

Life, What's it all About?

Ecclesiastes 11-12

Pastor John Miller

Someone said, "Life is like a good book; the further you get into it, the more it begins to make sense."

I don't know how long you've lived, but for many people, as for Solomon, if you look at life without God, life does not make sense. Solomon concluded in Ecclesiastes 1:2 that life without God is "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

This week I was blowing bubbles with my grandson in the backyard. He's chasing the bubbles, and I thought of Ecclesiastes. You grab the bubbles, they pop and there's nothing there. "Vanity" means "nothingness." That's really an apt description of what life is without God; there's no real substance, purpose or meaning to it.

Solomon has been looking at all of life "under the sun" or without God. He concluded that it was all vanity and vexation of spirit, that life is monotonous and empty without God. But today we see a change in Ecclesiastes. Solomon comes to the end of his book, and he makes some conclusions. Seeing God, he paints four pictures to help us understand what life is all about and how we are to live our lives.

Number one, Solomon says that life is an adventure that we are to live by faith in God, chapter 11, verses 1-6. And the object of our faith is to be God. In this section, Solomon used two activities to illustrate the idea of living by faith. They are a little bit hard to discern in this allegorical, metaphorical language and Hebrew poetry he uses to bridge the time and culture gap.

But it seems that he is conveying the idea of a merchant, who sent his ships out to sea, and they would return with bounty or blessings. Verses 1-2 say, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a serving to seven, and also to eight..."—and here's one of the key phrases in this section—"...for you do not know what evil will be on earth." Four times we'll read in these first six verses "thou knowest not" or "for you do not know."

You don't know what life will bring, but you need to venture forth in faith. We don't know what's going to happen, but we need to trust in God. When we learn to live by faith in God, life becomes an adventure, knowing that God is guiding us and God is leading us.

What does Solomon mean by "cast your bread upon the waters"? Is he talking about feeding the ducks? No. We can't be dogmatic, but he seems to be talking about a merchant sending his ships out with their goods and then returning back to their harbor with their prosperity. Another idea or concept is what Jesus said: "Give, and it will be given to you, pressed down... running over will be put into your bosom." So if you give "to seven," if you give "to eight," even though "you do not know what evil will be on the earth," God will bless you. If you are a giver,

you will reap the blessings of your generosity.

Then Solomon moves from the idea of a merchant, in verses 1-2, to the idea of a farmer, in verses 3-6. This is a little clearer. He gives the illustration of sowing. "If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie." You almost laugh at this; it's obvious that if the tree falls there, it's going to lie there. The idea is that the clouds bring the rain, trees fall over; God is in control. Even when bad things happen, they can turn to good; the rains come down, and the trees could be used for lumber.

But the key text is in verse 4: "He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap." That's the idea that it's too windy or it's too cloudy today to plant the seeds. Some always have excuses why they can't do something. I confess I'm sometimes like that. My wife asks, "Can we work in the yard today?"

"It's too hot; it's summer. We'll do it in the fall."

"Honey, it's fall. Can we work in the yard today?"

"It's too windy; it's fall. We'll do it in the winter."

"Honey, can we work in the yard today? I think we've lost the kids in the grass; it hasn't been mowed in months."

"It's too cold; it's wintertime. We'll have to wait 'till spring. Spring's a great time to do yard work and to plant in the yard."

In the spring, then, "Oh, it's my allergies. I can't work in the yard today." Then it's back to summer, and we have the cycle all over again. We're so good at making excuses. We never learn to venture in faith. I think what Solomon is saying here is whether you're a merchant or a farmer, you have to live by faith.

Notice the phrase in verse 5 that appears twice: "As you do not know..."—here it is again—"... what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know..."—for the third time—"...the works of God, who makes everything." Verse 6, "In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand..."—in other words, sow your seed and then be generous to give to others, trusting God to take care of you—"...for you do not know..."—there it is for the fourth time—"...which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good."

So basically he is saying learn to live by faith. In Habakkuk 2:4, it says, "The just shall live by his faith." A godly, righteous person lives by faith in God. That's what Jesus told us to do in Mark 11:22: "Have faith in God." I hear people sometimes say, "Well, I don't have enough faith that it will work out." My question to them is, "Faith in what?" or "Faith in who?" Everybody exercises faith.

The key to faith is not the amount of faith or the intensity of faith; it is the object of your faith that is important. There are those who tell you that if you have enough faith, you can move mountains, you can do great things. If your faith is in God and it is God's will, God's purpose and God's plan, yes, you can. Sometimes we try to impose our will on God. But faith is trusting that God knows best. Faith is trusting that God loves me and is in control of my life.

You don't have to be afraid when you walk with God by faith. God will watch over you. God will take care of you. God will protect you. God will take care of your children and grandchildren. It's so important to trust the Lord with your families.

I love the story in the book of Samuel about Jonathan and his armor bearer, who wiped out a whole garrison of the Philistines, just the two of them. There had been a standoff between these two armies for days. The Philistines were up on the mountain, and the Israelites were down in the valley. They weren't getting anywhere in the battle. Then Jonathan woke up one morning and said to his armor bearer, "If God is going to deliver us, He can deliver us by many or by few. We don't even need the army." If I was the armor bearer, I'd say, "Go back to bed, Jonathan. Something's wrong with you. You need some more sleep."

Jonathan said, "Let's go over to the garrison of the Philistines and let's see what God will do. When we go over, if they say, 'Stay there; we want to come down to show you something,' then we will know that God is not in it."

So they were going to venture in faith, but they had a fleece; they had an option. Maybe God's wasn't in it, so they were going to wait and see. If they said, "Come up here; we want to show you something," they would know that God was in it and they would defeat the other army.

The armor bearer agreed with Jonathan and said, "Okay, let's go." So the two of them, without letting Jonathan's father or the armies of Israel know, ventured over to the Philistine garrison. When the Philistines saw them, they said, "Come up here; we want to show you something." Then Jonathan turned to his armor bearer and said, "That's it; God is with us!" They scrambled up the mountain and Jonathan and his armor bearer were knocking them over. The Bible says that 20 men were wiped out by the two of them. The Philistines got so discomfited and so confused that they fought each other and killed each other off. That day God brought a great victory. Can you imagine the stories they could tell their kids and grandkids? How God discomfited the Philistines.

But the point was that God can save by many or by few. God doesn't need your money. God doesn't need your contacts. God doesn't need your abilities. God doesn't need your ingenuity. God needs your trust and your obedience.

We used to sing a hymn years ago that went:

"Trust and obey, for there's no other way

To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Simple, but simply profound. Learn to trust and be obedient to God. Learn to live by faith.

F. B. Meyer said, "You never test the resources of God until you attempt the impossible." If you can explain it, God didn't do it. Learn to say, "I believe in God and I'm trusting God. He can take care of us, He can provide and He can bring the victory."

So life is an adventure. Learn to live it by faith. If you are struggling in life right now, maybe you need to learn to trust in the Lord with all your heart. "Lean not to your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths."

The second conclusion that Solomon came to was that life is a gift from God; enjoy it. This is a long section; from chapter 11, verse 7 to chapter 12, verse 8. How can we enjoy life? First of all, Solomon gives us some admonitions. Number one, we need to rejoice in our youth. Verses 7-9 say, "Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun." In poetic language, he is basically saying that life is good when God comes into the picture. "But if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many." You're going to get old and there will be hardships. Your body starts to go. "All that is coming is vanity."

Now here it is again; in verse 8, we have "rejoices in them all," and now in verse 9 we have, "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth." What's a "young man"? I'm not going to say. Age is relative. You're as young as you feel. But when you're old, you know it. It just hits you. So if you're young, rejoice, because He has blessed you. You can enjoy life. It's a gift from God. "And let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment." He wants us to remember God, and He will bring us into judgment.

This is how you enjoy life. Number one, you rejoice daily. Every day give thanks. Count your blessings; name them one by one. Thank God for your wife. Thank God for your husband. Thank God for your children. Thank God for your food, your house and your job. For all the blessings God has given you, learn to rejoice in God. When you're thankful, you have a heart of joy.

The second thing you need to do is in verse 10: remove sin from your life. "Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh. For childhood and youth are vanity."

So there are two admonitions: in verse 9, we "rejoice," and in verse 10, we "remove." What does it mean to remove? It means that sin will lead to sadness. It brings guilt to the mind and damage to the body. Jesus said that sin is serious. If you have a right hand that causes you to sin, cut it off. He says that if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Now He doesn't mean that literally. If we cut off our right hand and our right eye, we still have the other hand and eye to sin with, so it won't work to literally cut them off. If we were to take what Jesus said literally, we'd all have stubs and one eye.

What Jesus does mean is that sin is a serious matter. Now I want to speak to the young folks.

Remove sin from your life. Don't practice sinful behavior. You'll live with guilt and shame if you practice sin. It's detrimental to you socially, physically and spiritually.

I'm so glad that when I was a young boy I grew up in a Christian home. My Dad and Mom taught me to fear God as a young man. My Dad took time with me to talk about life and things of that nature, and it kept me from so many wicked things that I saw permanently damage my friends. So if you are a young person, remove sin from your life. Don't follow the crowd. Don't do what others are doing just because it sounds like fun. Sin leads to sadness. Holiness leads to happiness. Remove sorrow by removing evil.

The third step to take in order to enjoy life is remember your Creator early in life. Chapter 12, verse 1 says, "Remember now your Creator..."—so we have the three r's: "rejoice," "remove" and "remember"—"...in the days of your youth." Good advice. It's so sad and tragic that we've been teaching young people that they're the product of evolution. One of the reasons we have a moral breakdown in this country today is because we've taught our young people that there is no God. There is no fear of God before their eyes. There is no understanding of accountability before God.

"Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come." What are "the difficult days"? Getting old is what he's talking about. Solomon's going to describe it quite graphically. "And the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them': while the sun and the light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain."

What does he mean by "Remember...your Creator"? In the Hebrew, "remember" means more than just mentally recalling something or reflecting and pondering. It has the idea here of action and obedience. It implies action on our part and obedience. The same Hebrew word was used when God looked at Hannah, who was praying for a child. God answered her prayer and gave her a son. The Bible says that the Lord "remembered" Hannah. That doesn't mean that God almost forgot about Hannah. It means that God remembered by blessing her, by acting on her behalf.

The concept of remembering your Creator conveys the idea of not only pondering the person and the power of God, but then acting upon what we know about God. I think about God, I remember, and then I act upon how I think about God. What I believe will determine how I behave. So you "remember" God while you're young, before you get too old.

I don't know if you're like me, but getting old is a challenge. Getting old is not for wimps. You have to be courageous. There are many challenges.

Look at this amazing metaphorical, allegorical Hebrew poetry on aging. Verse 3 says, "In the day when the keepers of the house tremble..."—that means when your arms and legs shake—"...and the strong men bow down..."—you begin to bend over—"...when the grinders cease because they are few..."—that's when you lose your teeth; your teeth fall out. Someone said,

"You know you're getting old when you bite into a steak, and your teeth stay there." I heard the famous radio preacher, J. Vernon McGee, say, "You know you're getting old when you see a pretty girl and your pacemaker opens the garage door."

Solomon continues, "...and those that look through the windows grow dim." You get so you can't see. "Where are my glasses? I need my glasses to find my glasses." Verse 4, "When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low..."—you can't hear—"...when one rises up at the sound of a bird."

I love that. Someone in my neighborhood got some chickens and put them in their backyard. Sometimes I want to sleep a little bit, but I hear, "Cock a doodle do!" Or when you get old and you want to sleep in, some little bird wakes you up. You can't sleep like you used to; the sounds wake you up.

Verse 4, "And all the daughters of music are brought low." You can't hear the music anymore. "Also they are afraid of height, and of terrors in the way." You have a fear of heights. You can't go high up a ladder anymore.

I had to have some of the guys from the church come and help me put up my Christmas lights this year. I got about halfway up the ladder and was shaking. "I think I'll have someone younger than me go up this ladder to hang these lights." So you have a fear of heights.

"When the almond tree blossoms" means that your hair turns white.

"The grasshopper is a burden." Have you ever watched a grasshopper walk? He's painting a picture of how the old walk. You have to have a walker, because you can't walk very well.

Then in verse 5, it says, "And desire fails." Every Hebrew commentary I read agrees that this is talking about the sex drive. Ray Stedman said, "Thank God it's last on the list." It is last on the list, and after that you die and go to heaven. Don't freak out.

Solomon then says, "For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets." He's describing death. "Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well. Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. 'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'All is vanity.'"

Charles Swindoll has written a book on Ecclesiastes titled *Living on the Ragged Edge*. He called a chapter "Gray Hairs, Fewer Teeth and a Big Smile." I like that.

So we need to rejoice in our youth; remove sin, which brings sorrow; and remember God in the days of your youth. Remember your Creator.

The fourth step is that life is a school; learn your lessons from God. We're all in school. The problem is that when you get old, you forget what the lessons were; you forget what you've

learned. So when you're young, you need to learn to fear God, to walk with God, to stay in God's Word and keep your focus on God.

Now in verses 9-12, Solomon is going to explain the characteristics of his words in Ecclesiastes. "And moreover, because the Preacher..."—referring to Solomon—"...was wise..."—he was wise—"...he still taught the people knowledge..."—he was knowledgeable—"...yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words." Notice he gave "wise," "knowledgeable" and "acceptable" words. Verse 10, "And what was written was upright—words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd."

"Goads" were long, pointed objects that farmers would use to poke the oxen in the fields to get them to move. "Nails" were probably referring to tent stakes to fasten down their tents. "One Shepherd," I believe, is referring to Jehovah God, which, in the New Testament, is referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the Word of God. So even Solomon is acknowledging here that the words he wrote were given to him by inspiration of God.

"And further," he says, "my son, be admonished by these." He's saying that he's given them God's Word, and by them they need to be admonished. "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh."

For us as believers, we have the Bible. This book is given by inspiration of God. I believe with all my heart that the Bible is the only inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God. Outside of this one book, the Bible, there are no other inerrant, infallible, inspired books. Other religious groups add to the Scriptures and have their books and revelations from God, but the Bible is all we need "for life and godliness." God has given us everything we need in His Word. The psalmist said it is "a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." The psalmist also said, "The entrance of Your words gives light; gives understanding to the simple." So there is nothing more important for you to do, if you are going to find, enjoy and live life, than to meditate day and night on the Bible.

Psalms 1 says, "Blessed is the man [or woman] who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his [or her] delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates..."—not "medicates"—"...day and night." That's the problem; everyone is getting medicated, and no one is meditating on God's Word. What happens when you meditate on God's Word? "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."

When I think of my kids, my grandkids and you, the congregation here at Revival, the one passion I have is that you love God, love His Word and walk in obedience to it. It's that simple; that you will "love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength," that you will love God's Word, that you will meditate on it day and night and that you will live it out in your daily lives. You need to read it, study it, meditate on it and memorize it.

The Scriptures that I quote in my preaching I learned when I was a teenager, in my early '20s. I started preaching when I was 20 years old. I grew up in the church and memorized Scripture. Then in my early years, God gave me that ability to memorize and quote Scripture. But at this point in my life, I don't memorize anything anymore. My ability to memorize has long gone; my computer isn't doing that anymore. But I've "hidden God's Word in my heart," and God the Holy Spirit brings it to my recall.

My advice to the young—this is real "rubber meets the road" advice—is if you still have the ability to memorize and retain, meditate on God's Word and memorize God's Word. Hide it in your heart. Someone said that "The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible." So there is nothing more important for the young than to meditate on, memorize and be obedient to God's Word. James says to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only."

The fourth and last thing we need to do is to remember that life is a stewardship; fear and obey God. Verses 13-14 say, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter..."—this is the grand finale; the entire book is summarized here—"...Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all..."—and here's the reason—"...for God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

So Solomon, in all of his wisdom, comes to this conclusion. If you are a Christian, you need to understand that your life is not your own; it's been given to you by God. Your marriage belongs to God. Your children belong to God. Everything you have is God's. So we are simply stewards over what God has entrusted us with. Then one day we will give an account to God of what we did with what He entrusted to us.

But some people just waste their lives. We see people who waste the talents, the gifts, their abilities; they cop out of life altogether. Then there are others who spend their lives seeking enjoyment but don't find it, because they are looking for it in entertainment. They're just trying to keep themselves entertained, always having fun, always on the go, always buying new things, but they don't find enjoyment.

The third category is those who invest their lives. So don't waste your life, don't spend your life, but rather invest your life. Corrie Ten Boom said, "The measure of a life is not its duration but its donation." I love that. It's not how long you live but it's the donation you make; how you are impacting others around you. What kind of a blessing are you? Do you see that you are a steward over all that God has entrusted to you; that you need to be distributing, benevolent, kind, loving, encouraging, devoted to your husband or wife, to your kids, to your church, to everyone around you? You need to be a blessing.

My Dad used to sing an old hymn I will never forget. He used to sing it all the time.

"Make me a blessing.

Make me a blessing.

Out of my life

May Jesus shine."

That should be our desire and our prayer. "Make me a blessing to my spouse. Make me a blessing to my kids. Make me a blessing to my grandkids." We will be, if we fear God and obey Him.

Notice these two conclusions: number one, we are to "fear God"; and number two, we are to "keep His commandments," verse 13. That's not so far off from what Jesus said, the two great commandments. "Love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." Loving God and fearing God are closely connected. What "fear the Lord" means is that you love Him so much that you don't want to disappoint Him, you don't want to break His heart.

When you sin, you grieve the Holy Spirit. Your ungodly attitudes and actions grieve the Holy Spirit. You sadden the heart of God. If you love God and fear God, then you don't want to do anything that is going to dishonor God. You want to bring pleasure to God. Proverbs 1:7 is the classic passage given by Solomon, which says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." That's where knowledge starts; it's learning to fear God.

Then verse 13 says to "keep His commandments" or "His Word" or "His precepts." The Ten Commandments or the Decalogue is for your good and for God's glory. They are laws that liberate us. Now you can't keep the Ten Commandments in order to go to heaven, because we aren't righteous; we will sin. No one can work their way to heaven. Salvation is a gift from God. We are saved by grace and not by works. There is no religious rite or ritual or good deed that we could do to get ourselves to heaven. We have to put our faith in Christ. But we should be obedient and walk in His commandments, as He enables us, by His Holy Spirit. The law of liberty has been put in us "who walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh." So we fear God and keep His commandments, if we love Him and obey Him.

Verse 14 is the rationale or the reason for it: "For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." What a great way to end the book of Ecclesiastes. We are going to stand before God and give an account to God. One day you will die and stand before God and give an account of your life.

Let me explain the Crucifixion. Jesus was God in the flesh. He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life and He died on the Cross voluntarily as a substitute for our sins. He was buried, and three days later He rose victoriously from the dead. He then ascended back into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. The Bible says that "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Salvation is "a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast."

If you don't know that your sins have been forgiven, if you don't know that when you die, you'd go to heaven, you just need to turn to Jesus and say, "God, I'm a sinner, and I've broken your law. I've fallen short of your standards. But I know Jesus died for me and paid for my sins, and I'm trusting Him and believing in Him." Then the Bible says that God will actually declare you to

be righteous. Theologically, it's called "imputation." God imputes to you the righteousness of Christ. Your sin was placed on Christ and paid for, and Christ's righteousness was given to you as a free gift. Now you stand in Him complete. So when you die, you will not be judged for your sin, but you will be judged for your service.

What did you do with your time? With your talents? With your treasures? Did you just build bigger barns? Did you hoard your goods? Did you live selfishly? Or did you invest your time, your treasures and your talents for the good of others and for the glory of God?

But if you are not a Christian, you will stand before Jesus, the books will be opened, your name will not appear and you will be thrown into the "lake of fire," known as "gehenna," the second death. Jesus said, "There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth...where their worm dieth not." It's a place of utter darkness. It's called "hell." There's heaven and there's hell. "Choose this day whom you will serve."