

Week 14 - God's Life Plan - Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8

Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 16:23-34

Introduction

Many Christ-followers wonder about God's plan for their lives - what God would have them do, how God would have them be, whether what they do matters, and whether any of those things are knowable to any degree of certainty.

In Chapter 11, Qoheleth makes a bold, positive turn by showing us God's life plan for his followers.

He says it involves three steps: get busy, enjoy your days, and remember the Lord.

Let's begin with what he has to say about getting busy.

I. Get busy

Have you ever wondered if your efforts for the Lord really matter?

Many people do as they pray, give, witness, and work faithfully without seeing any apparent results.

It can get pretty difficult, and doubts are normal when you don't see results.

But then, there are times when things come together, and we see something we did for the Lord bear fruit and glimpse what God can do through us.

The problem is we can never tell when we'll be successful or what success might look like.

That's the subject on Qoheleth's mind as he begins Chapter 11, and he opens with a pair of difficult-to-interpret commands [**Ecclesiastes 11:1-2**].

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

I have to say, the only time I've ever seen someone cast bread upon water was when they were feeding ducks, and I don't think that bread was ever seen again.

But of course, Qoheleth is speaking figuratively and not literally, and we're left to interpret what he's trying to communicate here.

Some scholars conclude that he's talking about philanthropy in these two verses and encouraging us to be generous in sharing what we have with the poor.

It's a kind of pay-it-forward philosophy where, by helping people who are in need now, we will be helped when we are in need someday.

We might also tie Qoheleth's command to Jesus' words in **Luke 6:38**, where he taught:

"Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

Or, we could look to the Old Testament command to share with a neighbor in need, which we find in **Nehemiah 8:10**.

With seven being the typical number of completeness in Scripture, sharing seven portions would represent the height of generosity, and to share eight would be to go above and beyond.

That's not an unreasonable interpretation, and it presents a sound teaching since many people hesitate to be generous for fear of coming up short should they fall on hard times themselves.

However, looking at those first two verses within the immediate context, it seems clear that Qoheleth means something else entirely.

Instead of encouraging generous hospitality, Qoheleth is commanding us to be industrious and adventurous in our efforts for the Lord.

The Hebrew word rendered “cast” in most English versions means “send” or “send away,” to “let go,” or to “give free reign to.”

We could see this command in terms of agriculture and seed sowing as Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 9:6**.

In that case, the harvest would be the return seen after many days.

However, it’s hard to explain why Qoheleth would refer to the sowing of seed as casting bread upon the waters.

It seems better to view the command in commercial terms and equate the casting of bread on the waters with engaging in trade - sending one’s wares out to sea and waiting for the ships to return carrying merchandise from foreign lands.

He’s describing a risk/reward system where nothing is gained when nothing is ventured.

Then, in verse 2, continuing with the theme of engaging in business, he says it’s wise to diversify.

Saying, “Give a portion to seven or even eight,” is another way of saying, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” and one of the main reasons is that you never know where disaster might strike.

After all, time and chance happen to all, as he pointed out in 9:11, so it’s wise to invest widely so that if one venture fails, another can pick up the slack.

Next, in verses 3-4, Qoheleth describes the risk-averse - those who are content to wait until everything is perfect and success is guaranteed before they’ll act.

In verse 3 [**Ecclesiastes 11:3**], he describes two natural and apparently random events that are beyond human control.

There is nothing a farmer can do about either the rain or the wind that comes along to topple a tree.

However, as verse 4 [**Ecclesiastes 11:4**] makes clear, he can control when he plants his seed and harvests his crops.

In Qoheleth’s description, we see a farmer standing in his field, looking at the conditions.

He remains paralyzed by analysis as he tries to determine whether conditions are ideal, and since he can never be sure, he never gets around to planting.

And the procrastination that keeps him from planting also keeps him from harvesting because where there’s no planting there can be no harvesting.

Those verses contain sound financial and agricultural advice, but we can also apply their principles to the business of God’s kingdom.

We know that Jesus has given his followers a commission, a job to do, as we continue his earthly ministry in his absence.

We are to be about the business of making disciples, which involves bringing others into the kingdom through evangelism and making them into disciples through teaching and fostering their obedience.

We also know that each Christ-follower has a unique set of talents, abilities, and at least one spiritual gift.

And God wants us to use those things to benefit his kingdom.

He wants us to be venture capitalists for the kingdom, not hoarders who are afraid to take risks.

Will your neighbor or co-worker accept Christ if you witness to them? Who knows?

Take a chance, share the gospel with them, and find out.

Will someone be saved each time you share the gospel, or will every ministry you try succeed?

The answer to both questions is obviously “No.”

That’s why it’s wise to try as many things as you can think of and take every opportunity.

In the parable of the soils from Luke 8, the seed fell on differing kinds of soil with varied results, and the reality is none of us knows how God might use our efforts to advance his kingdom [**Ecclesiastes 11:5**].

But, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 3, one person plants a seed, and another comes along to water it, but God is responsible for the growth of the seed.

You aren't responsible for the results of your efforts; you are responsible for being faithful in expending the effort.

While we may never know the precise results of our efforts this side of heaven, we know that our labor is not in vain when we labor for the Lord [**1 Corinthians 15:58**].

And, even if all our efforts come to naught, wouldn't it be better to fail by venturing out, taking a chance, and giving everything we have than to fail because we clung to our resources and refused to take a chance?

I think the parable of the servants in Luke 19 makes it pretty clear that no one will be rewarded for hoarding what God has given them to use.

Closing out this section in verse 6 [**Ecclesiastes 11:6**], we see Qoheleth say, "Live boldly, take chances, work hard, try everything, and then trust God to use it as he sees fit."

Let me encourage you not to hold back because of uncertainty or fear but to step out in faith and use what God has entrusted to your stewardship for his glory.

Don't be concerned with whether your individual efforts will succeed in some particular way, but trust that God knows how to take what you offer and use it for his glory.

II. Enjoy your days

Turning from his command to get busy, Qoheleth next says that we should enjoy our lives whether we are old or young.

He speaks to older folks first in verses 7-8 [**Ecclesiastes 11:7-8**], saying:

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. 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.

Qoheleth has often said that life is *hebel*, vanity and chasing the wind.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing bright and enjoyable in it.

Much of life is sweet, bright, and pleasant, and God intends for us to enjoy those things while we sojourn here.

Therefore, there's an advantage to reaching old age because you've not only had more time to serve the Lord, as we've seen in verses 1-6 but also more time to enjoy this world.

A significant reason to enjoy every moment to the fullest is that life is fleeting, joy is intermixed with sorrow, and we must face the reality that light has its opposite - we will likely have as many days of darkness as light.

Still, sorrow is part of what gives joy meaning, just as you can't have a mountaintop without a corresponding valley.

Many older people develop the unfortunate and unbecoming habit of constantly complaining about everything as if life were nothing but one continuing disappointment.

It's better by far to heed Qoheleth's command and determine to rejoice in each day no matter what it brings because each day is a gift from God.

To paraphrase the psalmist in **Psalms 118:24**, we should wake up each day saying:

"This is the day that the Lord has made; [**I will**] rejoice and be glad in it."

Daily joy isn't limited to the elderly, though, as Qoheleth turns his attention to the young in verses 9-10, saying [**Ecclesiastes 11:9-10**]:

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. Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

Just as the older person is to praise God for the number of their days, the young are to praise him for their strength. There's a somewhat popular saying among those whose youth has become a memory, "Youth is wasted on the young." While that can be taken as an indictment against the youth of the present, it's also an admission of recognition gained too late by those whose youth is gone.

Young people often don't recognize the blessings they possess, so they don't fully appreciate them.

Their bodies are stronger, it takes more to injure them, and they heal faster when they do get hurt.

Their futures are ahead of them and full of possibilities, so they can dream big dreams and hope to make a difference.

They have more time to recover from mistakes, so they have greater freedom to take risks.

As the old saying goes, the world is their oyster, and Qoheleth says they should follow their hearts and dare to act on their vision.

Still, Qoheleth seems to understand that some will take his command as a license to do whatever one pleases, so he tempers it by reminding the youth that God will judge everything they do.

He doesn't do this to take the fun out of life any more than he did by reminding the elderly that life contains darkness and light.

He simply reminds the youth that we all live before God and will answer to him in how we use his good gifts.

So, Qoheleth's message is much the same as Paul gave Timothy in **2 Timothy 2:2** -

Rejoice responsibly, enjoy life's pleasures while avoiding sin, and celebrate the gift of your youth while following God's commands.

Again, he tempers the rejoicing by telling the youth to enjoy the advantages while they last and not to allow the temporary nature of youth to become something to worry about.

He says to them, "Don't let life get you down. Enjoy your youth for its temporary advantages, knowing it won't last, and don't allow it to become an idol you try to cling to because it won't last."

And because it won't last, he says, remember your Creator - look beyond the *hebel* of this earth to God who made us for himself.

III. Remember the Lord

Look with me at **Ecclesiastes 12:1**, which says,

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them."

To "remember" him isn't merely to recall him as a mental act; it means dropping all pretense of self-sufficiency and committing to him by living a God-centered life.

Only God sees the pattern of existence in its entirety because he made and sustains it, and God is the driving force behind everything he calls us to do in Chapter 11.

God is the one who causes our efforts to succeed or fail; God gives us each of our days, God gives us our strength, and God eases our burdens and heals our pains.

And Qoheleth says the best time to commit fully to God is when we are still young enough to give a whole lifetime to his service.

In the following verses, Qoheleth describes old age in what is arguably one of the most memorable poems of the Bible.

Using metaphors, he sketches a realistic portrait of the march of time and its effects on our mortal bodies.

But before we dig into it, I want to remind you of something.

No matter how old you are, this is as young as you will ever be, so this is the “youth” of the rest of your life.

So, even if you can hardly be called a youth in a true sense because of your years on this earth and the ravages of time, I urge you to consider what you still have and commit to using it for God because it’s unlikely you’ll ever have more.

Now, let’s look at the poem and consider its imagery.

As we do, I encourage you to notice the feelings it arouses in you.

Let’s look at verses 1-8 in their entirety before taking them individually [**Ecclesiastes 12:1-8**]; Qoheleth writes:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

Again, Qoheleth says, “Remember also your Creator [now] before evil days come and the years draw near of which you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’”

Verse 2 compares the advance of years and the troubles of old age to a gathering storm.

Day and night are darkened by clouds, and another storm comes along as soon as the previous one passes.

As I said a bit ago, when you’re young, you tend to heal faster, and you can look forward to “clear skies” returning amid a life-storm.

But, as you age, it seems like one thing after another without a break, and there’s little time to recover.

I ran across a meme recently that I sent to my oldest daughter on her 40th birthday.

It said, “I’m at the age when I have to wonder, have I injured myself, or is this just how I am now.”

However, life's gathering clouds and storms take more than a physical toll as we envision them dulling the senses, diminishing the faculties, removing loved ones, changing familiar customs and habits, and ending hopes and dreams.

Verses 3 and 4 describe old age as a house falling apart through decay.

The “keepers” of verse 3 are one’s arms, which lose their strength and begin to tremble.

The “strong men” are the legs bent with age.

Of course, the “grinders” are one’s teeth, and the “windows” are eyes dimmed by cataracts or the general loss of vision most people suffer as they age.

The “doors” that are shut refer to one’s hearing as the hum of the street and industry fade.

Older folks also tend to rise early with the birds of the morning, who often begin singing before the sun rises.

The “daughters of song” are the vocal cords that lose their elasticity and ability to make sweet sounds.

The total picture of these individual images is one of narrowing perception and growing remoteness where one begins to feel they are no longer fully a part of the world around them.

Verse 5 introduces the fear many older folks have of stumbling and falling because of being slow-moving and unsteady.

Qoheleth uses the imagery of a grasshopper that normally hops with great vigor, slowly, laboriously dragging itself along in its final days.

We see the white hair of age in the image of the almond tree that awakes from its winter slumber with a crown of snowy blossoms.

Finally, Qoheleth describes the phenomenon of a general lack of desire that comes as life nears its end before he turns his attention to the cessation of life itself.

Death eventually comes for everyone, and Qoheleth's mention of going to an eternal home speaks to its permanence rather than our New Testament understanding of life after death.

The house in decay will one day fall, and mourners will gather for each of us and carry out the final service anyone on this earth can perform for another.

Life is fragile, as Qoheleth describes it, as a golden bowl suspended by a slender silver cord and an earthenware vessel that can be easily broken.

When it comes, there is no opportunity for repair, and we become like a broken windlass at the well, rendering us unable to draw the water of life any longer.

And so our bodies return to the dust from which God formed mankind, just as God pronounced we would in **Genesis 3:19**, and our spirits return to him from whence they came.

And Qoheleth pronounces the whole affair to be "Vanity of vanities."

Conclusion

So, what should we do with all this?

First, we need to heed God's call to action and get busy with the work the Lord has given us to do.

We need to be bold and step out in faith.

We need to act like venture capitalists for the Lord by taking risks and investing our talents and resources in kingdom pursuits, recognizing that God didn't give us those things to keep to ourselves.

We must stop waiting for everything to be perfect before we act.

We need to cast our net widely, try as many things as possible, start new ministries, and engage with everyone we can because we can't know what will succeed.

Second, we need to enjoy our lives.

Whether we're closer to the beginning or end of life, God wants us to find joy in our moments, recognizing that life is fleeting.

Young people mustn't waste their time in pursuits that are displeasing to God or that lead to emptiness.

Instead, they should savor and revel in the blessings that are theirs while keeping their hearts aligned with God's commands.

As we grow older, we need to embrace the wisdom that comes with age as compensation for our lost vigor and continue to serve the Lord in the strength that remains with gladness, knowing that each day is a precious gift from him.

While it's never too late to serve the Lord, it's also true that no one ever starts serving him too soon.

Lastly, we're called to remember the Lord our God all our days and in all our endeavors.

Make it your practice to start each day with gladness and gratitude, acknowledge your dependence on the Lord, and, whether young or old, commit yourself wholeheartedly to God's service, knowing our time to serve here is limited.

Be active in your service, joyful on the journey, and steadfast in your devotion.

Your life can be so much more than vanity - it can make a difference in eternity.

Let's pray.