a mist; your vitality will fail you one day and it will not protect you from life’s inevitable end! And neither will those things protect you from experiencing the anxiety and trouble that comes when you live your life like God is indifferent to your choices. Don’t be fooled, says Solomon, God doesn’t have a “young-offenders act” where you get to start from zero again when you turn 19; the choices you make in your youth – for good or for bad - will follow you for the rest of your life. So choose wisely, says Solomon; enjoy the sweet days of your youth but remember they don’t last forever and, one day, you’re going to need to give an account for those days. Remember *that*, says Solomon, and you’ll hold the secret to true enjoyment/vitality in life that can last for as many years as God gives you under the sun.

So that’s **The sweetness of youth**. The next thing Solomon wants to show us is:

2. The bitterness of aging – 12:1-8

What follows next in **12:1-8** is some of the most darkly beautiful poetry on the subject of aging I think I’ve ever read; Solomon is now a man near the end of his life, and to drive home his point about the fading, mist-like nature of youth, Solomon now describes in vivid detail/stunning word pictures what the days of darkness/trouble that follow youth look like.

And for most of us, this is a fearful picture that we can only look ahead to with a mix of curiosity and dread. I know many of us have watched our parents/relatives – once so young and full of life - succumb to this very process; which is simultaneously painful to witness but also fearful as eventually it dawns on us that – one day – the old man shuffling down the hallway at the retirement home will be me.

I was struck again by the fear/anxiety that aging/illness can bring about for us in our youth, just this past week as I watched the film adaptation of Lisa Genova’s best-selling novel “**Still Alice**.” If you feel like you have too much joy in your life, I’d recommend watching this film to correct the imbalance. It’s a devastating story of a young professional woman, just 50 years old, who develops early onset Alzheimer’s disease; and you just watch as the illness sucks the very life out of this otherwise young, healthy, intelligent woman. If you listen to the language she uses to describe her deteriorating self in a speech she gives at the Alzheimer’s Society – “Ridiculous. Incapable. Comic. Far from who we once were.” – you can hear the echoes of Solomon’s description here in these verses.



It's little wonder - absent of any firm belief in God or life beyond this one – why much of the western world today seeks to avoid the aging process Solomon describes/Lisa Genova's novel presents with every fibre of our being/resource at our disposal. But, I believe, Solomon's purpose in this description is not at all to crush us, but – rather – to motivate us toward change before these days of trouble arrive.

So, all I want to do is walk us through Solomon's description of these "days of trouble" and see if we can discern if that is indeed Solomon's purpose in giving it to us.

Look with me at **vs. 1**. Solomon says (**READ vs. 1**) So, we see first of all, Solomon is presenting this picture to someone still living in the days of their youth/before much of this process he's about to describe has notably begun, with the clear command at the start of it all to "remember your Creator."

Now, many commentators warn against trying to find too many one-to-one parallels in Solomon's description of the bitter process of aging; but I think there are a few that stand out as fairly clear to us. The end of **vs. 1b** first of all, surely describing the aging one who says things like, "I'm ready to go home." Look at **vs. 2 (READ vs. 2)** Commentators here note this is likely a description of mental decline as guiding lights become dim and natural processes seem to happen out of order. **Vs. 3** the "keepers of the house" is said to refer to the hands; the "strong men" referring to the legs; in age these once strong/steady things begin to weaken and tremble. "When the grinders cease b/c they are few" is likely a reference to teeth. **Vs. 4** "When men rise up at the sound of birds but their songs grow faint" is referring to the way sleep becomes harder and harder to come by, as well as the diminished capacity to hear. In **Vs. 5a** the reference to the "blossoming of the almond tree," is said to refer to the way an almond tree presents with white blossoms, clearly referring to hair, and also contrasting Solomon's earlier picture of dark hair in youth; the "grasshopper drags himself along" refers to declining physical energy, and "desire no longer being stirred" refers lastly to sexual desire.

Finally, the last part of **vs. 5b** you see that the end comes at last; he writes (**READ vs. 5b**).

In **vs. 6** there is this repeated call to the young to remember their Creator – you see, Solomon writes, "Remember Him"; and the call is to do so before the aging process reaches its completion and life comes to an end. Again, this is beautiful poetry, ultimately, describing created things that are no longer functioning as they were designed to; which, of course, is a picture of the end of life itself. Solomon writes (**READ vss. 6-7**). And then, finally – coming full circle from the beginning of Ecclesiastes in **Ch. 1** – Solomon closes where he began in **vs. 8** stating (**READ vs. 8**).

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Now, what is the point of all this? I mean, sure, it's beautiful poetry but it's also pretty depressing stuff. Well, on one level, this *is* entirely fitting as Solomon has sought to faithfully present the result of his exploration truthfully from the start; and the truth is, aging and death *are* depressing and Solomon doesn't sugar coat that.

Just the other day, Sarah woke up with some strange pain in her back; I asked her how she'd injured herself and she just said, "I don't even know! I wasn't lifting/carrying anything

yesterday. I just went to bed and then when I woke up my back felt sore.” I’m sure she was expecting a more empathetic response, but I remember just looking at her with a smile and saying, “Welcome! Welcome!” B/c that’s how it goes the closer you get to 40 and then onwards: you can injure yourself just by going to bed!

But, in the end, I think Solomon has two purposes for why he wants us to know this:

1. Solomon wants us to know w/o a shadow of a doubt what’s coming; like a faithful friend/researcher Solomon wants to warn us that whatever protection we think we’re afforded by our youth is an illusion, and that this bitter aging process that he describes so vividly, is what awaits us all.
2. The second reason centers around Solomon’s repeated command to remember our Creator. In his commentary on this passage, **Derek Kidner** states, “*For our part, to ‘remember’ is no perfunctory or purely mental act – it is to drop our pretence of self-sufficiency and to submit ourselves to Him.*” But we must remember, Solomon’s command is to remember our Creator “in our youth” i.e. before these days of trouble come upon us; and *here* is where the motivation for behavioural/attitude change comes in. Again, **Derek Kidner** writes of this passage, “*So, it is in youth, not age, that these inexorable facts are best confronted, when they can still drive us to action.*”

As I said, I believe Solomon’s entire purpose in his description of the bitterness of aging, is *not* to depress/discourage us, but to motivate us – while we still have our youthful energy – to consider the brevity of life, as well as to consider our steps more carefully in light of the reality that God sees and will bring to judgement every one of them. To consider the inevitable bitterness of aging and say, “If that is what will be true *then*, what needs to change about how I’m living *now*?”

So, we’ve considered **The sweetness of youth** as well as **The bitterness of aging**. The last thing Solomon shows us is:

3. Finding wholeness in our life under the sun – 12:9-14

This is the end that Solomon has been building towards throughout Ecclesiastes, and it’s also the purpose behind his contrasted pictures of youth and aging in our passage today as well.

Vss. 9-11 give us a deeper picture into the life and purpose behind Solomon’s writing overall - both here as well as in other places in the bible like Proverbs + Song of Songs – as well as **vs. 11** in particular showing the connection we see in Scripture between the wise, goading words of Solomon, and the fulfilment of Solomon’s reign in Jesus Himself – our true Shepherd-King who said of Himself in **Matt. 12:41-42 (READ Matt. 12:41-42)**.

But I want to focus us in this last point particularly on **vs. 13-14** where Solomon states explicitly what he says is the “conclusion of the matter” now that “all has been heard.” – look with me there. Solomon writes (**READ vs. 13-14**).



Now, the “brackets” of Solomon’s stated thesis on both ends of the book – what literary scholars call the “*Inclusio*” – is what he means when he says that “all has been heard”; he’s referring to his lifelong study of everything under the sun which is chronicled in the book of Ecclesiastes.

But, there’s no question - at first glance – his conclusion of all that’s been seen/heard feels pretty anti-climactic; we’re left thinking, “....really? That’s it? Just fear God and keep His commandments?”

But the true weight of Solomon’s answer comes when we take a little bit deeper look into what he’s written here. The first clue is to note - as we saw in **Ch. 7** – those little square brackets; this time around the word “duty” in **vs. 13b**. Again, what this signals to us is that the word “duty” does not actually appear in the original Hebrew. Which means that **vs. 13b** actually reads, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole/ness of man.” It means that what Solomon is describing for us - here in the simplest/most basic of terms - is how we can find the true wholeness in our lives under the sun that God intended for us to experience.

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How do we do find it? First of all, we **fear God**; you might also be familiar with Solomon’s words in **Proverbs 9:10** where he tells us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Now there’s no question, when we consider the size and power of our Creator God as compared with our tiny, finite existence, there should be a measure of genuine fear to come into His presence; particularly when you add what Solomon says again in **vs. 14** about how God will bring our every deed into judgement. But, for the one who has come into restored relationship with this God through the work of Jesus in His death and resurrection on our behalf, we know that the fear of God is now transformed from a feeling of terror, into one of deep reverence and awe. For while judgement by a holy God *should* instill fear in all of us, the hopeful message of the gospel is that – in Jesus – our rightful punishment for sin was taken and paid for us *by* Him in His death on the cross. As **Stephen Meyers** notes, “*Fearing God, paradoxically, is the way to live without fear. For all of our anxieties about a life we cannot predict or control are now banished before a God who controls it all.*”

And then, it’s out of that humble reverence and awe of our redeeming God, that we are led to the second way we find true wholeness in this life: **keeping His commandments**. Now, I know for many people – even those who have faith in God – this sounds more threatening than joyful to us; it’s what often leads people to believe that Christianity is just about following a bunch of rules in order to earn God’s favor. But what I would submit to you is that the order in which Solomon lists these pathways to true wholeness is incredibly significant. B/c if you reverse the order to say: keep God’s commandments and fear Him, it immediately removes all hope from the equation. Why? b/c it begins with us/our effort, instead of God’s. But do you see: when we begin with the reverent fear/awe of God who has given His only Son in order to redeem us, all of a sudden it transforms obedience to His commands as well, from something we do in order to earn His favor, to something we do b/c we already have it.

Live out all your days under the sun remembering your Creator and what He's done to redeem you; live your life in fearful reverence/awe of His transcendence as well as His intimate closeness; and live your life in accordance with God's perfect design for humanity (which is, positively stated, all that it means to keep His commandments). Live like *this*, says Solomon, and you will truly find at last the meaning/purpose/value – the wholeness in life – that the misty pursuits of wealth/wisdom, pleasure/youth can never give you.

Conclusion

So, where does that leave us as we turn out the lights/close the doors on our time in Ecclesiastes? If you've been around for any part of the series, or even if this is your first Sunday with us today, you know that the bookends of Ecclesiastes are the Teacher's plaintiff cry, "Meaningless! Hebel! Everything is like a mist!"; and everything included inside of those bookends, has sought to prove that thesis.

Wherever you're at in your relationship with the Creator of all things this morning – pressing in, or still on the outside looking in - I hope our time in Ecclesiastes has caused you to question some things; challenged you to look more deeply underneath the surface of some of the pursuits of your life, and to ask yourself whether or not you're simply chasing after the wind; looking to find in temporary/fleeting pursuits what can only be found in God.

I hope it's also caused you to look at your life differently; to consider what James reiterates centuries later in the NT, viz. that our lives are nothing but a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes; and that in considering the inevitable end of our lives, Ecclesiastes has inspired you to seek to truly live and enjoy the days God has granted you under the sun.

We have but one Hope to find the wholeness we're all seeking in the face of that inevitable end, and it's in living out our finite, misty days in reverence, and in reference, to the One who defeated death for all time in His death and resurrection. For as the apostle Paul says in **1 Cor. 15:54, 58** "When the perishable [*hebel*] puts on the imperishable [that is, our new life in Christ] and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [now, in Jesus] your labour is no longer [*hebel*]."

Let's pray.