**BCM Bible Study: April 28/29, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 11-12**

Introduction: Follow up on last week’s challenge: What act of service can you do as an outward sign of humility?

Wisdom in a Broken World: **Read Ecc. 11:1-8**

* This section reiterates something we have seen throughout Ecclesiastes – we do not know what will happen in the future. There is no guarantee of success in our endeavors. While we can understand the world to some extent, it remains an enigma to us. Where do you see this in the passage?
  + How have you seen this reality in your life or the world in general?
* In light of this reality, what advice does the Teacher give for wise living?
  + There are a few pieces of advice here. The first two verses seem to describe the need to invest your resources wisely and broadly. Verse 4 advises against laziness and hoping to stumble into wealth. Verse 6 complements this idea by promoting hard work. In all, he is suggesting that we acknowledge the fickle nature of life, diversify our efforts, and work hard.
  + What causes you to struggle with laziness?
  + There are two extremes that could paralyze us into inaction: fear of failure or assumed success. Which one do you struggle with more?
* Verses 7-8 remind us that hard times will come. We should not hold onto or hoard possessions, but use them wisely now. They are *hevel* in that they are fleeting. Are you tempted to gather wealth or hoard possessions? Why or why not? Why is it tempting to do this?
  + **Read Luke 12:16-21, 32-34; 2 Cor. 9:6-7** (time permitting, read Matthew 25:14-30, or summarize if needed). What do these verses tell us about using our resources in a God-honoring way?
  + What do you think it looks like to steward your resources well, to balance generosity with saving or investing for your future?

What We Learn from Aging: **Read Ecc. 11:9-10**

* How is the Teacher advising the young person to live in these verses?
  + We have already seen the affirmation of living well and pursuing good, and here we are reminded that there are limits in light of God’s judgment. Our friend Iain Provan says this about the passage: “Why is it that so many religious people’s lives are instead characterized by fear and defensiveness, by a joy-suppressing legalism?”
  + Do you identify with this quote? How so?
  + Fundamental to this idea is that we are made to live well *now*, to work to bring heaven to earth *now,* not to refuse to live a full life so that we may live well in heaven. What does it mean to pursue joy in light of God’s judgment?

**Read Ecc. 12:1-8**. There is a lot of imagery in this section that can make it confusing (see notes for more on these images), but what is the overall picture the Teacher is painting?

* The young person is urged to live well in light of the process of aging (12:1-5a) and death (12:5b-7). Have you personally experienced the aging of a relative to the point of lessened physical ability or death? What was that like? How did this shape your perspective on life?
  + These verses draw on apocalyptic (end times) imagery to give an analogy to decaying life. (see notes for more) This suggests that everyone will experience this process of decay. To what extent are you aware of your mortality? Do you think often about the brevity of youth?
  + Knowing the limitations that aging presents, what does it mean to enjoy life in ways that are unique to being young?
* **Read 1 Timothy 5:3-8.** What does it look like to live out these verses? How do we balance pursuit of our own lives while still taking caring or family?
  + Just as we are to be mindful of our parents in our youth, we are to “Remember also your Creator” (12:1) in light of what you know is coming. What does this mean?
  + **Read Matthew 24:42-44** (and 45-51, time permitting). What does it mean to live your life in light of these verses while not living in constant fear?

The Conclusion of the Matter

We have heard the last word from the Teacher and will now hear again from the author, who has not spoken since 1:1. In fact, 12:8 mirrors the Teacher’s first statement in 1:2, bringing his argument full circle. **Read Ecc. 12:9-12.**

* A goad is a staff with sharp nails stuck in it that is used to keep animals on the right track and out of danger. Why does the author use this imagery to describe God’s word?
  + “Wisdom must be allowed to do its painful work on our lives, as the goat bites; we must resist the temptation to reach for the painkiller.” (Provan)
  + What are the “painkillers” we use to avoid the realities of life? How do they keep us from God?
  + In what way can the word of God be like a goad to you?
* What does verse 12 mean? (Especially during exam time!)
  + There is no profit is writing many books, especially if it is to that end. The best that comes from this is that our voice is heard and we are wearied as a result. How have you seen the desire to be heard or seen become pervasive our culture?
  + One of the great dangers of this is that we “arrange things in order to keep God’s Word at arm’s length, rather than with the intention of hearing it yet more clearly and obeying it.” (Provan) Do you fall into the trap of wanting to understand God rather than coming to know Him? What is the difference?

**Read Ecc. 12:13-14**. What is the conclusion of Ecclesiastes? Put it in your own words.

* Given what you have learned in Ecclesiastes, what does it mean to fear God?
  + Jesus tells us not to be afraid, for he is with us. For those redeemed by God, fear of God involves rejoicing and remembering in what God has done and living joyfully and reverently. (Provan)

Conclusion: What is your biggest takeaway from Ecclesiastes?

I encourage you in two ways as you go home for the summer. First, honor God by living rightfully before him. Second, have fun! Enjoy your life and make the most of these days. Let your reverence of God lead you to love others well.

Notes:

* The exact interpretation of 11:1-2 could be debated. Is the Teacher advising generous giving, diversifying investments, maritime sea-trade? It is difficult to know his exact thoughts. However, it is clear in the context of the passage (esp. v.6) that he is advocating for a long-term view of life and using resources wisely in light of knowing that success is not guaranteed.
* Don’t take the 7 or 8 in 11:2 too literally. This is a common proverbial structure, to suggest one number and then another. (See, for instance, Proverbs 30:18) To read too much into the number (i.e., 7 means perfection, so eight must mean more than perfection) would be a stretch. There is no other reason to think that the Teacher is concerned with numerology.
* Regarding 11:5, we could say that we do now know some about how the body is formed in the womb. While, it is true that we do know much more than they did at the time Ecclesiastes was written, much of the development of human life is a wonderful mystery. Moreover, his point doesn’t rest on his specific example of the mystery of human life. The overall point is that the world and its inner-working will always remain something of a mystery to us, no matter how much we learn.
* In 11:10, you will find the word “hevel” again. The NIV translates it “meaningless” which can badly obscure the meaning. Youth and vigor are *fleeting*, so use that time well.
* 12:3-5 have some interesting imagery. The purpose here is to describe the process of aging through the analogy of a community facing the end times. There are four types of people in view – male, female, nobility, servant – that represent all of humanity since all of humanity will face death. Verses 3-4 describe the fate of each of them as they face the difficulty of the end times. Verse 5a offer the climax that leads to death in 5b. There are three images in verse 5, some of which are obscured in different translations. The three images are listed in this order: the almond tree, grasshopper, caper plant. (The caper is obscured in English in many translations) The point is simply that agricultural and ecological disaster will accompany the end times. The almond tree is past it’s point of fruitfulness. The grasshopper is a common sign of destruction of the end times; it’s dragging on the ground indicates its work is done. The caper tree is a symbol of pleasure, both with regard to sex and food.
* 12:6 can also provoke some questions. In general, the gold and silver bowl and cord probably represent the preciousness of life and we see life ended and being poured out. Particularly interesting is the wheel. It is too much to get into here, but there is ancient imagery of this Hebrew word having to do with crushing skulls. In all these things, death is in view.
* It might seem ironic that the author wants to say something at the end after saying not to add to the saying of the Teacher. But he really isn’t adding anything; he is only commending the Teacher and offering a summary.