

# The Sweet Life

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10 December 4, 2024

If you look up what are the most satisfying careers, *Teacher* always makes the list, sometimes in the number 1 spot. Why then are teachers "nearly three times as likely to experience symptoms of depression than the general adult population?"<sup>1</sup> Researchers have found "that educators have worse well-being on all five of the indicators in [their] survey."

How does that compute? The world says, "Do this and you'll be satisfied." But when we look at people in that group, a *majority* of them experience deep unhappiness day in and day out. It's because an *external* pursuit cannot ultimately satisfy our *internal* needs.

This is the *hevel* of life that *our* Teacher in Ecclesiastes has been lecturing about for the last ten chapters. Sin has ruined a good thing in this world, and now we're up against the futility of mortal life, which is bounded by time, death, and chance. So what should we do? What hope do we have?

The Teacher has given us an unvarnished look life in this world. Honestly, it hasn't been a pretty sight. We've seen unfairness and disappointments and tragedy and absurdity and the ever-looming specter of death. But rather than give in to despair, the Teacher will show us a way forward. We're very close to the end of his lecture, which culminates in a forceful and direct conclusion: Fear God and keep His commands knowing every act you commit has eternal weight.

"But, wait," we might say, "I thought life was *hevel* - a wisp of smoke you can't hold onto?" What good is it to try to fear God when reality under-the-sun works to undermine every aspect of life?

This is where chapters 11 and 12 come in. They are full of proverbs which show us the way toward the proper end. Guideposts which point the way to a joyful and satisfied life *even under the sun*.

Like all proverbs, they are general in nature - they aren't guarantees. They're *proverbs* not *promises*. But, as we internalize and apply them, we are more able to receive life as God intends to give it and become more and more fruitful as we walk in the fear of God.

**Ecclesiastes 11:1 - Send your bread on the surface of the water, for after many days you may find it.**

Commentators are super divided over whether the Teacher is talking about industry or philanthropy in these verses. Is he talking to us about wise investments or generosity to those in need? You can make the case either way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-are-more-likely-to-experience-depression-symptoms-than-other-adults/2021/06>

The Teacher hasn't been terribly philanthropic in his teachings, so perhaps he really just wants to instruct us about diversifying our investments. In your Bible, the heading of this text probably says something like, "Invest in life," or, "The value of diligence," or "Invest in many ventures."

Generally speaking, it's wise not to put all your eggs in one basket. But what about those scholars who say he's actually talking about being generous? The idea is, "Hey, give to as many people as you can, because one day the tides may turn and *you* may need help." That's not a bad idea, but is it *really* generosity if you're doing it in order to be owed favors from other people? Either way, there's wisdom here. Manage the resources you have with forethought *and* generosity.

But let's step back and think about this with a wider lens. We are New Testament Christians with the full counsel of God. We are *different* than the original audience, which was probably court officials in Solomon's administration.

The Lord calls us into all sorts of careers and activities, but all for His glory and His purposes. God wants Christian businessmen and laborers as much as He wants vocational missionaries or Bible teachers. He calls His people to be scholars and sergeants, worship leaders and window washers.

But, no matter what our calling is, we have common perspective and common goals. For us, "investment" is always supposed to be oriented toward God's Kingdom and toward people. So, even if God has called you to be a very successful venture capitalist, the underlying catalyst should be a desire to glorify God and bless others and further the Kingdom. But there are a *lot* of ways to do those things.

So, since this is the reality we now live in as people who get to set our minds on things *above*, we should be wise with our resources *and* we should be generous toward others.

**Ecclesiastes 11:2 - <sup>2</sup>Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you don't know what disaster may happen on earth.**

When the Bible does this kind of mathematical formula, "to seven or even to eight..." it doesn't usually mean a literal number. It means an ongoing, indefinite mentality. We can paraphrase verse 2 this way: "*Be generous to as many as you can and then some.*"<sup>2</sup>

This is *not* demanding that we all become penniless ascetics. It says give a *portion*. But, it's a good reminder that, throughout the Bible, God's people are encouraged and commanded to be generous people.

Most of us have a harder time being generous than we do being miserly or greedy. Sometimes we talk ourselves out of giving. We make decisions like, "I *never* give money to the homeless because they only spend it on bad stuff."

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*

I get it. And we shouldn't be foolish with the resources God gives us. But look at the image here: We see a person casting bread on water. He doesn't know where it's going to go or who is going to get it. There should be a liberality in the way we give to the needy and give to the Lord's work.

People ask, "Do Christians have to tithe?" And, generally, the issue is, "I really don't want to give 10% of my income because that's a lot, so what do I *have* to do?" But the Bible presents a relational perspective on giving - one founded in love for God and love for others. "*Seven or even to eight.*"

But our giving is not just about money. What is the *best portion* we can give to others? The Bible often points out that *the Lord* is our portion.<sup>3</sup> So give *Him* as much as you can to others. "Silver and gold I have not, but what I *do* have, I give you."<sup>4</sup> We should be *generous* with the Gospel.

**Ecclesiastes 11:3 - <sup>3</sup>If the clouds are full, they will pour out rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or the north, the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.**

We were in Yosemite a few weeks ago and as we walked we heard a tremendous cracking sound. One of the great big trees had fallen over a few hundred yards from us.

As Derek Kidner points out, this tree did not ask if it was a convenient time or place for it to fall.<sup>5</sup> Had we been standing near it, we would've had a *much* different day.

We cannot control or predict the *hevel* world. When we *try* to control things, we just embarrass ourselves and *sometimes* we end up making some futility of our own.

The UAE was in the news awhile back because they did some cloud seeding and shortly after, they got two-and-a-half years worth of rainfall in 24 hours. It caused serious flooding.<sup>6</sup> Experts argue over how much impact the seeding had, but it certainly didn't work out the way they wanted.

**Ecclesiastes 11:4 - <sup>4</sup>One who watches the wind will not sow, and the one who looks at the clouds will not reap.**

Wait, you just told us to look up at a cloud! The Teacher's whole point is to help us navigate life under the sun in a way that leads to joy and eternal advantage. He did the research so we can walk in wisdom. He says, "Listen - you can't control a *lot* of factors in life. Don't be worried about *control*, instead focus on your *conduct*. How are *you* living life? What are *you* spending your life on?"

Don't wait for circumstances to be perfect before you live the life God has given you. If we wait for every condition to be just right before we step out in faith or try a new venture or pursue our calling, we're going to be paralyzed and we'll never get anything done. Live your life. Walk by faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 73:26

<sup>4</sup> Acts 3:6

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner *Ecclesiastes: A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-68839043>

Douglas Miller writes, “*The rain came (or will come), the tree fell (or will fall). You just need to get to work.*”<sup>7</sup> That is especially true when we bring these images into the spiritual realm. For the Christian, sowing and reaping always have a Gospel connotation. The encouragement is for us to be about our Master’s business even if conditions aren’t ideal. Share the Gospel. Preach the Word. Try to develop opportunities to witness or minister or shine as a light in the dark. Sow and reap.

**Ecclesiastes 11:5 - <sup>5</sup>Just as you don’t know the path of the wind, or how bones develop in the womb of a pregnant woman, so also you don’t know the work of God who makes everything.**

There’s a *lot* of disagreement over how exactly this verse should be rendered. In the Septuagint, the wind refers to the breeze outside. But, in the Targum and Vulgate, it’s translated as the spirit of a person being put into a human life by God.<sup>8</sup>

Commentators will argue forever, but it’s more likely the Teacher was referring to the spirit of a person, not just the blowing of the wind.<sup>9</sup>

We don’t understand how God brings an eternal spirit into a little human embryo, but He does! Solomon’s main point is that we shouldn’t try to outguess God.<sup>10</sup> And He *is* working, so as we live we should be careful not to outpace Him as we make life decisions. That’s always a mistake.

But pause and realize this truth: From the moment of your conception, God has been *Personally*, actively, intimately working in your life. You are not an accident. You are not just a clump of cells. You are not a mass of chemicals. You are one of the most valuable creatures in His universe. He breathed life into you, He made you into His image, a living spirit housed in a body of flesh.

Which is more valuable, an ant or your puppy? You are worth more than *many* sparrows.<sup>11</sup> We must cherish and defend the value of human life. And be encouraged by the fact that the God of the universe, Who took the time to knit you together in your mother’s womb is *still* working in your life.

**Ecclesiastes 11:6 - <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.**

Sometimes Hollywood will remake a franchise and they’ll call it a “gritty reboot.” One of the points of this chapter is that the Teacher wants us to have *grit*. That doesn’t mean we should be dour or cranky all the time - quite the contrary - but we should be realistic and resilient and persistent in life. Not quitters. Not complainers. Not slackers.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

<sup>8</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Targum is an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible. The Vulgate is a Latin translation of the whole Bible.

<sup>9</sup> See Eaton. Also consider how Jesus seemed to refer to this verse in John 3:8, tying the idea to spiritual rebirth.

<sup>10</sup> Kidner

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 10:31

Now, he doesn't mean here that we have to work 24 hours a day to exhaustion. He means we can be enterprising *any* time, not *all* the time.<sup>12</sup> Again, let's bring this into the Christian life. Opportunities to be used by God can happen any time. Peter encourages us to always be ready to share the truth with others.<sup>13</sup>

Philip Ryken summarizes the mindset the Teacher is talking about and says, "*So work hard for the kingdom of God. Live boldly and creatively. Try something new! Be a spiritual entrepreneur. Even if you are not completely sure what will work, try everything you can to serve Christ in a world that desperately needs the gospel.*"<sup>14</sup>

Research shows that these days, Americans are less generous, less entrepreneurial, less productive, doing less DIY projects, moving less, are less active, reading fewer books, are getting married less, and having fewer children.

Life should not be *less* among Christians. In fact, Hebrews tells us that we should meet all the more together, that we should *provoke* each other to more love and more good works as we see the day approaching.<sup>15</sup> What has God called you to do? Do you have a dream of doing something, not a selfish dream but a way to honor the Lord and minister to the world around you? Maybe it's in the world of business, maybe it's in more formal Gospel ministry. The Teacher is telling you to do what you can with what you have and see what happens. Try it. Develop it. Sow and reap.

**Ecclesiastes 11:7-8 - <sup>7</sup>Light is sweet, and it is pleasing for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, if someone lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, since they will be many. All that comes is futile.**

So here we see the Teacher isn't telling us to be spiritual workaholics. Your baseline experience should generally be *joy*. Rejoicing. Deep, internal satisfaction. Even though life comes standard with difficulty and suffering - days of darkness. Even still, the life God gives His people is good and joyous and full of value.

The Teacher wants us to enjoy life, but as one commentator notes, "Life does not yield up its joys easily."<sup>16</sup> That's why you don't automatically get satisfaction by choosing teaching as a career, right? Because real fulfillment comes from a relationship with God your Creator and Savior Who overcomes the futility of this world, Who works all things together for good for those who love Him.

Meanwhile, if you find yourself in one of those days of darkness, or maybe years of darkness - if you're suffering or struggling tonight, the Lord knows and He cares and He *is* working. And we can take some comfort in the fact that the suffering of this life is also fleeting *hevel*. It will soon be over

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<sup>12</sup> Miller

<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>14</sup> Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25

<sup>16</sup> Eaton

and replaced with a glorious eternity where there is no pain, no suffering, no disappointment or defeat. Where there will *only* be light. There is no dark of night in heaven.<sup>17</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 11:9 - <sup>9</sup>Rejoice, young person, while you are young, and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth. And walk in the ways of your heart and in the desire of your eyes; but know that for all of these things God will bring you to judgment.**

We can rejoice when we're old and we can rejoice when we're young. It's a mindset.

To you young people, the Teacher says, "Have fun. Enjoy your life. Be silly." But wait, did he just say "Follow your heart?" Didn't we just learn about *not* following our hearts in the last passage? Well, look at how the verse closes.

The Teacher isn't suggesting that God is a bogeyman Who is laying in wait to entrap you or get mad at you for having a little fun in life. Ecclesiastes tells young people to truly enjoy life by having the right *understanding* of life. All the alcohol ads have that simple disclaimer at the bottom: Enjoy responsibly. In a much more meaningful way, *that's* what the Teacher is saying. Your life is a gift given to you by God. So, enjoy life responsibly. Enjoy life knowing that you are going to live forever and the things you do have eternal weight and consequence.

If you understand life as it really is, then you will be motivated to live in the fear of God. And then you'll be able to *truly* enjoy life. You'll lay hold of what the world offers but can't deliver.

**Ecclesiastes 11:10 - <sup>10</sup>Remove sorrow from your heart, and put away pain from your flesh, because youth and the prime of life are fleeting.**

The Teacher is telling us to get rid of anxiety, resentment, anger, irritation.<sup>18</sup> Now, that's sometimes easier said than done. But his point is a heart full of these things is going to seriously hamper the production of joy in our lives. What *can* I do to weed out these attitudes? I can't just give up and say, "Well, this is how I feel, this is how things are, so I guess my life is just full of sorrow now."

When he talks about getting rid of pain in your flesh (your version may say 'evil'), it goes without saying that we should get rid of wicked activities that damage our bodies. But he also means if you *can* get healthier, if you *can* take care of that sickness or injury or physical problem through medical means, then do it. It's not more spiritual to be afflicted.

The bottom line is: A joyful life starts from the heart and moves out. Joy doesn't start with the circumstances and then soak into the heart and mind. Proverbs 15 says, "A joyful heart makes a face cheerful, but a sad heart produces a broken spirit."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21:25

<sup>18</sup> Eaton

<sup>19</sup> Proverbs 15:13

You young people, cultivate a cheerful heart now. Because one day your youth *will* be gone. You'll no longer be in your prime. Your vitality will slip away. And that's what the next set of proverbs are about - the twilight of life.

No matter *what* phase we're in, the good life *is* within our reach. Despite what the bumper stickers say, life is a gift to be *enjoyed* and *employed*. Rather than try to control things or be vexed over what we can't control, we should focus on our *conduct* in light of God's eternal judgment. And we should enthusiastically pursue life to the full, with the fear of God directing and motivating us.

As far as the Teacher is concerned, a person who fears God will have a satisfied life. Not without difficulty or sadness, but defined by joy. Full of activity of many sorts. Generous and industrious and resourceful and even silly. A life not defined by the sullen, *do-less-ness*<sup>20</sup> we see in the culture around us, but a life defined by the more-abundantly-ness God promises to give. You don't have to go find the "most fulfilling" career. Instead, you fear God and receive the incredible gift of life He wants to give you and then you'll find fulfillment in whatever career or situation or opportunity He calls you to.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-americans-dont-exercise-mental-health-crisis-depression-anxiety-fitness-2024-6>

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/10/progress-doesnt-always-mean-movement-says-harvard-study-of-daily-exercise/>

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