

Live While We're Young

Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:7

A recent article in *The Guardian* (a publication in the U.K.) described the top 5 regrets that people have at the end of life. The list was collected by a nurse working with men and women in the final months. *The Guardian* reports:

There was no mention of more sex or bungee jumps. . . . [Rather] the top five regrets of the dying, as witnessed by [this nurse, Bronnie] Ware:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

"This was the most common regret of all. When people realise that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. . . . Health brings a freedom very few realise, until they no longer have it."

2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

"This came from every male patient that [she] nursed. They missed their children's youth and their [spouse's] companionship. . . ."

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

"Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. . . ."

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

"Often they would not truly realise the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and it was not always possible to track them down. . . ."

5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

"This is a surprisingly common one, [according to the nurse]. Many did not realise until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. . . . Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to their selves, that they were content, when deep within, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again."¹

Now there's nothing scientific to this study; merely the reflections of one nurse's work. Nor is there anything particular spiritual in this perspective. But it's pretty honest, and I would venture to guess generally reflective of attitudes and regrets at the end of life.

Life is a gift; we only get one. How will we spend it? More specifically, youth and health are gifts; how will we spend those? These are questions that our passage this morning forces us to ask. The word "youth" is mentioned in these verses four times (11:9, 10; 12:1). What does it look like, to use the title of One Direction's recent single, to "Live While We're Young"?

¹ Susie Steiner, "Top five regrets of the dying," *The Guardian* (Feb. 1, 2012). Steiner reports on the work of Bronnie Ware, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying - A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing* (Hay House). Article available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying>

Our passage this morning begins by reminding us, as Ecclesiastes has several times so far, that life is a gift, even despite the realities of old-age and death. Life is a gift. Look with me at v. 7: “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.”

To “see the sun” in Ecclesiastes is language of being alive (cf. 6:5; 7:11). And according to the preacher, seeing the sun, basking in the light of life on earth, is sweet and pleasant. As he’s said elsewhere in the book, “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” Life is a gift from God.

In fact it’s something God calls us to rejoice in, to enjoy and make the most of. We’ve seen the call to rejoice in life six times in this book already;² here is the final one. The beginning of v. 8 says, “So if a person lives many years, *let him rejoice in them all . . .*” And again, v. 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. . . .”

The Preacher not only commends joy, he commands it. We’ll talk about what that means in a little bit. But life is a gift to be enjoyed, not taken for granted. And that’s in part because *it is a gift that does not last*—at least not under the sun, in this world that you and I see and touch and experience here today. We all have an expiration date, and recognizing our mortality and life’s brevity is a key motivation for making the most of whatever days God gives us.

Look again with me at v. 8 and hear the urgency of rejoicing in all of life: “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.” Part of what helps us enjoy whatever days God gives us under the sun (not just in our youth but even in our old age) is the reminder that “the days of darkness” are coming, which in contrast to the sweetness of light refers to the bitterness of death. “All that comes is vanity”—not necessarily meaningless, but fleeting, temporary, here today and gone tomorrow. A vapor. And so again, v. 10 tells us to “Remove vexation [or trouble] from your heart, and put away pain from your body, [why?] *for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.*” Youthful vitality is fleeting, so enjoy life now while you can.

Similarly, 12:1 also remind us of the dark days ahead, “the evil days” and “the years . . . of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (12:1). Youth does not last. And what follows from this verse is a rather playful description of old-age and death in vv. 2-7. Though people have understood these verses in several different ways, the imagery here is almost certainly an allegory or extended metaphor describing the effects of age on the human body by using the imagery of a decaying house and estate. I suspect most of us will find it funny, but for different reasons. Our younger crowd is likely to laugh at the silliness of the picture; our seniors are likely to chuckle at how true to life it really is. All of us take heed, for this is where the train is heading regardless of how much track you have in front of you.

As life draws to a close, the sweetness of light is darkened.³

- Verse 2: “the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain.” The storm rolls in over the house; the sun and moon are darkened, a sign in the OT among other things that the end is coming.

² See Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9.

³ The explanation that follows owes much to the work of Richard L. Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Gary Burge and Andrew Hill, eds. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

- Verse 3: “in the day when the keepers of the house tremble,” probably a reference to the arms that used to do the housework but are now shaking due to old age.
- “. . . and the strong men are bent,” most likely the legs, pictured as those who used to bear heavy loads, now bent under the weight of years of labor.
- “. . . and the grinders cease because they are few,”—these are the teeth, and they’re fewer and fewer, no longer able to grind up food as the miller grinds grain.
- “. . . and those who look through the windows are dimmed.” This is probably the eyes and loss of sight, pictured as the ladies of the estate who would sit in the living room and peer out the window, but they can’t see anything anymore.
- Verse 4: “and the doors on the street are shut- when the sound of the grinding is low.” Probably the ears that can’t hear the sound outside; they’re shut.
- “. . . and one rises up at the sound of a bird,” a picture of the sleepless nights of old age, roused by the smallest sound.
- “. . . and all the daughters of song are brought low,” most likely the weakened voice. The ladies who go around singing and entertaining become quiet.
- Verse 5: “they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way,” perhaps the fear of falling in your old age, or the general phobias that develop at the end of life.
- “. . . the almond tree blossoms,” a beautiful head of white hair.
- “. . . the grasshopper drags itself along,” the limp of getting around when the body no longer works the way it should.
“. . . and desire fails,” that is, sexual desire. More literally, “the caperberry doesn’t work,” which was an ancient aphrodisiac. So in other words, the Cialis doesn’t help anymore.
- Why? “because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.” Here we see unambiguously that death is in view, as the town breaks out in a funeral procession. And unlike the temporary home that has just fallen apart, at death we go to “an eternal home,” and abiding one. Ecclesiastes doesn’t tell us much about what that means; the NT tells us much more. We’ll touch on it later.
- But look at the imagery of the end in v. 6: “before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken,” a picture of a golden lamp hanging from a silver cord that snaps, a chandelier that comes crashing down, and the light goes out. “. . . or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,” like a clay pot that slips out of our hands, life ends.
- And in v. 7, with an echo of Genesis 1-3, we get the most specific description of death in the book: “and the dust returns to the earth as it was,” our bodies in the grave, “and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

The book began with Solomon building his palace and estate looking for life (2:1-11); it ends by describing the decay of a house and estate as a picture of his decaying life.

The point of all of this is that God wants us to make the most of life BEFORE this happens. 12:1 reads, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, *before* the evil days come . . .”

Three times in these verses: *before, before, before* (12:1, 2, 6). And back in 11: 8: “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*” (11:8). So what does it mean to make the most of life now, to rejoice in all our days, especially our youth?

According to Solomon *it requires relating to God as both our Creator and our Judge*. Look again at v. 9 with me: “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*” (11:9). His call to joy is anchored in the reminder that God is judge. And then look with me again at 12:1: “*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth . . .*” Enjoying life and youth requires remembering God our Creator.

Making the most of life and youth in world given to decay and death requires living in communion with God our Creator and our Judge. To put it another way, true joy, fulfilling joy in this life, requires both *purpose* and *constraint*. It is in knowing God as Creator that we find *purpose* for our lives. And it is in knowing God as judge that we’re reminded to live according to that purpose, and to show *constraint* in how we live, denying ourselves of some things for the sake of God.

That of course sounds like no fun at all. That’s no real way to “live” for most young people; just another example of God being a cosmic kill-joy. It certainly was not compelling for a good chunk of my teenage years. But that simply betrays our fundamental misunderstanding of joy.

Think of it like this. The joy and satisfaction of playing a game is only full when we play by the rules—according to the purpose of the game and in submission to the rules (along with the officials who hold us accountable to the rules). You’ll never enjoy the game of golf if you ignore the game’s design and score it the same way as you score basketball—there’s no challenge in running up points on the green. Neither is there any joy in a game when we ignore the rules. No one trains for the Olympics in order to get disqualified. And no one likes to play with a cheat. There’s no real glory or satisfaction in cheating, even if it leads to victory. Because even if no one else knows, you do; you didn’t really win. Games are only fun and enjoyable when we play by the rules. You can’t tackle the ref on the football field and then rewrite the rules once he’s out of the way—you’re no longer playing true football. To be fully enjoyed, a game must be played with both *purpose* and *constraint*. Life is no different.

We were made by our Creator for a purpose, which the Westminster Catechism summarizes beautifully: “What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” That is, to make much of God and to be fully satisfied and delighted in God forever. That’s a joy that lasts.

As humans made in his image, God wants us to know him, respect him, love him, worship him, and enjoy him above all earthly treasures, and so to serve him by reflecting his beauty and helping others to know and treasure him, thereby filling the whole world with his beauty and glory (cf. Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8; Eccl. 12:13-14). We were made for a purpose. And God, our Creator, will also judge our lives according to this purpose—whether we gave God the honor due his name, whether we exercised constraint saying No to some things in order to say Yes to God.

And when this purpose is in place—that we were made to glorify God and enjoy him forever—then we are free, as 11:9 puts it, to “walk in the ways of our hearts and the sight of our eyes” in

seeking to enjoy life. When Solomon says that, he's not talking about some shallow, self-centered "be true to yourself." *Be true to your heart as your heart is anchored in the purposes of God*, which is how your heart was meant to function. Follow the "sight of your eyes" not in terms of grabbing whatever's in front of you, but in terms of contentment with whatever God gives (as Solomon said back in ch. 6:9: "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite"—contentment with what you have). And as you seek to enjoy life according to God's purpose for you, being satisfied in him, we are actually free to enjoy the goodness of life on this earth, and to seek joy and pleasure in it *without worshiping it*—the food, the friendships, the laughter, the life experiences that are an echo of and signpost pointing to our ultimate joy in God. And part of that pursuit of joy in our youth, according to v. 10, means putting away our vexations, our anxieties, the things that trouble your heart and weigh you down, the burdens you carry in your body, because youth is a gift that doesn't last forever.

Young people, there is a sense in which God tells you not to grow up too quickly. Not in terms of prolonged immaturity and irresponsibility or selfishness. But you're going to have plenty of time to worry about all the troubles and difficulties of life in this fallen world. It is a good thing to have fun in your youth—to run around and tear up the basketball court, to pummel each other with snowballs, to laugh and be goofy, to enjoy the life and energy of your youth. But that joy will only be meaningful in so far as it's rooted in your purpose to glorify God and with the recognition that he is your judge. There is a standard of holiness revealed in God's Word, even in our fun and joy, and God will hold us to account. You have to "play by the rules" to truly have fun.

The temptation is of course to ignore God's purpose, to disregard his right to judge us as our Creator and King, and to seek pleasure in life on our own terms, or on somebody else's. To listen to some other voice in our effort to make the most of life and youth. So I want all of us, especially young people—teenagers, young adults—to think honestly about this question: Which voice are you listening to as you look for happiness and joy in life?

For some of us the predominant voice we hear is pop culture—what the world of entertainment tells us it means to enjoy life. Take One Direction's new song, from where I stole the title of this sermon. The song rightly captures the urgency of making the most of your youth; in this respect at least the band is onto something. But that's where the similarity between Solomon and Zayn, Liam, Harry, and company ends. I'll spare you the lyrics,⁴ but the song is about a high school boy convincing a high school girl he barely knows to sneak out of her house and go have sex with him. That, we're told, is what it means to "live while you're young." The world tells us that joy is the freedom to do whatever we think will give us pleasure. Yet that kind of unconstrained joy never provides the satisfaction it promises. This was my story through most of high school—an empty pursuit of joy. The thrill of under-aged drinking gives way to the fear of being found out when you get home; it's not that fun anymore. Things we thought would bring us joy eventually result in fear, regret, shame, and even despair, if we let ourselves face it honestly. We need the purpose and constraint that comes from knowing God our Creator and Judge.

For others among us, it's not so much entertainment as it is someone else's voice telling us how to live and enjoy life and youth. Maybe it's your friends, and what you think will please them; maybe a boyfriend or girlfriend, maybe even a spouse, and so you live your life to keep them happy, thinking that that's joy. But frankly, they're pretty hard to please, aren't they? They're

⁴ See http://www.elyricsworld.com/live_while_we're_young_lyrics_one_direction.html.

looking for their joy in you, and you're looking for your joy in them, and neither of you are able to give what the other one wants.

Maybe it's your parents' voice that dictates your life, living to please mom and dad and fulfill their dreams for you. Now, I want to be clear here that it is a good and holy thing to honor and respect your parents; God commands that and there is actually much joy and freedom in it. Too often we simply brush disobedience to parents aside—"it's just a phase." It's not a phase; it's sin. It is a good thing to honor your parents. It is *not*, however, a good thing to *worship* them. And that's what I want to talk about for a moment.

Some of you find your life and significance, your joy, in your parents' approval. When you sit down to take that test, or step onto the playing field or the stage, the voice that drives you is your parents' praise, or maybe just trying not to get scolded again for being a failure. And so joy is all about pleasing them, and when that's hard to do, there's not much joy in life. And parents, you need to listen to this because some of you are creating a scenario that not only encourages this but demands it. Because rather than teaching them to find their significance in what Jesus thinks of them, you're finding *your own* life and significance in the performance of your children, and what other people think about *you* based on *them*. And not only are you robbing their youth of joy, as they live with the anxiety and fear of whether you will accept them, you're poisoning their view of God, giving them the impression that just as they have to perform for you to be loved and accepted, they have to perform for him. Some of them are going to live with guilt and a subtle sense of failure as a child and as a Christian their whole lives. Some of them are going to learn how to perform well, and become some of the most self-righteous people you've ever met. And some of them, the minute you're out of your house, are going to wash their hands of Christianity, and maybe even you.

Parents are to be honored, respected, and obeyed, but not worshiped. Only God is to be worshiped; he's the one who defines our life and value, our significance. Not our culture. Not our friends. Not what others tell us or think. Not even what we think in our own hearts. Young people, old people, if we are to make the most of our days for joy, we must find our life and identity in God and *his* purpose for us, which is possible for sinners such only through grace of God in Jesus Christ.

When you think about the fact that God has a purpose and will judge us according to that purpose, we have to ask the question, what if we've already blown it? Because we have. What about the young man already enslaved to pornography? The young girl trapped in an eating disorder? What about the old man at the end of his life reflecting on all his regrets, things he wished he would have done, words he wished he could take back? Is there any hope for those who have fallen short of God's purpose for their lives, or is his judgment all that remains before us?

The hope and beauty of Christianity is that our Creator and our Judge is also our *Savior*, who has worked salvation precisely for those who forgot their Creator and sought lasting pleasure in something other than him. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 says, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

God made us for a purpose—to glorify God and enjoy him forever. His love for us was such that he was unwilling to sit back and watch us throw away that purpose on lesser joys, joys that would betray and kill us. And so in his love he sent his Son, Jesus, to take on human flesh and walk in perfect faithfulness to God and his purpose. And while we ridiculed him for his faithfulness, he willingly died the cruelest death *for us*. He took the judgment we deserved on himself, to *wash* us, to *sanctify* us, to *justify* us—that we might be declared “not guilty” of our just punishment, and that we, like him, might rise in newness of life, if we will cling to Jesus Christ in faith.

Through faith in Jesus we have communion with God our Creator and Judge and Savior. And it is in this communion that we find true and lasting joy—a joy free from guilt, shame, fear, and regret. A joy that doesn’t depend on our performance for God or what anyone else thinks of us, but on our union with Jesus. A joy that does not corrode with age, unlike our bodies. Rather, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, [vapor,] but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Through our communion with God in Christ, as we treasure him above all other joys and as we depend upon the Holy Spirit whom he has given us, we have a joy that comes from living according God’s purpose, as his grace teaches us to say No to “ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Tit. 2:12-14).

This is joy that lasts. Will we pursue that joy all our days, but especially while we’re young?