

XV. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“A Heart that Cheers Throughout Life”
Ecclesiastes 11
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
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In this study we are in Ecclesiastes 11. We have two studies left in our study of the book of Ecclesiastes and how this contributes to a world and life view. We have looked at how the authorship of Solomon is important in the study of this book and the dating of this book in the 9th century and how it is affirmed in this book. This book is the repentant nature of Solomon as he comes back to the roots of the wisdom he had embraced early on in his life and ministry and as a prodigal has come home. This book is very difficult because it doesn't outline well at all so we have had to do it more or less by commentary in the verses in our expositional look at the Scriptures.

At the end of Ecclesiastes 9 and 10, Solomon was giving us wisdom. Remember that knowledge, understanding and wisdom all run through the book of Proverbs which is God's ordained common sense for life. One of the things we've learned is that knowledge and understanding leads to a very sensible and practical wisdom and that is what chapters 9 and 10 affirmed with the various proverbial and axioms given in the those chapters. The point of those two chapters was the practicality of wisdom, God's wisdom and living by wisdom just makes sense in life. It is rational and thoughtful. Now you need to leave that a little behind.

In Ecclesiastes 11 and flowing into Ecclesiastes 12 are the bold strokes of wisdom – entrepreneurial wisdom, wisdom in stark, bold colors. It is challenging and it's this aspect of the Christian life that's not only on the edge and pushes the envelope but is sometimes over the edge and taking a step that doesn't seem to make much sense. Yet when you know how God works in the supra rational nature it makes sense. God is never irrational but He is supra rational. God is never illogical but He is supra logical. That means at times as God leads us we'll do things that are not irrational but they are pressing the envelope. They are bold strokes and decisions in life.

It may show up in marriage, vocation, entrepreneurial efforts in starting businesses as a Christian, or in launching a ministry that God lays upon your heart. It was incredible to see recently how eight ministries associated with the sanctity of life were started by Briarwood members who took a bold step for the Lord. It is exciting to see when members of Christ's body who feel called to start something that reaches others take that bold step. We had an 81 year old retired FBI man who started a ministry that tutored inner city kids that grew in leaps in bounds and many other members joined him in doing it as our church just helped. Every year this man would make an appointment with me telling me that every member of Briarwood ought to be involved in this ministry to inner city kids.

Ecclesiastes 11 shows up in the board directed ministries at Briarwood. It is shown as things that are laid on people's heart are taking things to another level that required a tremendous step of informed faith but bold faith with bold colors for it was entrepreneurial in nature. I have tried to outline chapter 11 for it to make a little more sense. I will walk you through the two propositions which will lead to two observations which will lead to two proposals which will end with two challenges. We'll start with the first proposition which is found in verse 1.

Ecclesiastes 11:1 says *[1] Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.* Some commentators will tell you this doesn't really mean bread but that it's the

grain that makes bread it is referring to and how amazing where the waters will carry it and the harvest it will bring. I think that is a jump we can't make there.

I think it tells us to cast our bread on the waters and then something amazing happens which is that you will find it after many days. In other words, the water currents will carry it away, here and there and soak it and sink it. Then after many days, you will find something that has happened that is extraordinary at times. When I read this the first time I thought about the time I was 8 years old and after church my granddaddy would take my sister and I to this cemetery that had a lake with a lot of geese. We'd take the bread left over from lunch and cast it upon the lake for the geese.

Here the waters are moving and the notion is instead of hoarding it up we are to cast it out. Remember at one time the world was covered with water. Water is life. Cast it out into the waters of life. It's not hard for me to think about taking the Bread of Life, God's Word and I cast it out in my five minute podcast for others to hear and take in or when I preach God's Word every Sunday to those who come to worship. I heard recently from a man who had been driving through Kentucky listening to the Bread of Life on the radio who told me through tears how much it had meant to him. It's amazing what God does with this.

I think it's more than just listening to preaching or reading a devotion or something like that. Bread is the sustenance of life. Around the Mediterranean area bread is everywhere. It's a staple for people in that area eat it all the time. It's so good but do you hoard it up or cast it out upon the waters of life? Cast it out and see what God will do with it. Cast out your finances and see what God will do. I understand all about budgets, savings and all and I'm not saying that's wrong but when something comes in will we cast it out and see how it might be used of the Lord. It's that entrepreneurial spirit of living boldly.

Sometimes we get a few extra loaves that you know you can't eat it all before it goes bad so you have to freeze it and the next thing you know when you want to toast it to eat it, it just loses something. But go beyond bread and think of the sustenance's of life that God puts into your hands – your gifts, abilities, finances, etc. He is talking about living with a lavish generosity, not a thoughtless or stupid generosity but something that pushes the envelope beyond just rational, sensible generosity.

There was a lady in our church who was a great prayer warrior who was the epitome of a Proverbs 31 real estate woman who is now with the Lord but she came to me one day and gave me a hundred dollars. She said to me 'I want you to use this like God leads you.' I took it home that day and put it in a place where I could pray over it that God would multiply it and that God would give us a Fellows Ministry at Briarwood. I'm not saying that was why we got a Fellows Ministry for there are a number of reasons we got it but I'm talking about this woman who at the time was single, living by herself and she certainly could have used that money for herself. This passage is talking about a lavish, generous giving and sharing. What will it look like when we cast it out and what God will do with it?

Then the writer gives another proposition after this in Ecclesiastes 11:2 which says *[2] Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.*

So not only are we to throw it out to life but he is even more specific. Invest in people. Seven is a number of completion so he is saying go even beyond that and give it to eight. Put into people's lives so that there is this diversity that is moving out into life. Again, I think that is how our board directed ministries came into existence.

What does it mean to reach into a business community with intentionality? What about this burgeoning of women in the business community and what would that look like? What does this look like on campuses? Praise God for all the campus ministries at the big state universities but what would happen at a smaller private school or a community college? Who is there that could be reached with the Gospel? What about a medical ministry or fine arts or the performing arts? Let's invest lavishly with people that have gifts and abilities to take things to another level in life and ministry. Not only do we do things decently and with order but let's do things that press the envelope a little bit. Can we send church planters or Bible professors to a nation, like New Zealand and praise God now 20 years later a college, a seminary, a denomination and a burgeoning college ministry is happening.

I hear financial people telling others to develop diverse streams of income. This is some interesting language of today. My mother would have just said 'Just get a couple of jobs, son.' Let's invest in diverse attempts to fulfill the Great Commission and live the Great Commandment. So we have seen his two propositions and now he comes back with two observations. Here is observation number one.

Ecclesiastes 11:3 says *[3] 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.*

Many of us who get ready to do the propositions and we hear something like this, we pray about it, think about it and then the paralysis of analysis happens. What's the weather going to be? It may rain and I don't think we ought to try this if it's raining. At seminary we learned for every drop of rain we lose three attendees at church that Sunday. We better not do anything till we get a forecast of clear weather. By the way, a tree may fall and who knows how it will fall so why don't we just stay home and not tempt the fates.

Observations number one is that we will find multiple reasons not to act, not to give, not to invest. As we look at the circumstances, the weather or possibilities of what could happen and we'll end up having the paralysis of analysis as we come up with all these obstacles. Then the writer follows this observation up with another observation.

Ecclesiastes 11:4–5 says *[4] He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. [5] 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.*

Do you know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb? We do know that God forms that child. We know that child is a living being and that child has a soul which means that child has life. When does that child have life in the womb? We God makes the child living in the womb but do we know the way that God does it? How does He breathe that into them? And so we do not know the work of God who makes everything.

He is telling us that God's ways are not our ways. The observation is the confidence that God will get His work done but His ways are mysterious. God's ways are beyond us. The reason we can live on, out and over the edge is because God doesn't live in our boxes. There is only one thing God can't do. God can't quit being God. He is always consistent with who He is – His attributes, His power. So God who so moves, just as we don't know how that spirit or soul comes into that child in the womb so we don't know all about how God is working all kinds of things.

Recently my podcast devotion Fresh Bread has been in Genesis 40 and 41 where I've been studying the life of Joseph. Joseph is in prison, interprets these two dreams for the baker and the cupbearer and when the cupbearer through the interpretation of the dream was going to

get out of prison, Joseph asked him to remember him when he got out. When the cupbearer gets out he forgets him. Joseph continues two more years in prison and then Pharaoh has a dream and then the cupbearer remembers Joseph and the gift God had given him to interpret dreams. The cupbearer tells Pharaoh to call on Joseph because he would tell him the truth about his dreams – good and bad. Pharaoh tells Joseph his two dreams and Joseph tells him the two are one and it has been given to you in two to let you know God has fixed it.

The two dreams have to do with a 14 year period of 7 years of famine and 7 of plenty but the famine will be so bad that it eats up what is left over from the years of fullness but they will survive. Joseph tells him how to go about handling this by saying he will need to tax the people 20 percent while there is the 7 years of fullness so they can be fed during the 7 years of famine. He also told him that he needed someone who was wise to oversee all that. Pharaoh looks at Joseph and says ‘You have the Spirit of God in you. Here’s my signet ring for your vice president now. The only person you have to answer to is me and everyone else will have to answer to you.’ I don’t think Pharaoh is converted but I think by God’s common grace he has enough sense to see the witness of God in his life. Weren’t we kind of upset with that cupbearer?

God was working on this and He didn’t just want Joseph to get out of prison because he got it right for a cupbearer for God wanted him to be vice president of Egypt because God has some plans for His nation that is going to be brought down there. God has a plan for these 14 years. We don’t understand because we can’t multitask but God can and God does. God’s ways are mysterious and beyond us. They are never irrational but supra rational, never illogical but supra logical. God’s work is mysterious but yet God’s work is assured. He will accomplish His purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar in his self-exaltation ended up like an animal in a field for seven years but then it says in Daniel 4:34–35, *[34] At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever or his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; [35] all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”*

To have a right world and life view you have to know how big God is. God’s ways are beyond our ways. God’s work is beyond our work and we don’t know the way of His working and He is working many times when we think He has forgotten but He is always on time. He is always doing things at the right time, in the right way and accomplishing His purposes. These two observations are then followed up by two proposals.

Ecclesiastes 11:6–7 says *[6] 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. [7] Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.*

Here he is telling us to embrace a work ethic that gives you an enjoyment in life. So when the sun is up in the morning you sow your seed. The sun is still up in the afternoon so you still sow your seed. Which one will bear fruit? Maybe now both of them will. Work throughout the day for He has given us six days to labor but remember God has given a day of rest. So while it’s light and the light is sweet then engage in the endeavors of life. There may be multiple endeavors but enjoy life and enjoy work in life. Work is not a curse, it’s a blessing.

For those who think of retirement, I would encourage you to think of retreadment. It’s okay to finish up with a certain job but then go do something else. As one preacher said ‘Do not fossilize in Florida.’ Do not spend the rest of your life picking up conch shells. I have to confess

I loved living in Florida the three years I was there. But I do like what one preacher said; ‘Seems like Florida is the place for newlyweds and nearly dead.’ As long as God has given you life and movement proportionate to the movement you can do, go do something and don’t go die in a pile.

I spy on some of you men who have retired. I keep an eye on you because my wife has a little circuit called the bank, post office, Walmart, Publix, Piggly Wiggly and then back home. She will tell me who she sees in that circuit. She sees the men of this church that say they are retired but have their own little schedule at Walmart, Piggly Wiggly and Publix. You are out there going because your wife probably told you she signed on for breakfast and dinner but not lunch so go find something to do.

There is one man in our church who is a retired lawyer who is going to five different ministries in our church to see which one he can give his leadership skills to in order to take to another level. He is beginning to explore it. In other words, God has plundered the Egyptians and given him His support package and now he is going to use his skills and abilities in ministry. So embrace work throughout the day and throughout life for it is a blessing in life.

There are two things that I think we don’t appreciate that we ought to appreciate until we are providentially hindered from it. One is the blessing of work and the other is the blessing of gathered worship. The other day I saw a dear member of this church who lately had not been able to come due to some physical issues and he was just sitting there as tears were rolling down his face. He said to me ‘Pastor, I’m so grateful for the radio but you have no idea how much I have missed being with God’s people to praise His name.’ Worship and work is something that ought to occupy us and one of the ways you worship is to do your work heartily as unto the Lord. Let’s continue in the text.

Ecclesiastes 11:8 says [8] *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 is coming a time of darkness when man’s work is done. You while it’s day be engaged in the works.

Proposal number one is get involved in multiple endeavors with your ability to worship and work. Proposal number two is cease the day, the waking hours, fully. To the years of your youth to the years of your age cease them and use them all of the days of your life.

Then the writer concludes with these two challenges found in Ecclesiastes 11:9 which says [9] *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.*

He challenges you to make use of all the days of your life and don’t waste the years of your youth. He is not telling you to do what our culture is doing now which is to make idolatry of youth or worship youth. Some of us worship youth to the point of trying to stay young as older people try to look like they are still around 25 years of age and these people end up looking like comics and clowns. Let’s just dress our age and look our age for it’s honorable. You have two choices with your wrinkles. Either eat a lot of food and fill them up or rejoice that they’re there because they tell people you have lived life and God has taught you things throughout life. Take hold of your youth and use it but in your older age cease that day as well. There is so much you can do.

I love to talk with parents and their children who are getting ready to go off to college because the next four years of their life they will have so many opportunities. They will have opportunities to build habits in their life that will steady them the rest of their life – make them

good and not bad. There will be the opportunities to make friends that will stay with you for life. When I go back to Charlotte, North Carolina at least once a year I have a few people I see that I have been friends with since I was 7 years old. We played ball when all you had was a water hose to drink from and not all these purified water bottles. We survived it somehow. These young people will have opportunities to read all kinds of things, explore things, to be taught and cease moments of education.

Don't waste your youth for it's a glorious time, but then when it leaves you don't idolize it. Now take hold of the wisdom of years and life and use that in your life as well. Then we see the last challenge in the last verse of the chapter.

Ecclesiastes 11:10 says *[10] Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.*

It's interesting how he tells us to take hold of our youth for it's a glorious time and then when you get older, get rid of pain, take a couple of aspirin. Then take hold of the older part of your life and don't idolize for that's vexation. But whatever you do, don't let the circumstances of life, youth or age, define you. Live life because your life is not your age, it's the Lord. Live that season of life for the Lord.

There are three men in the Old Testament that really overwhelm me and I'm trying to find their sin somewhere for I know they're sinners. They are Job, Daniel and Joseph. Here is one of the things I love about Joseph. His brothers put him in a pit and he is sold into slavery. When he goes into slavery he becomes the best slave Potiphar ever had. He was such a good slave that Potiphar put him in charge of everything. Joseph didn't wallow in bitterness which is really drinking poison thinking you're going to kill the person you're mad at yet it actually kills you. That is why forgiveness is so wonderful. Let the Lord hold their account for you don't need to hold it.

Joseph just turned his brothers over to the Lord and became a great slave to Potiphar. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and Joseph said 'I won't sin against my master or your marriage or my God.' So what happened? She put a charge against him that wasn't true, but Potiphar believed his wife and Joseph was put into jail. I would have died in a puddle of self-pity right then if I were Joseph. Joseph becomes the best prisoner the captain of the guard ever had and the captain put him in charge of the whole prison. Then he began to minister to the cupbearer and the baker. I probably would have told them to just handle their own problems. When they came to Joseph he was ready to minister to them and did. Then when they forgot about him Joseph just kept on for two more years of faithfulness.

Pharaoh is now going to come to Joseph. Joseph will end up being the best vice president Egypt ever had. Then God will set him up to take care of the people of God, no longer a family to become a nation as God prepares them to go back to the Promised Land 400 years later. Joseph's circumstances never defined him with vexation. He put his confidence in the Lord. The Lord was bigger than the circumstance and his next step was for the Lord in how he lived his life.

It's that kind of life that I would ask God to give us. A life that is bold, entrepreneurial, generous, lavish, no paralysis, ceasing every moment not for the moment and not for ourselves but for the Lord. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You so much for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to walk our way through this absolutely astounding book of Ecclesiastes. I confess my

sense of inadequacies with it but I'm also thankful for the things that You unfold. Would You feed Your people even as we have come to it today and continue to grow us to live with wisdom that is sensible in light of the truth of Your Word and with wisdom that is bold and pressing the issues of life because we know the God of the Word for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

WISDOM WITH BOLD STROKES

- Two Propositions
- Two Observations
- Two Proposals
- Two Challenges