

525. Explain what is meant by the statement: “*Prudence* is sufficient for one to refrain from lifting a voice against the king.”
526. Why refer to a “bird” and “winged creatures” when speaking of words spoken in private?

F. EXHORTATIONS TO WORK IN HARMONY WITH WISDOM 11:1—12:8

1. Trust God and be cheerful in all of your activities. 11:1-8

TEXT 11:1-8

- 1 Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.
- 2 Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.
- 3 If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies.
- 4 He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.
- 5 Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.
- 6 Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.
- 7 The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.
- 8 Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. Everything that is to come will be futility.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 11:1-8

395. After reading this section (verses one-eight), list at least five principles on stewardship which are taught here.
396. What is meant by the figure of speech which states "Cast your bread upon the surface of the waters"?
397. Is benevolence taught in verse two? Explain.
398. Identify the arguments used to establish the fact that one should plant his crops regardless of the weather signs.
399. Give evidence that weather is under the control of God.
400. What two things should a man do if he lives a long time (verse eight)?

PARAPHRASE 11:1-8

Do not be afraid to send forth your merchandise upon the waters in commercial trade—you will surely have a good return although you may have to wait a long time. Divide into portions what you have—seven or even eight parts—as you know not what evil will come on the earth. If clouds are full of rain, they will empty themselves upon the earth. If the wind blows from either the north or south and blows the tree over, in the place where the tree falls, there it remains. Since these illustrations speak to truth, one cannot afford to be too cautious or wait too long to sow. If you wait until all weather conditions are just exactly right before you sow, you will never reap a crop. You do not know the path the wind follows or the way bones are formed in the womb of a pregnant woman. Neither do you know how God works in all the things He does. Therefore, sow your seed from daylight until dark for you have no way of discovering at this time whether the morning or the evening sowing will produce the best harvest. Perhaps both the morning and evening sowing will be good. Indeed the light of day is sweet! It is very pleasant for one to work in the sunshine. If you are fortunate to live many years in the sunlight, rejoice in them all. One thing you can be certain of—the days of darkness will be many: all that lies ahead is emptiness and futility.

COMMENT 11:1-8

To teach through precepts and proverbs was characteristic of the wise men of Solomon's day. He includes himself in this category (12:9). In what is considered among the most beautiful language in the Bible, the Preacher now turns to his final advice. He urges his readers to trust God and work hard! He demonstrates a concern for the happiness of others (note the difference in attitude from that found in 2:1-11), and urges wise industry, combined with pleasure, before old age makes such activity impossible.

This division, which includes verses one through seven of chapter twelve with chapter eleven, is accepted by most modern commentators. The emphasis is thrilling and exciting: Give of your substance and yourself; above all, make the most of your youth. Enjoy. How badly youth need this lesson today. There is no curtailment from God on approved pleasure. No somber, spiritual straight jacket for the believer. "Rejoice," "let your heart be pleasant," "remove vexation," "put away pain," "follow the impulses of your heart and desires of your eyes" are all admonitions to enjoy life. Just remember, the Preacher warns, "God will bring you to judgment." The spirit of this final section under discussion is that one should find the work and happiness which God approves and pursue it with all his strength.

vs. 1-2 These two verses should be considered together. It is possible that the second verse is an explanation of the metaphor in verse one. However, the exact meaning of both verses is much contested. It is highly improbable that the actual meaning and application can be made with any certainty. No less than six distinct explanations have been offered by commentators. Some are so fanciful that they do not merit consideration.¹ The two views which are most generally held are:

¹ For a review of the various interpretations of these two verses, one should study the two following sections:

George A. Barton. *The International Critical Commentary: The Book of Ecclesiastes*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), pp. 181-183.

George A. Buttrick (ed.). *The Interpreter's Bible*, V. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 81-82.

(1) The traditional Jewish view holds that the lesson is one of charity, and that one's benevolence should be practiced freely without a view to personal return. There is the awareness, however, that should one give freely of his substance, in due season a substantial gain will be forthcoming. (2) The other interpretation encourages the daily pursuit of labor, resigning oneself to the providence of God's certain control and promise of future reward.

The image of a trading ship is understood as the meaning of "cast your bread on the surface of the waters." "Cast" means "send forth" and coincides with a merchant sending forth his ships laden with trade goods. One does not know when the ship will return. Often large periods of time lapsed before the ship arrived at home port with goods in trade. Solomon practiced such ventures as it is recorded of him that "the king had at sea the ships of Tarshish with the ships of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver ivory and apes and peacocks" (I Kings 10:22). (Cf. Proverbs 31:14) The idea is that just as the ship returns to reward the one who sent it forth, so God will restore generously the one who demonstrates compassion upon others. A beautiful description of this principle was written by Solomon. He said, "He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed" (Proverbs 19:17).

The division into seven parts suggests in the metaphor that one is wise if he does not trust his entire fortune to one ship. The idea is to help many different people. The additional thought of the "eight" divisions may imply an unlimited number and could be expressed by "seven and *more*." This would be making friends "for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16:9). As one would say today, it is unwise "putting all one's eggs in the same basket." The "misfortune" is thus understood to be an evil that results in loss of possessions or friends, and since one has helped numerous individuals, when his time of need is apparent, help will be forthcoming.

If the saying "Cast your bread on the surface of the waters"

is taken at face value, it would mean that one freely and generously distributes his riches to those in need. It carries the idea of doing good without hope of gratitude or return. (Cf. Luke 6:32-35) Although the motive is pure there is the promise that "you will find it after many days." As Ranston said, "Be generous, do not be narrow in your liberality; even on the thankless waters scatter broadcast the seeds of kindness; be sure that sooner or later you will be rewarded."²

What if the Preacher's intention is not to teach benevolence? What other lesson is justified by these two verses? Assuming continuity in the writing of Ecclesiastes, which has been consistently demonstrated, a close study of the context suggests that the subject at hand is the same subject discussed in chapter ten and obviously pursued in verses three through six of chapter eleven. What is this subject? It is the idea that the way of wisdom is superior to the way of the fool. Although one cannot control the acts of nature (God) or the evil misfortunes produced by fools (sometimes rulers) there is the admonition in the midst of it all to simply trust God—there are certain things one neither knows nor controls which may have tremendous effects upon his life, yet he must work with all his might and commit himself to God's providential care. The figure of speech—"Cast your bread on the surface of the waters"—need not be restricted to a single aspect of one's work or labor. Let it speak to the total picture of industry. Let it encompass charity, but allow more than this. If one's life is lived in its totality according to the righteous rules and principles preached by Koheleth in his book, then the reward will assuredly come to him "after many days."

Verse two is simply an admonition to be wise in various activities of life. Allow wisdom to prepare one for the unexpected misfortunes of life which are beyond control. Note how the following verses fortify this argument.

v. 3 One law of God which alters man's activities upon the

² Harry Ranston. *Ecclesiastes and Early Greek Wisdom Literature*. (London: Epworth Press, 1925), p. 40.

earth, and over which man has absolutely no control, is the fact that when "the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth." A similar example of the same principle is seen in the fact that a tree remains where it falls. E. M. Zerr comments: "This verse is to be considered especially in connection with the last clause of the preceding verse. The laws of nature are fixed so that man should make use of present opportunities for doing good, before some action of nature (which is unseen and unavoidable) cuts off the opportunity."³

Man may fret or even suffer over too much rain or too little, but he cannot control it. The tree falls very likely from the blowing of the wind. Note the use of "south" and "north" in this verse as well as in chapter one verse six. The tree could have been a fruit tree in full bloom or a much desired shade tree, but man does not prevent its destruction. The following verse describes how wise men act under such circumstances. One must admit to conditions of life which are beyond his control.

v. 4 The admonition which states, "whatever your hands find to do, verily, do it with all your might" (9:10), is not heeded by the one who excessively worries over matters he cannot control. Under all circumstances one should do the very best work he can and let God care for him. The wind may threaten to blow away the seeds at sowing time, and the clouds threaten to drop heavy rains to damage or destroy the harvest. (Cf. I Samuel 12:7; Proverbs 26:1) However, one must employ wise judgment, not fear or inactivity under such circumstances. There is no assurance for the farmer who does the best he can, but he does something.

Some see in the verse a broader application than literal sowing and reaping which would have special meaning for farmers. Luther said it pertains "in general to all human activity, but especially to charity." Delitzsch said, "The cultivation of the land is the prototype of all labor."⁴ (Cf. Genesis 2:15b) The

³ E. M. Zerr. *Bible Commentary*, III (Marion, Indiana: Cogdill Foundation Publications, 1954), p. 224.

⁴ Delitzsch. *op. cit.*, p. 395.

principle established in verse one and amplified in these verses is applicable to many situations, but it serves the purpose of the Preacher's reasoning to view it in the context of the farmer who is always watching the skies and fails to sow his crop.

v. 5 The Preacher is still discussing "the activity of God." One should not stumble over the difficulty of understanding the first part of this verse and miss the obvious. There are two examples presented in the verse which illustrate the mysterious activities of God in nature. The point is made that one can not know what God does. This truth has been previously demonstrated. (Cf. 1:13; 3:10, 11; 8:17)

One difficulty is presented by the fact that the word translated "wind" (*ruach*) may also be translated "spirit." However, the wind has just been under consideration (verse four), and this could very well be a reflection of this same truth. We know, too, that Jesus discussed the subject in John 3:18 where He observed that the wind blows where it wishes but man doesn't know where it is going or where it came from. If the "wind" is misunderstood to be the true meaning, then there are two distinct illustrations.

On the other hand, if *ruach* is to be translated "spirit," then there is but one illustration as the "spirit" and "bones formed in the womb" would speak to the mysterious "making" of a baby—a mystery which even today baffles modern science. (Cf. Psalms 139:13-16)

Regardless of which interpretation is preferred, neither the essence nor the application of the lesson is changed. The point is that *man does not know* the activity of God.

"Who makes all things" does not speak to the total universe but rather specifically to things mentioned here such as wind and bones in the womb. Zerr observes, "The lesson still is that man should make use of present and known advantages, not waiting to figure out the ways of God as to the future."⁵

v. 6 The Preacher continues to admonish toward hard work.

⁵ Zerr. *op. cit.*, p. 224.

The positive emphasis "sow your seed," and the negative warning, "do not be idle," clearly demonstrates his intention. Repetition is a technique used in effective preaching. Restating this theme (Cf. verses three-four) is like hitting the same nail repeatedly until it is well-fastened (12:11). The specific explanation is found once again in the figure of the farmer who must work from morning until night, and in addition must trust God as he does not know which effort will succeed. The broader application would encourage one to work diligently at every task he undertakes as this is obviously the overriding message which Solomon relentlessly preaches.

v. 7 "To see the sun" may communicate no other meaning than to be alive. (Cf. 6:5; 7:11) The basic *joy of living* is the tenor of Solomon's emphasis now, but it is conveyed through this verse by the words "pleasant" and "good," and not necessarily by "to see." Solomon's quest is clearly set forth in 2:3, 24; 3:12; 22; 5:18 and 8:15. "Light" is a metaphor and represents life. No matter how difficult tasks may become, or how sad the circumstances surrounding life, it is still a good thing to be alive. Especially is this true when one is yet in his youth with health and vigor on his side. Oppression or misfortune could temporarily cause one to despair, but the energy of youth will assist one in rising above such adversity. The day will come when one edges toward the "darkness." (Cf. 12:2, 6-7) At that time, all opportunities for joyful activities will be lost.

v. 8 Here Solomon is careful to note that throughout life, from youth to old age, it is possible to find "good" and "pleasant" activities. How can one "rejoice" in "all" his days? The answer has been labored by the Preacher. It is best summarized by his own words, "Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun" (9:8-9).

The "days of darkness" do not refer to the "misfortunes"

which may occur on the earth. Neither do they refer to the end years of one's life. The reference is to the abiding place of the soul when it is no longer in the light or "under the sun." In other words it is the period of time one must spend in the grave or Sheol. (Cf. 9:10; Genesis 37:35; Job 21:13; 17:13; Isaiah 38:10) Solomon also uses the term "eternal home" (12:5) in describing Sheol. Such pensive meditation on the certainty of this truth has a sobering effect on the wise (7:2-4). He does not despair but becomes more determined that he will make the most of his opportunities. In the grave, when the soul abides in Sheol, "everything" will be futility. There is *nothing* that promises any kind of positive experience in the grave. How appropriate to this comment are the words of Jesus in John 9:4 when He said, "We must work the works of Him who sent me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work."

FACT QUESTIONS 11:1-8

527. What primary admonition to youth comes through in this section?
528. Youth should temper their activities remembering what future event?
529. What is the traditional Jewish view of verses one and two.
530. Explain the major alternative interpretation of verses one and two.
531. What is suggested by the division of one's goods into seven parts?
532. If "cast your bread on the surface of the water" speaks to the total of one's life, what is the lesson to be learned?
533. How do the "clouds" and the "tree" demonstrate that man has no control over certain activities of God?
534. What will keep one from meaningful industry?
535. What do the two examples in verse five illustrate?
536. What technique of preaching, mentioned in verse eleven of chapter twelve is used in verse six?

537. What two words in verse seven are to have special emphasis?
538. When will joyful activities be lost?
539. To what does "days of darkness" refer? (Cf. verse eight)

2. Enjoy the days of your youth. 11:9-10

TEXT 11:9-10

- 9 Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.
- 10 So, remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 11:9-10

401. Although young men are encouraged to enjoy their "childhood" and "young manhood," what warning should they remember (verse nine)?
402. Should youth follow *all* the "impulses" and "desires" of their heart? Discuss.
403. Why should young people withdraw from vexation and evil ("pain")?

PARAPHRASE 11:9-10

Make the most, young man, of your youth as well as your more mature young manhood. Rejoice and be happy in both of them! Follow the delight of your eyes and the way the desire of your heart leads you. Explore the many facets of life

utilizing all the vigor of your youth. However, keep ever before your eyes the fact that God will call you to account. Remove care and evil from your mind and body—these things will prove to rob you of your joy. Youth is fleeting and the vigor experienced in your manhood is soon lost.

COMMENT 11:9-10

v. 9 Note the Preacher's admonition is directed to young men. The youth have the pathway of life before them. Their hopes, dreams and ambitions will be shaped by attitudes formed while still young. Parker remarks: "Cohemoth thus does not fear to enforce religious considerations upon the young mind. How noble a spectacle is a young life of joy consecrated to the service of truth, eager in upholding the claims of all pureness and wisdom! There is no nobler sight in all the earth than consecrated youth, sanctified enthusiasm, exuberant joy, used as a stimulus in sacred service."¹

There is a unit relationship that exists in the admonitions in 11:9, 10 and 12:1. The unity of the section is somewhat minimized by the chapter break. However, Leupold² wisely points out that in verse nine, youth are to rejoice in all good things that give the heart true cheer; in verse ten he is told to put aside all that might interfere with such legitimate joy; and in chapter twelve verse one, provision is made for the youth to see that his roots are to run deep in *remembering God* which alone assures joy.

Solomon is encouraging the pursuit of pleasure tempered with the awareness that God will bring all activities into judgment. Some view the pleasures as sinful and thus the verse is taken as a prohibition or warning. The argument states that Solomon is using "stern irony" with a charge that one is free

¹ Joseph Parker. *The People's Bible*, XIV (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, n.d.), p. 114.

² Leupold. *op. cit.*, pp. 268-269.

to enjoy all the sinful pleasures that youth finds exciting, but one must not forget that God will inevitably bring all deeds to judgment. Such an interpretation, however, is totally foreign to the spirit of the passage. What is evident is the fact that in the prime of life all that is wholesome activity, and thus approved of God, should be pursued.

"Follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes." Job speaks of the heart following after the eyes (Job 31:7). This type of wholesome pleasure has previously been approved. (Cf. 2:10, 24; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18; 8:15) Much of what the Preacher identifies as both wise and foolish, he has observed with his eyes. The eyes stimulate impulses and desires. The caution expressed here is toward the innocent use of sight and that which is pleasing to God. The caution comes in the stern form of a reminder "that God will bring you into judgment." One does not know many of the activities of God (verses five-six), but what he *must know* is that God will one day judge him. What is the nature of this judgment? Various views are offered: (1) The judgment is the pain and debility that comes to one in old age, but is increased because of the sowing of wild oats in one's youth. The more one corrupts his youth, the more he suffers in old age. (2) the calamities that befall one are the direct result of sins and should be interpreted as an outpouring of God's wrath. This kind of temporal judgment is in harmony with the principle of retribution previously discussed. (3) The interpretation which appears the most defensible in the light of 3:17; 12:1, 7 and 14 is that there will be a final time of judgment. The Preacher's view of the final judgment is not clear or detailed, but he appeals to proper behavior on the premise that such a judgment is coming. Existence beyond the grave was hinted at in 9:5, 6, 10 and confirmed in 12:7.

v. 10 Solomon now urges the removal of vexation and pain. The final argument offered which should motivate this action is that the years of youth are temporary. One should avoid that which injures the inner and the outer man—the spiritual and the physical. That which robs youth of good times, pleasant

days, desires of the eyes, and general happiness are to be shunned. The emphasis through this section is on a positive note. Young people are exhorted to find genuine joy in their youth. Sin brings decay and sickness (I Corinthians 6:18). For the person today who wishes to capture the same spirit of this passage, the words of Paul should be followed: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1).

FACT QUESTIONS 11:9-10

540. What shapes the dreams of young men?
541. Explain the unity that exists in the three verses found in 11:9-10 and 12:1.
542. Why should the pleasures discussed in verses nine and ten be considered as wholesome and not evil?
543. What influence do the eyes have on the heart?
544. Identify the three possible types of judgment that lie before youth.
545. What is the final argument offered in verse ten?

3. Remember God in your youth. 12:1

TEXT 12:1

1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them";

THOUGHT QUESTIONS 12:1

404. At what time in life should one remember God?
405. What are the "evil" days? (Cf. 11:8)

406. Young people are to enjoy and find delight in life. Is this same delight available all through life? Discuss.

PARAPHRASE 12:1

The evil days are coming! When they do come you will be unable to enjoy or find delight in them. My advice is to remember God the Creator while you are a young man and not wait until the joy of living is past.

COMMENT 12:1

v. 1 Young people are to have fun, but they are also to keep in mind who made them and why they were made. Since it is God who is the Creator, He has the right to speak through His servant and admonish toward wise behavior. Thus, not only should one remember God, he should allow God to influence all of life. Since God made man, He knows what will bring man happiness. The term "Creator" is definitely a reference to God as it is the participle form of the same word translated in Genesis 1:1 which speaks of God's creative work. It is also a plural form which suggests to many a reference to the work of the Godhead.

Since youth and strength are both marked by vanity—that is they are very fleeting—it is foolish to waste them. There is not a better time to follow God than in one's youth! The open grave invites all men too soon, even as the Psalmist said, "My days are like a lengthened shadow; and I wither away like grass" (Psalms 102:11). Now, however, life is vigorous, the accent is on youth, the joys are sweet, the time to be alive is now. Soon the joys which are now within the reach of youth will slip away. Man always moves into the period of decline. One has wisely expressed the experience of growing old as "his last days sloped gently toward the grave."

"The evil days" are obviously a reference to the following

graphic pictures presented by the Preacher of the final, crippling stages of old age. Previously "The days of darkness" (11:8), referred to the grave, but this is not the meaning here. "I have no delight" means that such closing years of life have lost the pleasure of youth and the prime of life. One does not find pleasure in the loss of strength, eyesight, and hearing; or does he look forward to the time when he no longer can walk or properly chew his food.

FACT QUESTIONS 12:1

546. What is the significance of speaking of God as Creator?
 547. Explain what is meant by "the evil days."

G. DEATH COMES TO EVERY MAN. 12:2-8

TEXT 12:2-8

- 2 before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain;
 3 in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim;
 4 and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly.
 5 Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street.
 6 Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed;
 7 Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the