

The Dusk and Dawn of Life  
Ecclesiastes 11  
December 12, 2021  
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CenterPoint Church

Read Ecclesiastes 11

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

## Introduction

Alan Stokes special music song about Ecclesiastes 11: *“He that observeth the wind shall not sow, he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child, even so, thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed and in the evening withhold not thine hand for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall alike be good. Truly the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.”*

Today’s sermon text has a little advice to every one of us - young, old, bold, cautious, industrious, or indecisive. It’s classic wisdom from our guide through life, King Solomon. The first section talks about how we are to

### **I. Be Generous and Work Hard Even in Uncertainty (vv. 1-6)**

*<sup>1</sup> Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. <sup>2</sup> Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. <sup>3</sup> If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. <sup>4</sup> He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. <sup>5</sup> As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. <sup>6</sup> In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.*

That first verse, *“Cast your bread upon the waters”* is an interesting image. I’ve heard people say that phrase at different times, but I’m not sure I knew what they meant. Sometimes I thought it was like that Sting song: *“If you love somebody set them free.”* That doesn’t seem to fit the context here, though, and I read three more likely ways that we can understand this phrase:<sup>1</sup>

1) You have to take action to get something done. If you want to start a business, you have to fill out some paperwork, build a client list, hire employees, etc. If you want to build a house, hire a realtor or an architect. Move forward, cast your bread upon the waters, don’t expect things to just happen. Not sure that’s right, though.

2) Combined with verse 2 (giving a portion to seven or eight), it’s our common saying *“don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”* The idea is that if you are a merchant shipping your goods, put them in different boats in case a disaster happens to one or more of them. It’s what financial people would call a diversified portfolio. You might lose one or two, but you’ve got more that will cushion you from losing everything. That may be right, but...

3) The way I’ve usually understood this verse is that it is calling us to be generous wherever and whenever we can be because when we cast our generosity (our bread) all around, who knows

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<sup>1</sup> Philip G. Ryken, *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes* (Glasgow, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015).

where it will land that will return a blessing to us? In other words, if you give money to people who are in need, or every time someone is going on a short-term mission trip you give them a donation, who knows how many people you've blessed in those actions? And they might return your generosity one day when you are in need. Even if you are never rewarded tangibly, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you've helped a lot of people, done a lot of good; maybe even receive a reward in heaven.

Here's how I recently understood this idea: When I first moved here, I reached out to the pastors next door at LifeHouse and took them out to lunch, we developed a relationship. No big deal, I'm not sure I realized that I was casting my bread on the water. What did they say when we lost our nursery space at the yoga studio and needed to use their front room for our nursery? "Of course, anytime, free of charge." Cast your bread and you will find it. It's the same principle as 2 Corinthians 9:6 – "*whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*" Someone who is jaded or skeptical could say that this is a manipulative selfish act, that you're just trying to help other people so they'll owe you. But that takes away the voluntary nature of giving. We give because God has blessed us, whether we are rewarded or not.

Take a look at verse 3 again – "*If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*" Rain falls, trees fall. Doesn't seem like the most profound, radical verse in the Bible, does it? Story time: Back in the late 1950s, there was a young man, a freshman in college on the football team, in the lobby of his dorm room in college who was waiting for a ride to go buy a pack of cigarettes. Some upperclassmen football players beckoned him over to the table where they were sitting reading the Bible. At some point, they read Ecclesiastes 11:3 and that young man said that he saw himself as the tree: fallen, rotting, and decaying. God used that verse to show him that his true spiritual condition was death, and that even though he had attended church that he was not a Christian. He went up to his dorm room, knelt beside his bed, and asked God to forgive his sins. That young man's name was R.C. Sproul, and he went on to get a PhD in theology, teach seminary, start churches, and most especially, to found Ligonier Ministries, a ministry committed to bringing strong, theologically-rich Biblical teaching to laypeople. R.C. Sproul claimed of Ecclesiastes 11:3: "I think I'm probably the only person in church history who was converted to Christ by that verse."<sup>2</sup>

That verse and the following ones tell us that nature is predictable on the one hand and unpredictable on the other. The worst thing to do is to be paralyzed as you observe nature so that you do nothing – verse 4 says you might hesitate to sow or reap if you think too much about whether it's going to rain or not; so verse 6 says sow and plant when you're supposed to, because you don't know what will happen. Our modern equivalent would be "He who hesitates is lost."<sup>3</sup> The ultimate reason, the larger framework, for all of this is in verse 5 – that we don't understand God's will and work; we don't even know how God breathes the spirit into a child when it is conceived inside of its mother. Sure, we know God's declarative will in the Bible, what He has revealed about what pleases Him and how we are to be saved. But we do not know how He is working every day. God does not expect us to know the future, but to be obedient in the things He has placed before us. You cannot predict, much less control, the future. But you can control how you act, and God is looking for hard work and obedience. So get to plowing and sowing, whatever that means in your particular field of work.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *R.C. Sproul: A Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> J.V. Fesko, *Where Wisdom is Found: Christ in Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), p. 136.

The rest of this chapter will address our lives at different stages. First is the advice that despite the pain and vanity, you are to

## **II. Enjoy Your Aging (vv. 7-8)**

*<sup>7</sup>Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup>So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.*

There's an old Dutch proverb that says: "We grow too soon old and too late smart." Woody Allen said, "You can live to be a hundred if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be a hundred." But maybe the quote that best captures this Scripture is from the wise philosopher, Ferris Beuller: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." Solomon says that life can be dark and full of vanity and futility, everyone is going to experience some level of that. No one gets a pain-free pass through life. Despite the trials and the darkness that you go through, you're blessed if you live a long life. And as with all the blessings that God gives us, treat them as blessings and gifts. Enjoy your life. Rejoice in, and give thanks for, every one of your years. Verse 7 - "*it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun,*" in other words, every morning you wake up and are still breathing and living life is a good one.

Our culture, for the most part, would like to deny that the aging process happens. The guys are all envious of Tom Brady, who has apparently found the fountain of youth and plays football like a 25-year-old at age 44. Tom Cruise is almost 60 and he's still fulfilling his impossible missions. The ladies may be envious of Jennifer Lopez who is still energetic and young looking in her 50s. We all want to look and stay young, we pretend we're turning 29 again every year. There's a whole industry for plastic surgery and Botox, because we're so scared of looking old when our culture worships youth. But that's the definition of vanity in every sense of the word. Solomon says to let that stuff go, to rejoice in every one of your years, enjoy your life; don't dread getting older, embrace it because it means you get to live and love and experience what the Lord has for you!

Our last verses move to the other end of the spectrum. If you're still young, you only get a certain amount of time to

## **III. Enjoy Your Youth (vv. 9-10)**

*<sup>9</sup>Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. <sup>10</sup>Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.*

I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said, "youth is wasted on the young." You don't know what you don't know at that age, and you certainly don't know how good you have it. Solomon urges those who are young: find joy in your heart by the things that your youth allows you to do. Enjoy having a body that hasn't had multiple back and knee surgeries. Enjoy the freedom of not having a mortgage or multiple mouths to feed. Enjoy having the energy to pursue things that excite you. Solomon kind of kills the whole vibe in the last verse with, "*youth and the dawn of life are vanity,*" but even so, strive to enjoy that time in your life, let your heart cheer you. You're not invincible, but you don't have all the burdens of old age.

Is this a free pass for young people to sow their wild oats, go crazy with living for pleasure? Only if you want to experience regret, sorrow, and emptiness – refer back to chapter 2 to see what a dead-end that kind of lifestyle is. In the second part of verse 9 it says that "*for all these things God will bring you into judgment*" and it seems to be referring to the earlier part of verse 9 – the walking in

the ways of your heart. So either it means that you shouldn't enjoy yourself too much because you'll end up sinning, and then God will judge that sin. Or it means that God will judge whether you've taken advantage of all these wonderful things He's given you, that He'll make you answer for how you spurned His gifts of joy and happiness if you don't embrace them. Maybe it's both, but what seems to be implied is that "enjoyment is not only permitted, it is commanded; it is not only an opportunity, it is a divine imperative."<sup>4</sup> But enjoy God's good gifts, not the twisted, sinful versions that the Devil offers. 1 John 2:16 says *"For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world."* Don't get caught in the world's lies and traps, but enjoy the blessings of life from God.

## Conclusion

God throughout the Scriptures promises to watch over our entire lives, from cradle to grave: Isaiah 46:3-4a says, *"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of those house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you.."* God is with us every step in life.

Children, teens, young adults – you have been given a wonderful gift of life, live it in a way that pleases God and brings lasting joy to you and those around you. Adults, retirees, senior citizens – you have been given a wonderful gift of life, live it in a way that pleases God and brings joy to you and those around you. You're never too young to start making a difference and you're never too old to keep making a difference. 1 Timothy 4:12 says, *"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."* And 2 Timothy 2:22 says, *"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."* Paul clearly did not lower the bar for young people and just think, "Well, let's wait until they've gotten all those wild days behind them; when they've got some maturity, then we'll ask them to model Christ." No, Paul exhorted young believers to live out their faith in a powerful way. And then in Titus 2:2-3, he commanded, *"Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women, likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good."* Paul didn't give older believers a pass either; they don't get to retire from modelling Christlikeness and mentoring the younger generations. Whatever age and stage you find yourself in is a great time to delight in God and show the world what a transformed believer's life looks like.

Next Sunday night is my 30<sup>th</sup> High School Reunion at Bellaire High School - "Go Cardinals.". I'm not going because it's in Houston, Texas. But I wonder what the conversations would sound like. Once we get past our memories from High School – "Hey, you were one of those twins whose dad was a pastor, right?" "Do you remember our jazz band days?" – what else do we talk about? How do you define your life in the last 30 years? My classmates and I have plenty of years behind us for both regrets and successes, but also plenty of years left to be productive, redeem our mistakes, and make our lives count for something. I'm so grateful for my life, my marriage, my kids, my ministry jobs, don't get me wrong, but when I meet kids I went to school with, it's human nature to judge yourself in comparison to them, isn't it? If they went on to become the CEO of a company and made their first million before age 30, you start to think, "Why did I accomplish so little in life?" But if they dropped out of college, lived in their parents' basement for years working at a dead-end job, your head swells with pride and you think, "Hey, at least I'm better than that guy. My life's pretty great, I really accomplished a lot." And maybe that's the deeper reason I don't go to reunions beyond the geographic distance: I don't want to judge my life based on comparing it to other people. I want to

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<sup>4</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), p. 136.

look at my life and thank God for every year He's given me, every blessing He's provided; every trial was put there to shape and grow me, every victory was to encourage and spur me on to greater things. You're not living anybody else's life, you're living the life God gave you and ordained for you to live.

Let's take a little quiz. You can answer these in your head:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) Name the MVPs of the last World Series, Super Bowl, Stanley Cup finals, and NBA finals
- 2) Name two recent Pulitzer Prize winners
- 3) Name two winners of last year's Academy awards
- 4) Name a teacher who helped you learn and grow as a person
- 5) Name a friend who has been there for you during good and bad times
- 6) Name an adult who has been an excellent role model for you

I'm guessing that you did a lot better on the second half of that quiz than you did the first half. Obviously, the first three questions were about people who achieved great things, the very best in their fields. You'd think they'd be easy to remember. If you couldn't come up with recent winners of MVP awards or acting awards, how would you have done if I had asked you to name those winners from 1976 or 1955? How quickly our achievements are forgotten. But we remember the people who made an impact on our lives, who loved us, who helped us and taught us important things. There's nothing wrong with aiming for excellence in whatever field we're in, but do we live our lives aiming to be recognized and famous, or do we live our lives for the ways that we can pour into other people and help them?

The greatest life that was ever lived was lived in service to other people. A Man who understood His life's mission as the life of a servant, who not only walked around helping people that He saw in need, but ultimately gave His life as a ransom for a great multitude of people. Jesus died in the place of sinners like you and me to fulfill His Father's rescue mission, reconciling people so that they could be in full fellowship with God. His sacrifice purchased our forgiveness and our eternal life. He frees us from our sins to open us up to a life that is able to pursue true meaning and joy. As we live our lives as new creations in Christ, we can celebrate the gift of our lives and invest them in the things that God has said will bring true joy and eternal rewards. Don't waste your life. Whether you live into your 90s or have your life ended at a young age, you can make your life count for eternity as you seek your Father's will in all you do. Amen.

*Benediction - Romans 8:37-39 - "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Rice, *Hot Illustration for Youth Talks 4* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 148.