

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS:

A Sermon on Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:1

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This week our nation experienced a political assassination. We've seen hatred flowing from prejudice and evil responses and reactions. So much darkness! Yet in the shadows, light becomes one of God's powerful gifts. The more time you have in the night, the more you appreciate sight. Yet light also allows images to etch the mind, creating memories that guide our way when darkness afflicts. Today's dawn brought fresh divine mercies (Lam 3:22–23), which pursued us into this room (Ps 23:6). We have an able, wise, and good Shepherd who never leaves nor forsakes—whether in the green pastures or in the valleys of darkest shadow.

Turn to Ecclesiastes 11. Today we meditate on the power of light and the gift of sight in a world where dark days are many. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes is one who had tasted the bigness and beauties of God and who supplies help for those who know the Lord yet cannot grasp his ways in this crooked and confused age. This passage seeks to help us know how to rejoice in the Lord always, even when sorrow or strife, loss or lack seem our daily portion. Follow along as I read Eccl 11:7–12:1.... Our passage has two units: (1) the need to rejoice in the Lord always (11:7–8); (2) how to rejoice in the Lord always (11:9–12:1).

The Need to Rejoice in the Lord Always (11:7–8)

Seeing Light is Sweet (11:7)

Verse 7 asserts, “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.” Our normal rhythms of sleep and work, seasons and years, are all guided by the presence and patterns of the sun. Every relationship we have and activity we enjoy is aided by light. In the first work week of Genesis 1, the day did not end in the dark, for “there was evening and there was morning, day one” (Gen 1:5). In God's timing, light always triumphs, as night gives way to sight and dawn drives to noon. The Preacher says, “The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises” (Eccl 1:5). Morning light overcomes the night, and during the blackness, the sun is hastening to the place where it will rise again.

Ecclesiastes uses “light” and “darkness” metaphorically. When Solomon says, “Light is sweet,” he uses a general truth to speak about spiritual realities. Within this book, while “it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun,” most in this world are dwelling in darkness without eyes to see the goodness of God that is all around them. Consider 2:13–14: “Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has

his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” Though the fool lives under the sun, he remains blind, unable to see God’s goodness and faithfulness. The stillborn baby never sees light (6:4–5), and in this world death will come to all, when “the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain” (12:2). But of the fool we read: “All his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger” (5:17). There are dark days for both the one who fears God and the one who does not, but it is ever night or spiritually dark for the fool. The fool never appreciates the common graces of God in ways that move him to praise. Therefore, it is the wise who alone can say, “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun” (11:7; cf. 7:11–12).

Solomon is the sage who authored this book, and he counts himself among the wise who can appreciate the sweetness of spiritual sight of God’s light. He wants us to recognize how significant glimpses of God’s grace can be. I assume that Jesus has moved most of you from darkness to light, meaning that you recall having tasted and seen God’s goodness, beauty, and faithfulness. You have experienced his closeness, heard him speak through his Word, and rejoiced at his declaration of no condemnation. You’ve sensed his powerful presence amidst pain, and you have felt the relief of deliverance and hope of eternal life. You know that “light is sweet,” for you have lived in the darkness and have seen its end.

But the reality is that once the clouds of past pain dissipate, for the believer greater storms await. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Solomon is here urging us not to forget past grace, for it will fuel our hope in future grace. Past glimpses of God’s mercies help true saints maintain their satisfaction in God when trials test our faith. Having experienced the joy in the day, believers gain a hope for dawn and noon that can carry and guide them through the night. Look with me back at 11:8.

Why Seeing Light Is Sweet (11:8)

Why is seeing light sweet? 11:8 supplies the reason why. The ESV opens verse 8 with the conjunction “So,” but I struggle to see how this translation is possible. Both the NASB and CSB translate with “indeed,” which is closer. The Hebrew conjunction is the normal one for expressing the basis for something, and I think that verse 8 gives the reason why verse 7 is true (cf. the same Hebrew construction in 4:9–10; see also 5:19–20; 8:15). Light is sweet “*for* if a person lives many years, he should rejoice in them all; and he should remember that the days of darkness will be many.” According to this text, light is sweet because of what it gives us not in relation to our past or present but in relation to our future. It is pleasant to see the sun because it supplies us fuel for maintaining our satisfaction in God always, even through extended seasons of darkness. The light forges our

memory of the right path, so that in the dark we still know the way to go. Glimpses of God's goodness today are God's gifts to help us endure tomorrow, for they remind us of his worth and beauty and help us know he will deliver again.

Notice first that, if God grants that we live many years, we are supposed to "rejoice in them all." It is like Paul, who implores, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" (Phil 4:4; cf. Rom 5:2–3; Jas 1:2–3). The apostle then immediately says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6–7). Paul calls people to rejoice always and then says that we battle anxiety and experience peace not only by praying to God but also by thanking God, remembering who he has been for us in our past and who he has promised to be for us in our future. We battle for joy in the darkness by recalling the light.

There is "a time to be born, and a time to die"—just two dates on the tomb stone. And between these poles, as we live out the dash (–), we are to rejoice (Eccl 3:2–8). In times of planting and plucking, killing and healing, weeping and laughing, we must rejoice. Through mourning and dancing, embracing and refraining, seeking and losing, we should rejoice. In times of silence and speaking, loving and hating, war and peace, we are to remain satisfied in all God is for us. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under the sun" (3:1). But in all our many years, come what may, we are to rejoice in the Lord always.

Light's sweetness comes in how it helps us maintain God-conscious joy, even when storm clouds darken our perspective. Notice the next statement, "It is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun because ... every person should remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity" (11:8). Even those who fear the Lord and have been declared right with him—even the spiritually wise will not always see the rays of God's goodness. Indeed, for us in this room, "the days of darkness will be many." Paul noted that we are "fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil 1:29). "If we endure, will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us" (2 Tim 2:12).

These realities are what makes seeing and savoring the shining of God's goodness all the sweeter. If one lives many years, many days of these years will be filled with darkness—when God's goodness seems distant. We must, therefore, memorialize the moments when we know God to be true, when we have seen his power, relished his mercy, and savored his promises, and we must let those glimpses of grace and goodness sustain us through the shadows. Seeing the sun of

God's goodness reminds us that light wins, that morning comes, that darkness will dissipate, and that God will continue to be faithful to carry us into a new day. With every dawn comes the promise of fresh mercies, so light is sweet because of the way it allows us to use every past glimpse of brilliant and warm grace to heighten hope for something beyond the night. Past encounters with God create hope for more steadfast love, so nurture gratitude for God's past kindness, as it will fuel your faithfulness amidst trial. If you entered this room weary and worn, feeling dry and distant from God ... if you feel burdened by the cares of this world, pause and pray that God will remind you of his past mercies and promises and from these heighten your hope that he will act for you again.

I've needed to fight for joy this week, for often my soul has been overwhelmed with the weight of this world's brokenness. How about you? Questions about your future, strife with loved ones, seemingly insurmountable obstacles, unending task lists, concern for your children, ignorance about how to provide or protect, fears about the state of our Union, anxiety about job security or health. Such cares easily suffocate our souls, leaving us gasping for breath and crying for reprieve. Yet we hear the call: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand" (Phil 4:4–5)." Brothers and sisters, remember how your God has been and forever will be good and faithful and let those truths firmly ground you in the storm. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isa 41:10). Recall how pleasant seeing the sun is and let that memory supply satisfying surety that light will again triumph over night. Our God is greater. Jesus is stronger.

How to Rejoice in the Lord Always (11:9–12:1)

We now come to part 2 of the sermon. 11:7–8 stressed the need to rejoice in the Lord always; 11:9–12:1 explains how to do this. While unclear in most translations, beginning in verse 9 we find a progression of six conjoined commands: "Rejoice ... and walk ... and know ... and remove ... and put away ... and remember! These six charges together clarify how you and I can remain satisfied in all God is for us. I have grouped them into four steps. How do we maintain our joy in God, even in hard times? *Step 1*: Rejoice always (11:9ab). *Step 2*: Run wisely (11:9cd). *Step 3*: Remove your cares (11:10ab). *Step 4*: Remember your Creator (12:1a)

Step 1: Rejoice Always (11:9ab)

Step 1 in rejoicing always is to choose joy: "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth" (v. 9ab). Choosing to rejoice is easier when days are bright, but God's worth is displayed even more in

the night when our baby will not be consoled, when we learn that our dad lost his job, or when cancer reaches stage 4. Our joy can look like laughs and smiles and praise reports when we win a sporting event, pass a major exam, or delight in time with a loved one. But joy can also look like dependent cries to God for help when money is low, when infertility persists, or when you hear that miscarriage is imminent or that your child has a chromosomal deformity. In Ecclesiastes, God is calling us *to rejoice in him both amid prosperity and adversity*, and this joy takes numerous forms, depending on the circumstances. Rejoicing is something greater than mere happiness, for when we are not smiling or able to laugh, we can still be satisfied, and our souls can find solace in our unchanging, ever-present, ever-faithful God. There is a way to be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:9).

Can you choose joy today? Can you declare that “God is worthy of my fear, worthy of my trust simply because of who he is and not because of what he gives or takes away? Can you say, “though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no heard in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17–19)? The first step in always rejoicing in the Lord is choosing joy. Jesus said, “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger; whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

Step 2: Run Wisely (11:9cd)

Step 2 in rejoicing in the Lord always is to run wisely. Look at the second half of verse 9: “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.” A preacher must truly know his audience if he tells them, “Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.” Moses characterized his audience as “stubborn, unbelieving, and rebellious” (e.g., Num 14:11; Deut 9:6–7, 23), and because of this he told them “not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes” (Num 15:39). In Ecclesiastes, however, the context is very different. The rest of the book shows that Solomon is not commending an unrestrained, worldly pursuit of pleasure. In 11:7–10 he is addressing the wise man and not the fool. He said in 11:8 that “it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun,” and in 2:14 he observed, “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” Only the wise see the sun as a manifestation of God’s goodness and grace (7:11–12). Elsewhere Solomon says that “the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way” (8:5). Indeed, 10:2 stresses: “A wise man’s heart inclines him to the right, but a fool’s heart to the left.” So, if the wise person’s heart is bent Godward, knowing the just way, it makes sense why Solomon would call him to “walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes.” These will be the ways of God.

If you are truly pursuing Jesus, you can assume the lights are green unless God cautions you with a yellow or stops you with a red. In the words of 9:7, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do” (cf. 1 Tim 4:4). Yet there is a stated warning. We must be sure to make every step, every decision, every click of the mouse, every purchase, every glance knowing “that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (Eccl 11:9). “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14; cf. 3:17; 5:2). So, we must not hesitate to follow our heart and to delight in pastries, parks, and parties, but we must do so keeping in mind the final judgment. The Lord will hold us accountable for every word and every deed, and this fact must color how we pursue joy. How do we rejoice in the Lord always? Step 1: choose joy. Step 2: run wisely.

Step 3: Remove Your Cares (v. 10)

Step 3 in sustaining God-conscious joy is to remove your cares. 11:10 reads, “Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.” The verbs “remove” and “put away” indicate that rejoicing even in dark days requires that a conscious choice not to allow the burdens, confusions, vexations, and troubles of this life to wear us down. The Preacher is not calling us to pretend life is pleasure when in fact it’s pain. No, there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (3:4). We don’t ignore human troubles, but we don’t let them consume us. This can be so hard, but we must fight the lies of Satan and embrace the hope God gives.

Jesus said, “Do not be anxious about your life.... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt 6:34). Indeed, “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.... Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (10:29–31). Knowing that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble,” Peter exhorted, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties upon him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:5–7). Because youth and the dawn of life are filled with confusion and questions, “remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body” (Eccl 11:10). That is step 3 in how to rejoice in the Lord always.

Step 4: Remember Your Creator (12:1)

There is no higher way to remain satisfied in God than to remember our Creator: “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.’” (12:1). What 11:8 designated “the days of darkness,” 12:1 calls “evil

days.” All of us suffer. If you are still young and have not yet experienced much, you have opportunity now to store memories of God’s kindness that can help sustain your faith long-term. Furthermore, you have the chance to shape within your heart convictions that celebrate God’s bigness and your neediness, that nurture God-dependence and battle self-reliance. “Remember your Creator!”

The Preacher in this book believed in a massive God who creates everything (11:5), both the good and the bad. “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him” (7:13–14). We are ignorant and small; God is in charge. His purposes are not being thwarted through the surprising death of a parent or through an extended search for a house or ministry post. He is at work through sustained illness and in your child’s rebellion. He is sovereign over the home sickness, the night terrors, and the relational friction. The Lord was on the throne before the divorce, and he is on the throne now! He is the Creator—all things being from him, through him, and to him (Rom 11:36). We are aided when we take our eyes off our problem and direct them to the only one who can produce a solution. We cry, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

If all the power of God that we can neither contain nor explain is working for us, we need not fear those who can only kill the body but cannot kill the soul (Matt 10:28). We gain boldness to leave houses and family and lands for Christ’s sake and for the gospel (Mark 10:29). Our faith need not falter when we fail a task or when a marriage suffers challenges. Oh, God, keep us believing; keep us trusting. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). Remember your Creator, who through the evil days will guide and provide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rejoice always in the sweetness of supernatural light, which all ultimately derives from Jesus, the light of the world. Embrace every glimpse of God’s goodness shown in and through Christ to give you memories that can help fuel your faith to the end. And as you recall what God has done in Christ and promised through Christ, rejoice always, run wisely, remove your cares, and remember your Creator, whether in times of sight or in the night.

The Queen of Sheba “came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matt 12:42). Jesus says, “Come unto me ... and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Knowing that God is for you in Jesus should awaken joyous hope for the day when night will be no more and his light will enable sight of his face forevermore.