

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:7

The Preacher Proclaims the Meaning of Life to the Youth of the Church

A. Guide yourself to your own Divine Calling

We might summarize chapter 11:1-6 as follows: "Do your work despite everything, even though it appears senseless and aimless." Whoever casts his bread (that is, his life) upon the waters, risks his life, his existence. (cf. the previous outline, 10:8ff, about the taking of risks.) The question arises: what is the use of that? But that is just what work in God's church and kingdom is. The idea of office is inherent in this again (cf. 9:10). The Shepherd of Israel guarantees that the believer will find the fruit of his toil after many days (cf. 12:11 with Matthew 16:25-28). In fact the "vanity of vanities" is again broken here, as it was earlier in the book. Even as early as The Teacher's days the knowledge that the promised Messiah would come, that God would judge righteously and that wisdom would win, confirmed to the believers that the so-called vicious circle never really existed. Man must begin faithfully with his calling. This also means: do not put all your eggs in one basket.

In God's kingdom you must not only take risks, but also spread the risk for the good cause. If you do not work with wisdom, then everything can turn out wrong, and what happened is past (v. 3). The mandate remains - one must work! Verse 5 does not only say that God keeps his decree hidden, from us, but also that his decree continues, right through our actions of faith, even though we cannot discover his ways from the beginning to the end (cf. 3:11). Because God works towards the end, the church member must tackle everything, and not start one project while leaving the rest. We can hope for God's blessing over everything, despite injustice and oppression, can we not (vv. 6 and 7)? This is also the meaning of v. 8: work while it is day (cf. John 9:4).

B. Rejoice in your Youth

The youth in the church are explicitly addressed now, even though The Teacher had them in mind right from the beginning, just as every preacher does! Are the youth in the church not supposed to carry the torch? They will be unable to do that if the spirit of The Teacher, the Holy Spirit, is foreign to them. The Teacher points to the fact that you are only young once (11:9) and that youth is the time for enjoyment and being cheerful. Seize the day and enjoy life as long as the lamp shines! This is meant seriously, and not ironically, as some have supposed (Staten Vertaling, notes)¹. This theme appears throughout the book (2:24ff; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; etc. In v. 9 The Teacher does not think of the evil lusts of your heart, of course (cf. 7:29). This is apparent from his devastating criticism of folly, which appears to win everything. He did not even have to say that! He also draws our attention to the coming judgment which will come upon the whole world. The advent congregation of the old (and new) covenant can only find true happiness in the Messiah who comes and will come.

¹ *Ed. Note:* The author is referring to the notes appended to the authorized Dutch version of the Bible (1637) by its translators.

Therefore, The Teacher's remarks do not state: "on the one hand..., but on the other hand..." Nor should one construe them as promoting an equilibrium: be cheerful and also think of the messianic age which comes. In that way you divide your life into two irreconcilable parts.

The matter is simple if we leave joy in the context in which The Teacher puts it: joy is a gift, a present from God. But with God a gift is never without a mandate. What is discussed here in part B, cannot be looked at apart from what was just said in part A, nor from what will be mentioned in part C. They go together. The Teacher says to the covenant community: dare to live, joyful and free, IN the communion of saints. That is what God has insisted on for a long time already (9:7). Outside of it is no joy.

C. And Remember your Creator

Because we are only young once, we must use our youthful vigour in the service of our Creator, before the evil days come, "and the pitcher is shattered at the spring." The mention of the "Creator" is an emphatic reference to chapter 7:29 and shows that The Teacher refers back to the mandate given in paradise (3:10; 9:10; etc.). It also proves that the Creator has heard the whole creation sigh and has seen everyone in travail. Whoever remains faithful to the Creator, works towards the completion of his plan, the renewal of all things. The union of alpha and omega (3:11) lies in the present, where the advent congregation and her children serve with joy.

Chapter 12:1ff. must be explained allegorically even though there are several possible explanations (see Prof. Aalders²). Verse 7 corresponds with Genesis 2:7 and 3:9, as well as Ecclesiastes 3:21 and 5:15. The emphasis remains on v. 1. Remember your Creator means: Continue to serve him faithfully in the covenant (the covenant as given in creation!) and follow him on the way he goes with his church, even though it is incomprehensible to you. The description of a pathetic old age is to inspire the young people still more to faithfulness to their God, the Shepherd of Israel. Would we give our young people the strength to sin, and their consumed energy to God (assuming this were possible)?

Questions

1. Does The Teacher only begin to think of the youth of the church in chapter 11:9?
2. Why is there so little real enjoyment of life, so little pleasure in our daily work? For many people, life is living one's life to the full. What do you think of that? (cf. John 17:3.)
3. Is Ecclesiastes 11:9 in conflict with Numbers 15:39, or with 1 John 2:15-17?

² *Ed. Note:* The author refers to the volume on Ecclesiastes in the Dutch Bible commentary, *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*. See footnote 2, *supra*

4. What do you think of Augustine's word: love God and then do whatever you like? (cf. Article 12 of the Belgic Confession.)
5. Is it true that a man can always turn to God when it pleases him? Is there not an acceptable time for everyone (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:2; Ecclesiastes 10:11)? How many lives have not been ruined (also young people's lives) because they did not perceive and ward off the threatening danger in time?
6. What is the calling of the young people of Christ's church? Mention some examples.
7. How does the Heidelberg Catechism speak of the death of God's children?
8. Today a secularized Christianity tries to make death a conscious deed of charity: making place for another (Prof. Kuitert³). What is your opinion on that?
Would the fact that people talk more about the comfort of the dying today than about the only comfort in life and death, be relevant in this context?

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³ *Ed. Note:* A Dutch theologian in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (syn.) at the Free University in Amsterdam.