

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I've been listening to a wonderful collection of short stories by **Wendell Berry**, all set in rural Kentucky in the early 1900s. One entitled, "Watch with Me," is about a guy nicknamed Nightlife who is not entirely in his right mind. One night when the visiting evangelist won't let him preach he goes off in a huff. The next morning he stops by Tol Proudfoot's place and without so much as a howdyado he picks up Tol's old shotgun and starts walking. Tol and a few other men follow him. They're worried he might shoot himself—or maybe someone else, crazy as he is. They keep their distance because they're afraid he might shoot them. Nightlife walks on, never looking to the right or left, as if he's in a trance. They follow him all day, getting hungrier by the hour. Then into the night. At one point they lose him in the dark. As the men chat quietly in the dark about the lost Nightlife I was struck by this exchange.

Walter said, "The way he is now, he just as well stayed home, or stayed asleep. Or never been born. He don't know where he is."

"Don't matter where he is," Tol said "He's just wanderin' around inside hisself looking for a way out. In there where he is it's dark, sure enough."

That one phrase reminded me of Ecclesiastes, "*He's just wanderin' around inside hisself looking for a way out. In there where he is it's dark, sure enough.*" **Turn to Eccl.**

- B. Today we come to the end of our study in the book of Ecclesiastes which began,
"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

Just so much smoke, if you only look at life as it is under the sun. Yet again and again, the Teacher has told us to enjoy life’s everyday gifts—our meals, our celebrations, our marriages and our work. Turn to **Eccl. 11:7-8** where he evokes for us a bright, sunny morning:

Light is sweet,

and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

However many years anyone may live,

let them enjoy them all.

But let them remember the days of darkness,

for there will be many.

Everything to come is meaningless.

There’s an old song that says we should “*live on the sunny side of life.*” *Go for it,* says the Teacher, *but there will also be a lot of times when you have to live in the dark.*

- C. How many here are young? While this book is for all of us, it was particularly written to the young, and it is to the young he speaks most directly now at the end. **Vv.9-10...**

I. GOD’S WANTS THE YOUNG TO ENJOY LIFE TO THE FULLEST (11:9-12:7)

- A. The best and easiest time to enjoy life is when we’re young.
- B. These next verses could be a great outline for a graduation speech. All those black-robed seniors sitting there and the Teacher is introduced. “*Our speaker today... is very wise.*” And the Teacher stands and says: **v.9a...** Be happy with joy that comes from within—from your heart. The hard thing is that the young (like most of the old) are bombarded with the idea that to be happy you need to something you don’t already have. A new phone, a spring break trip, a weekend

party, or entrance to a premier school. **Your heart is where joy springs from. A healthy heart is joyful.** Follow your dreams. Go on adventures. Leave time to laugh and enjoy life. Have fun with your friends. Love learning. Enjoy music. Run or dance or paint or write poems. Delve into science or literature. Play games. Stay up late watching Dr. Who. Laugh till your sides hurt.

- C. Well, out in the graduation audience, where the parents are sitting, there's some nervous coughs. You can almost hear them: *"Listen, son, you're going to college and you darn well better pass, at the prices I'm paying! Who hired this speaker!?! We want the speech about responsibility."*

Then the Teacher says, "but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." He means, *have a great time but don't do anything that God wouldn't want you to do. Don't do anything you'd regret when you stand before God.* But it can also mean, *Let your heart give you joy because God will hold you accountable for that. God judges on joy. Don't stymie the joy God intends you to have.*

God gets a bum rap for being a killjoy. A sourpuss. But that's a total lie. Illus.: In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* the devilish writer cannot contain his disgust at the enemy's [God's] obsession with joy: *"He has filled his world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without him minding in the least."*

- D. **V.10...** [*"Anxiety"* – frustration; vexation. *"Meaningless"* — *"Youth lasts about as long as smoke."* (MSG).] When I was young, in high school and college, I did not make an effort to be glad. In fact, I nourished the morose, moody side of my nature with gloomy midnight walks and way too

much introspection. Don't wallow in worry. Don't induce stress. *Be ye glad!*

- E. Now the Teacher tells us the key in **12:1...** It's an interesting way to remind young people about God: "*Remember your Creator.*" This is an orienting statement for young adults, as if a compass or homing device was implanted within them. *From your earliest days, never forget that you have a Creator. You aren't your own. You don't live in a world where you get to make your own rules or live as you please. And you are not alone. Your Creator knows you by name and loves you. **If you do not remember your Creator you will not know who you are.***

I'm deeply concerned about students who know much more about pop culture or college entrance exams than they do about their Creator. The Teacher would look at you at whisper, "*Don't invest all your life in smoke.*"

The Teacher indicates that he wants us to know our Creator, "*before the days of trouble come.*" Those who gain a firm grip in the hand of our Creator when they are young will be much better prepared to hold on to him as life gets more difficult. Now the Teacher paints an unforgettable picture for the young. *Look at this*, he says.

- F. Now the Teacher paints a picture for the assembled graduates of what it is like to get old: 12:1-7...

Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth,

before the days of trouble come

and the years approach when you will say,

"I find no pleasure in them"—

² **before** the sun and the light

and the moon and the stars grow dark,

and the clouds return after the rain; **Coming of life's winter**

³ when the keepers of the house tremble, **arms**

and the strong men stoop, **legs**
 when the grinders cease because they are few, **teeth**
 and those looking through the windows grow dim; **eyes**
⁴ when the doors to the street are closed **ears?**
 and the sound of grinding fades;
 when people rise up at the sound of birds, **can't sleep**
 but all their songs grow faint; **can't hear**
⁵ when people are afraid of heights
 and of dangers in the streets; **physical vulnerability**
 when the almond tree blossoms **white hair**
 and the grasshopper drags itself along **halting gait**
 and desire no longer is stirred. **Appetites wane**
 Then people go to their eternal home
 and mourners go about the streets. **funeral**
⁶ **Remember him** [your Creator]—**before** the silver cord is severed,
 and the golden bowl is broken;
 before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
 and the wheel broken at the well,
⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
 and the spirit returns to God who gave it. **Precious life ends**
Terry Pratchett said, *“Inside every old person is a young person wondering what happened.”* Young people, know your Creator now *before* age starts deconstructing you so that when *“the days of trouble come”* you will know how to trust in God.

And now, his speech complete, the Teacher wraps up with his familiar refrain, *“Meaningless, meaningless!”* says the Teacher. *“Everything is meaningless.”* Life ends in a puff of smoke. **Derek Kidner** writes, *“...with the experience of the whole book behind us and with this chapter’s haunting pictures of mortality to enforce the point, we come back to the initial cry, Vanity of vanities, and find it justified. Nothing in our search has led us home; nothing that we are offered under the sun is ours to keep.”* [p.104]

Illus.: I watched on YouTube a very, very short play by Samuel Becket entitled *Breath*. Picture a darkened stage littered with rubbish illuminated only by a faint light. You hear a sudden brief cry and the lights come up as you hear someone’s slow raspy inhalation. Silence for 5 seconds, then slow, rasping breathing out, like an escaping gasp, as the lights dim. The cry again. Then fade slowly to black. It all takes maybe 35 seconds. The Teacher would watch that, nod his head, and say, “*That’s life under the sun.*”

This book seems to actually have had two speakers, with the first reporting what the Teacher said. Now in **v.9** the “**author**” **sums up**, speaking of the Teacher in third person. He says...

**II. THE TEACHER’S WISDOM DRIVES US TO ONE CONCLUSION:
FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS (12:9-14)**

A. The first time you read Ecclesiastes you may be inclined to think, “*Who is this guy? What’s his problem!?*” But we come to realize, if we’re patient and thoughtful, that we are not dealing merely with a skeptic or nihilist, but with an extraordinarily wise and artistic man of God. Listen to **vv.9-10...** The famous American writer **Tom Wolfe**, who wrote a very Ecclesiastes-type book, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, said, “*For of all I have ever seen or learned, this book [Ecclesiastes] seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man’s life upon this earth – and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.*” [Ryken, p.276]

Bono has written, “*Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books. It’s a book about a character who wants to find out why he’s alive, why he was created. He tries knowledge. He*

tries wealth. He tries experiences. He tries everything. You hurry to the end of the book to find out why, and it says, 'Remember your Creator.' In a way, it's such a letdown. Yet it isn't." [Ryken, p.271]

B. Now we're told why we ponder this wise book. **Vv.11-**

12... These words goad us with sharp truth to get us to move out of our complacency over what we want in life.

"God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." Yow *"Whoever loves money never has enough."* Ouch! *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"* I'm moving, I'm moving.

And these words are like a nail pounded in the wall on which to hang wise mottos. *"God has made everything beautiful in its time."* *"Two are better than one and a cord of three strands is not quickly broken."* *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."* *"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth."*

Ultimately, these words come not only from the Teacher, but from "one Shepherd"—the Good Shepherd, the Lord. **That's what makes this book Scripture.**

That last phrase of v.12 is famous, especially in academic communities: *"Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body."* My editor says it is his least favorite book in the Bible! The point seems to be that with all these books, do not neglect the Book of God with its timeless and unmatched truth and wisdom. **Choose carefully the podcasts and pages that shape your life. Always value and read Scripture above all others.** The Bible is given to us through this writer and others who *"searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true."*

C. And now the conclusion, so basic that it almost seems anticlimactic. **Vv.13-14...** The indisputable evidence of the fear of the LORD is obedience. Not the way we sing in church or our Statement of Faith. Obedience in all things, seen and unseen, is proof of our accountability to God.

We fear God—reverence and trust him—because we’ve come to realize that nothing else matters. Nothing else lasts. Everything that doesn’t spring from obedience to our God is *meaningless*—just so much smoke. We remember our Creator so that we might not ignore his commands. It is also crucial to remember that Jesus said, “*If you love me, keep my commands.*”

We obey the Lord knowing that there is a day of reckoning coming. We who are *in Christ* will be dressed in his righteousness and have nothing to fear. That said, our deeds will be revealed, rewards will be given, and the obedient investments we’ve made in this life will be shown as treasures and crowns on that Great Day.

At the conclusion of his wonderful commentary, **Derek Kidner** repeats Augustine’s famous confession. He says it “*might have been written as a coda to this very book, instead of as a prelude to his own story:*

Thou has made us for thyself

And our heart is restless till it rests in thee.” [p.109]