

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 21

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Next, we have a magnificent passage which integrates, summarizes, and in some ways, reorients the message of the entire book. This is the preacher's grand finale. We will look at this text under three headings: First, the overture in chapter 11, verses 7 and 8. Second, rejoice in chapter 11, verses 9 and 10. And, finally, remember in chapter 12, verses 1 through 8.

I. The Overture

First, then, the overture. Verse 7: Light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Here we have an unrestrained affirmation of life. Light is associated throughout Scripture with life and joy and delight. Light, and thus life, is sweet. It is like honey. Savor it. Suck the marrow out of it. It is pleasant or good for the eyes to see the sun. The preacher finally says it without qualification: life is good. The sun, which he wasn't too happy to see in chapter one, the lethal, murderous sun, which is grinding us all to dust and bones; the sun, under which life has been, to put it mildly, seen as an unpleasant affair, is nonetheless, a delight to behold.

Here we finally have a GOOD observation, one which accords with the rest of the OT in delighting in the creation. So give thanks to God for your eyes, for the perpetual wonder and mystery of light. Get outside and take a walk. It is good to be alive.

Thus, verse 8 says if a person lives many years; let him rejoice in them all. Here the Preacher is addressing older people. Or at least potentially older people. People who may be blessed with many years. And he does not suggest, but he COMMANDS, rejoicing. Rejoice in them ALL, the text says. Rejoice in every single year. Whether you are nine or ninety, the years are good. Don't be the kind of person who wishes they were older or who wishes they were younger. That is to fail to rejoice in the year you are in. Don't constantly pine for the weekend, or the next vacation, or graduation, or retirement. Rejoice in the current day, in the current year. It's the only one you have. But, the preacher says, retaining his realism, let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. The call to rejoice comes with the call to remember the darkness.

The preacher retracts nothing he has said about the brutality of life, about its fleeting, ungraspable, enigmatic character. All that comes, the text says, all that lies in your future, is vanity. The future, like the past, is vapor, mist, unmanageable smoke. Thus, it is the very brevity, the elusiveness of life; that should cause us to cherish it. You cannot rejoice in retrospect. You can only rejoice in the present, and you can only truly rejoice with the sober realization of the vanity to come. That is the overture. And it hits both notes; rejoicing and remembering.

II. Rejoice

Our second point, then, is rejoice. Having exhorted people who may be older in verse 8, Verse 9 says: Rejoice, O young man, in your youth. The young particularly need this advice. They haven't learned to number their days. They think, as do many adults frankly, that they will live forever.

If you are young you should pay particular attention here. The Preacher does not want you to miss any pleasure; he wants you to live full of joy. And you cannot grasp his call rightly if you think you will never be old. So, rejoice IN YOUR YOUTH. Youth, with its strength, its vitality, its dreams and optimism, is a wonderful thing. If you are young, rejoice in your youth.

Verse 9 continues: 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 heart and the eyes are the organs of desire. Follow your desires, seek joy and delight with vigor. It is not simply permitted, it is commanded.

Then the preacher adds: but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Now that sure sounds like a wet blanket thrown on what the Preacher has just commanded, but it is not. For two reasons:

First, the reference to judgment here reminds young people that your actions matter, that there is moral accountability in the universe. Your desires are to be rightly ordered desires. Joy always dances with goodness, never alone. As St Augustine said: Love God and do what you will. The law of God, Psalm 19 says, invoking the organs of desire, rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes. But, in this context, the reference to judgment does something else as well. It reinforces the command to rejoice. God will judge us for our failure to rejoice in our youth. For our failure to let our hearts cheer us and our eyes delight in the sweetness of life. The ancient Jewish writing called the Talmud said this: Everyone must give an account to God of all the good things one saw in life and did not enjoy.

Have you had a good hotdog? Have you seen a good film? Have you enjoyed your friends and family? Have you been breathing God's air? Have your eyes seen? Have your ears heard? Have your hands touched? How much rejoicing

have you been doing? Don't take ANYTHING for granted. Celebrate it all. So, if you are a young person you need to learn this now: Christianity is NOT a dour, joyless religion. We believe that reverence for God AND reveling in life go hand in hand. God is the God of life and light and delight.

Next, in v.10, young people are urged to remove vexation from their hearts. We've seen a lot of vexation in this book. Vexation prevents joy. It comes from seeking leverage or control over life, from seeking to grasp the vapor. Live life with open and grateful, not grasping, hands. Remove vexation from your heart. Also, put away pain from your body. Don't endanger your health. Seek remedies which enable you to enjoy your bodily vigor while you can. For, as the last phrase of v.10 reminds us, youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Youth is a mist. If you are going to rejoice fully you MUST face this reality. Your youth is slipping away as I speak and there is nothing you can do about it. So, rejoice, young man, young woman, in your youth.

III. Remember

Our third point is Remember. Here we come, in chapter 12, to perhaps the most magnificent poem on old age ever written. The Preacher began with a poem in chapter 1, and he ends with one here. The poem is broadly structured by the use of the word BEFORE. It's used three times in the passage and this has the effect of causing the opening command – remember also your Creator in the days of your youth – to be implicitly repeated. So the poem is structured as follows: Remember your Creator BEFORE A happens, and then, implicitly, Remember your Creator before B happens, and then, implicitly again, Remember your Creator before C happens.

First verse 1: Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth. The overture was about rejoicing, yet remembering the darkness. We've looked at rejoicing, and here, for the first time in the book, the theme of remembering is taken up at length. Three points are critical here.

First, "remember" is a covenantal word. It does not mean to recall to mind something you've forgotten. When God remembers His people, it means He remembers His covenant and ACTS in terms for it for our sake. So for us, remembering God means to live perpetually in fidelity to the covenant. To ACT in terms of our relationship with God. To refuse to forget Him AND ALL His benefits.

Second, we are called to remember our CREATOR. Solomon has referred to God, but never to the Creator, until now. This reference to the creator, and our covenant remembering of Him, means that the creation, for all of its twisted vanity and futility, is yet good. Light is sweet and it IS pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

Third, this remembering is thus the ground and the cause of our joy in the vaporous world. To modify Augustine a bit: Remember God and follow the joy of your heart. So, remember your creator in the days of your youth, and then we get the first BEFORE in v.1: Before the evil days – the days of darkness – come and the years draw near of which you will say “I have no pleasure in them.” Rejoicing and Remembering will be acutely challenged with the onset of old age. Days are coming in which you will say: I have no pleasure in them.

The second section of the poem begins in v.2: Remember your creator BEFORE the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened. The dawn of youth has now fled and the scene is dark and grim. The Preacher depicts the onset of old age as fading light, and under the image of a Palestinian storm where, at the end of v.2, the clouds return after the rain. It's dark all day, and then its pitch black at night. Elderly people suffer one setback after another. Health issues which time will not heal, the death of spouses, friends and loved ones. The years in which we were told to rejoice are now full of bitter trial. The sun, which was pleasant to see, is now darkened.

The metaphor switches to a decrepit house in v.3: in the day when the keepers of the house tremble. Your hands, the guardians of the body, the house, now shake and every simple task is harder. The strong men are bent. You are bowlegged, you walk bent over; your gait is labored and difficult. The grinders, meaning the teeth, particularly the molars, cease because they are few. And there is no ancient Palestinian dentist can help the man depicted here.

The end of v.3: those who look through the windows are dimmed. Your eyesight is shot and there are no eyeglasses available. The sweet and pleasant things of the light are harder to see and enjoy. Do you like to read? The time is coming when it will be difficult, if not impossible to read. So remember you Creator and give thanks for you eyes – they aren't eternal. Verse 4 – and the doors on the street are shut. There are a number of options here, but the metaphor probably refers to the ears. You can't hear the street noise; you can't hear the normal noises of life.

The text continues: the sound of the grinding is low. This could refer to the fact that you need to eat soft food, you can't chew like you could when you were young. Or it could refer to the sound of women grinding grain which you can no longer hear. One rises up at the sound of a bird. You have trouble sleeping soundly and you're easily awakened. Did you get a good night's sleep? If so, did you remember your Creator and give thanks? Then at the end of v.4 all the daughters of song are brought low. You either can't sing because your voice is shot, or you can't hear and enjoy music because of your hearing is shot. The point is not to precisely grasp every image here, but to see that all of life's vivid intensity is diminished.

Verse 5: they are afraid of what is high. Heights mean danger because a fall can be lethal. Stairs, and in this culture, rooftops, are now off limits. And there are terrors in the way. You have to stay home now because travelling is dangerous. The almond tree blossoms and when it does it becomes a sliver-white color. Your hair, if you have any, is now gray. The grasshopper drags himself along. The grasshopper is light and nimble and agile, but now you are slowed to a crawl. Your ankles are swollen, your joints ache, your bones decay. Movement is arduous and labored. If you can walk or jog or play sports - remember your Creator. Soon you will consider BINGO a sport.

And, the text continues in v.5, desire fails. Probably appetite is primarily in view, but all desire has dissipated. Food is tasteless. You can no longer cook. All the optimism and possibility of youth are gone. "Welcome to limitationville." You don't get to check in anytime you like, but you can never leave. All of this gradual dissolution is given a reason in the middle of v.5: because man is going to his eternal home, which here means the grave. A generation goes and a generation comes, the Preacher said in chapter 1, and here he comes full circle. Hospice has been called in. And the funeral preparations have begun. The mourners go about the streets. They gather together to console one another, to cry and to wail.

The third section begins in v.6: And here I want to remind you are why the Preacher is pulling out all the rhetorical stops. He wants you to "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" BEFORE you are the subject of this poem. He wants you to rejoice and remember while it is relatively easy, because it WILL get progressively harder. There is nothing morbid here. This is the vapor at work. This is reality. Take it to heart while you are relatively young. The cult of youth is an idolatrous cult. Someday all the plastic surgeons, and all the Botox, and all the pharmaceuticals will fail you. The great English poet, John Donne, bought himself a coffin and put it in his bedroom to remind himself of his end. He would occasionally sleep in it to bring the point home. So get rid of the Christian kitsch and get yourself a coffin. Your friends will love it – and it will save your family money later when you need it.

As an aside, let me say this to those of you who are older. Chapter 11, verse 8 commands those who live many years to rejoice in them ALL. And surely, though youth are the target audience for this poem, the elderly must also remember their Creator, though the task will be much harder. Yet, you can still, as the Psalmist says: bear fruit in old age, and be ever full of sap and green. If you are reduced only to praying – make that a glorious restriction. As the Apostle Paul says: we do not lose heart, for though our outer man is decaying our inner man is being renewed day by day. Your light momentary affliction is producing an eternal weight of glory.

So, in v.6 the end comes. The silver cord is snapped, the golden bowl is broken. A bowl or a lamp suspended by a cord falls and the lamp's oil, the light of life,

goes out. The pitcher is shattered at the fountain. All the life giving water drains away. Broken pots have been found in Jewish tombs from this period. Since we mortals are earthen vessels, jars of clay, the shattering of pitchers was probably part of the funeral procession and then part of the burial rite. So, smash some pottery and put it in that new coffin.

The text continues, the wheel is broken at the cistern. Again, nothing can be drawn from the well. Notice the repetition in v.6: broken, shattered, and broken. Life is finally beyond repair. In v.7 the dust returns to the earth as it was. From dust you were taken and to dust you shall return. The spirit returns to God who gave it. There is, contrary to many scholars, an affirmation of the afterlife here, for not only does the spirit return to God, but the Preacher has told us that all men face a future judgment.

That is the poem. The preacher's book is finished. Then either an editor, or the Preacher speaking in the third person, ends the tale where it started. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity. As grim as this poem is, the preacher does not believe that the options are either despair, once we see the vapor in its fullness, or some kind of delusional denial of the harshness of life and the certainty of death. The poem serves here as a threefold reminder to remember your creator, the one who gave you life and light. And this remembering is the ground of all our rejoicing and reveling in the goodness of life.

And now, in the New Covenant, we remember the One who has first remembered us in our distress, who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was made man. Dying he destroyed our death, and rising He restores our life. In him we see clearly what is only subtly hinted at here, namely that joy and remembrance triumph over the vapor. And this Risen Christ, having abolished death and having brought life and immortality to light, before His ascension, left us one last thing to remember: Remember, He said, I am with you always, in youth and old age, into the grave and beyond, even to the end of the age. Amen.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).