LESSON 12

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:14

In this lesson we review Solomon's teachings about the nature and meaning of life.

OUTLINE

Bookstore shelves are filled with volumes about "life" and how to find meaning in it. Very few of them can boil down their observations as succinctly as Solomon. He concluded his survey of how to find meaning in life with two simple prescriptions: Fear God and keep His commands.

I. **Life Is Uncertain: Embrace It**
   A. Be Diversified in Your Investments
   B. Be Diligent in Your Involvement

II. **Life Is Short: Enjoy It**
   A. Experience Each Day Totally
   B. Enjoy Your Youth Thoroughly
   C. Express Your Faith Thoughtfully
   D. Embrace Your Aging Thankfully

III. **Life Is Mysterious: Examine It**
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IV. **Life Is Obedience: Express It**

OVERVIEW

During World War II, the prisoners of the Sobibor concentration camp in Eastern Europe started an uprising against their Nazi captors. Of the 700 prisoners who took part in the escape, 300 made it to the edge of the nearby forest. Of those, less than 100 are known to have survived. Three teenage boys were among those who were able to hide in the dense woods. They hid and slept during the day and traveled at night, fueled by the hope of survival.

After four nights of wandering, the boys came to a clearing and saw the silhouette of buildings against the sky. As they approached joyfully, they discovered the buildings were those of the Sobibor concentration camp! They had spent four days traveling in a circle. They were right back where they started.

While one of the three boys ultimately survived to tell his story to the world, the picture of them wandering in a circle is a picture of Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes. This book describes his round-trip experience with God. He begins the book by saying that all is vanity, and he ends the book by saying the same thing (12:8). We conclude our study of Ecclesiastes by looking at chapters 11 and 12 together since the two chapters cover one lengthy theme.

We stated earlier in this series of lessons that Ecclesiastes is Solomon's book of regrets. He looks back upon his life from the perspective of old age and regrets that he tried to live the latter part of his life without keeping God at the center. In that way, life is like wandering through the woods without a map, ending up where you began: frustrated and meaningless. Life without God, Solomon concludes, is vanity and striving after the wind.

In this lesson, we find Solomon resolving all the questions he has raised in the first ten chapters of the book. In the twelfth chapter he reaches what he calls "the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13). He presents us with a summary of four final principles by which we can find meaning and enjoyment in our brief sojourn through this temporary world.

Life Is Uncertain: Embrace It

Solomon has taken great pains to communicate the uncertainty of life throughout this book. There is a temptation for many who are Christians to just sit back and relax in the face of life's uncertainties: Play it safe, don't rock the boat, bide your time. Solomon takes a proactive, not a passive, approach to life—but does so with wisdom.

Be Diversified in Your Investments

Here is another well-known idiom that arises from Ecclesiastes: "Cast your bread upon the waters" (11:1). In Solomon's day, merchants would load their ships with grain and other goods and send them out to trade with other peoples. They hoped the ships would return laden with goods more valuable than those with which they departed. That was casting their bread upon the water. The plural "waters" indicated the wisdom of not sending all your grain in one ship, in one direction. Rather, diversify your investments so that if one ship isn't successful, others might be.

Today we talk of diversifying our investments so that if some go down in value, others will go up. Life is uncertain—instead of burying your resources in fear, invest them in a diversified manner.

Be Diligent in Your Involvement

Diversification should be coupled with diligence. Instead of being passive and fearful about life, be bold and be strong. Work hard and expect that God is with you. If you work hard, there is no guarantee you will be successful; but if you don't work hard, there *is* a guarantee you will be unsuccessful.

We don't know which way the wind will blow, where the rain will fall, or if it will be sunny or cloudy. If a tree falls, we don't know which direction it will fall, nor do we know how a child grows in its mother's womb. All of these are uncertainties about life. But we cannot let these uncertainties cripple us.

Don't you dare adopt the posture that some Christians have taken: "I know I'm going to heaven, so I'll just take it easy until that happens." The opposite should be true: Because you know you are going to heaven, you should live passionately in this life.

Life Is Short: Enjoy It

We are not going to stay young all our lives. Age is an unstoppable reality, so live your life totally, thoroughly, thoughtfully, and thankfully.

Experience Each Day Totally

I love the seventh verse: "Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun." Never take for granted the privilege of living another day. Anyone who has lived with a life-threatening illness or experience knows the truth of that statement. We ought to greet every new day with a "Thank You, Lord!" to show our gratitude to God for the privilege of being alive.

I love living in Southern California because I get to greet the sun most days of the year.

Enjoy Your Youth Thoroughly

One of the major themes of Solomon's book is that we are to enjoy life. Here he says specifically to young people: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth" (11:9).

I'm amazed at how young people think. When they're 16 they want to be 18. When they're 18 they want to be 21. And when they're 21 they want to be 25. Somewhere along the way, they start wanting to go backward instead of forward. But for so many years they are anxious to leave the "confines" of youth.

But Solomon says that youth is a time to be treasured. This is a message for parents as much as for young people: Don't force your kids to grow up sooner than necessary. Let them enjoy the freedom and opportunities of youth, for they will be over all too soon. I can remember talking with our children when they were college age about how great high school was. High school isn't a business like college; it's a place to grow and experience and be taken care of. Granted, it's only for a season, and responsibilities come soon. But young people should enjoy their youth and not long to be free of it.

Youth is not a time to sow wild oats—that's not Solomon's message. Instead, youth is a gift from God, just as adulthood is. The point is this: Don't be anxious to leave God's appointed times and seasons in your life, especially youth. Live them and enjoy them for all they're worth. The New Living Translation states it this way:

> "So refuse to worry, and keep your body healthy.
> But remember that youth, with a whole life before you,
> is meaningless."

Because youth is fleeting, I encourage parents to let their kids be kids. I've seen too many adults who never got to be children, who try to recover their childhood once they're married. It's a recipe for disaster because, let's face it, kids do wild and crazy things. If young people were allowed to get some of those things out of their system when they're supposed to, they'd feel less need to do it as adults.

Express Your Faith Thoughtfully

Twice in this last chapter Solomon admonishes his readers to remember their Creator in the days of their youth. Most people do the opposite: They put God on a shelf during the days of their youth saying, "I'll get serious about God when I'm a bit older."

If a strong foundation with God is laid during one's youth, it will be the basis for a lifetime of faith. "Remember" doesn't mean just a mental image, but a full commitment that involves heart, soul, mind, and strength. Learn spiritual disciplines and be spiritually accountable. Many adult Christians today (including myself) shudder to think where they might have ended up had they not laid a spiritual foundation in their lives when they were young.

Embrace Your Aging Thankfully

For those of us who are no longer young, Solomon says we are to embrace our age thankfully. In chapter 12, he paints a poetic picture of the signs of growing old which become motivation for living every day to its fullest while we're able.

- Verse 3: The "keepers of the house" are your arms and hands that tremble in old age. The "strong men" are your legs, knees, and shoulders that "bow down" and cause you to walk with a stoop. The "grinders . . . are few" means that we lose our teeth. "The windows grow dim" means that our eyesight fails.
- Verse 4: "The doors are shut" refers to our loss of hearing, while "grinders" again refers to teeth. If you "[rise] up at the sound of a bird" it means you get up at 4:00 a.m. with the birds like many old people do. The "daughters of music" refers to our voice beginning to quiver and weaken.
- Verse 5: To be "afraid of height" means just what it says, and "the almond tree blossoms" refers to our hair turning white. "The grasshopper is a burden" likens us to grasshoppers at the end of the summer when their life span is nearly over. If "desire fails," it means our libido decreases in old age. And "mourners" going about in the street refers, obviously, to our funeral procession.

Verse 6 contains several metaphors for death: loosening the silver cord, the golden bowl being broken, the pitcher being shattered, and the wheel being broken at the well. At death, "the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (verse 7).

The point is, life is on a timetable. We know old age and death are coming, so enjoy your life while you can.

Did you hear the story of the octogenarian who wanted to play golf, but his vision was so bad he couldn't see where the ball landed? He got another 80-year-old who had perfect vision to play with him.

So the first man hit his tee shot, and the second said, "I see just where your ball landed." But by the time they walked to where the ball was supposed to be, the second man couldn't remember where it was!

That's the way it is. If it's not our vision, it's our memory—or something else. Enjoy them all while you can!

Life Is Mysterious: Examine It

In school, we study first and then take the exam. But in life, Solomon says, we get the exam and then we study.

Wisdom Comes Through Instruction

Verse 9: "And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs."

Wisdom Comes Through Insight

Solomon, like Jesus Christ, taught words of truth: "The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth" (verse 10).

Wisdom Comes Through Inspiration

Students love verses 11-12: "The words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd . . . . Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh."

Did you notice that "Shepherd" in verse 11 is capitalized? That is a reference, of course, to God who is the source of all wisdom. He is the one who drives wisdom home to our hearts "like well-driven nails." I have heard preachers interpret this admonition concerning books to mean that the Bible is the only book you should read. That is obviously incorrect. Where would we be without the many godly authors who help us understand better what the Bible says?

However, some people amass huge libraries of intellectual and philosophical books because they are into searching, not finding; questions, not answers. But God has ended the search and provided the answer in Jesus Christ who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Let your study of books be about understanding the answer, not reveling in the search for truth.

Life Is Obedience: Express It

Finally, we arrive at Solomon's ultimate conclusion—where he has been headed since the first verse. His "conclusion of the whole matter" is worth reproducing word for word:

"Fear God and keep His commandments,
For this is man's all.
For God will bring every work into judgment,
Including every secret thing,
Whether good or evil."

Fearing God means to honor and reverence Him and "keep His commandments." That is the bottom line for how to find meaning in life. It's like the song we sing in church sometimes,

"Trust and obey,
For there's no other way,
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey."
—John H. Sammis

I hope you will find meaning in life by Solomon's simple formula of fearing God and keeping His commandments—for there's no other way.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel you often take a passive approach to life? If so, how can you practice making your approach more proactive?

   a. How does Solomon tell us to invest in Ecclesiastes 11:1-2?

   b. What is the cultural context of verse 1? How can we utilize this advice in our lives?

   c. *We cannot let . . . uncertainties cripple us.* Do you feel you let uncertainties prevent you from fully embracing your life? If so, how can you overcome this?

   d. As mentioned in the lesson, do you embrace all four instructions Solomon gives us in Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8 when it comes to enjoying life?

   e. Which do you struggle with the most? How can you change this?

f. How can you encourage those in your life to do the same?

g. Do you embrace your aging thankfully?

h. In Ecclesiastes 12:9-12, why does Solomon say we should examine our lives to find wisdom?

i. What three ways does he tell us to gain wisdom? How can you apply each of these to your own life?

2. What are the most significant new lessons you will take away from this study of Ecclesiastes?

a. How has Ecclesiastes corrected your life in some way?

b. What new dimensions of God's character have you discovered?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What four descriptions does Solomon tell us about life in Ecclesiastes 11–12? Why is his advice based on these descriptions?

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   a. How can we adopt each of these behaviors in our own lives?

2. In Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, what advice does Solomon give us for embracing life and approaching it proactively?

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3. What are four ways, as found in the lesson, we can enjoy life in a biblical way? (Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8)

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a. How can we renew our attitudes to adopt these instructions into our daily lives?

4. In Ecclesiastes 12, what three things does Solomon say wisdom comes through according to the following verses?

   a. Verse 9

   b. Verse 10

   c. Verses 11-12

5. What is the most important lesson we can learn from Ecclesiastes? (What is Solomon's ultimate conclusion?)

DID YOU KNOW?

Jesus Christ's subtle use of the Old Testament is revealed to the careful reader. For instance, Ecclesiastes 11:5 may well form the backdrop for John 3:8. Nicodemus was "the teacher of Israel" and would undoubtedly have made the connection between Jesus' words and Ecclesiastes. Both passages deal with mysteries; Ecclesiastes deals with the unpredictable nature of the wind, while Jesus uses that unpredictability to illustrate the Spirit's work (wind and spirit are the same word in Hebrew [*ruach*]); Ecclesiastes refers to the body being formed in the mother's womb and Nicodemus asks if that is what is meant by "born again." The more of the Old Testament the Christian knows, the more full his reading of the New Testament will be.