

Ecclesiastes 11-12 • How to Prepare for the End

Introduction

It's an age-old question that was asked of Jesus directly: "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16b) We want to know how to prepare for "the end", for the final reckoning of our life. It's a very big question, which has surprisingly simple biblical answers. It's probably a fact of human nature that we tend to believe that one big "success" will eradicate a thousand small indiscretions, but that's not how God sees it.

^{11:1}Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. ²Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. ³If 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. ⁴He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. ⁵Just 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.

[Read 11:1-5]

Q: What does v.1 mean?

- **Answer #1:** A common farming technique of that time was flooding of fields and casting the "bread" or seed upon the water. As the water evaporated, some of the seed took root in the soil and produced a harvest. Seeing how "bread" is sometimes associated with God's Word, the meaning may be akin to the Parable of the Sower in speaking of eventually reaping a harvest of souls through the planting of the Word.
- **Answer #2:** Bread is also a word often associated with making a living, and waters is often associated with large numbers of people. The meaning could be advocating the sharing of one's personal resources with the less fortunate which will, in time, provide a spiritual harvest. This meaning is probably better supported by the context of v.2 which follows.

Q: Setting aside what might be confusing imagery in v.3-5 for the moment, what is the key phrase that puts this imagery into the proper context so we can interpret these verses correctly?

A: "...so you do not know the activity of God..." (v.5) The examples are things whose outcomes only God can predict or control.

Q: Using this key phrase, go back through v.3-5 how can we place the imagery in the proper context?

- We can't entirely predict weather—just because there are clouds doesn't mean they "are full" and will "pour out rain"—we make assumptions about what will happen.
- When a tree in nature falls or is uprooted by a storm we have no way to know which way "a tree falls".
- If we cannot predict accurately what will happen in the presence of the wind or clouds, we will often forgo the opportunity to sow or reap timely because we're guessing the conditions aren't right—even though we're not 100% sure and they turn out to be fine.
- Many things of nature—such as the wind and formation of a baby—are complete mysteries to us yet they exist and interact with us, are undeniably real, and have outcomes/destinies impossible for man to predict.

The main point of these illustrations is to state that investing our resources in other people is not a predictable science to begin with, but in reality is completely in the hands of God in spite of our desire to control the outcome. We are not called by God to serve others because we can see and know the results or benefits, but to be satisfied with the role God has given us, knowing that it is **HE** who provides the results.

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⁶Sow 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.

⁷The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. ⁸Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come will be futility.

⁹Rejoice, 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. ¹⁰So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.

Q: What might be a very “Old Testament” way of succinctly stating what is being asked of us here?

A: “The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” (Matthew 22:9) We may not understand all of God’s ways, but we’re to minister to our fellow man not for what **WE** believe to be the return on our investment, but for what **GOD** will do with it.

[Read 11:6-8]

Q: Will there always be an endless opportunity to preach the Gospel, to sow the seeds of God’s kingdom?

We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

—John 9:4

Q: What is the basic meaning of these verses in context with the preceding verses?

A: Although we may not be able to predict the results—and must trust God for the return on the investment—we must recognize our responsibility to work during every available opportunity while there is yet time to do so.

[Read 11:9-10]

Q: Again, within the context of the teaching to this point, what is the practical application of the meaning of v.9?

A: We may not understand all of God’s ways, but we will certainly be held accountable by Him for all of our own ways.

Q: To place v.10 in the proper context, what is the key difference between childhood, young manhood, and adulthood?

A: Maturity of mind and heart over the body. When young, the body can sometimes make up for shortcomings with enthusiasm and vigor, but over the long haul it is the discipline and conditioning of the mind and heart to recognize the need to overcome that wins throughout life overall and cause the body—one’s actions—to do the right thing.

Point: *Our service to God through our commitment to others requires a mature, disciplined approach that trusts in Him to produce the right results for both His kingdom at large and for our life personally.*

Summary to this Point

Use this life to love your neighbor at every opportunity. In so doing, you are not only participating in His kingdom’s work, but establishing yourself in God’s eyes both in this life and the one to come.

Application: *Is your service to others “conditional”, limited only to those you know such as family or friends? In what ways do you provide relief without even the hope of seeing something in return? Do you realize that if you have been “pre-qualifying” candidates for your support that you might not be trusting God for the results?*

^{12:1}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”; ²before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; ³in 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; ⁴and 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. ⁵Furthermore, 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. ⁶Remember 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; ⁷then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. ⁸“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “all is vanity!”

⁹In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. ¹⁰The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.

¹¹The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. ¹²But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.

¹³The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. ¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

[Read 12:1-8]

Observation: *This is most likely a very poetic depiction of old age, trying to convey the meaning that we can't buy into the false belief that there is always time enough to change our ways or to cease from our own labors and do God's. A lifetime of habits will overtake us. Another way of stating it is that we cannot wait until “the end” to **PREPARE** for “the end”—it must begin at the earliest point in our life possible and become a natural extension of our lifestyle.*

V.6 is particularly strong with this imagery, most likely likening the situation to a well that can no longer be used because the bucket, rope and mechanism for lowering and raising the bucket are all useless. The phrase “remember Him before” is intended as a warning to turn to His ways while there's still time lest this fate be realized in one's own life, having waited too long.

Application:

- *Is it possible to never fully prepare for the end because we waited until we were too close to the end?*
- *Have you noticed that this is not about a “special” call or for a specific purpose that God wants you to accomplish, but is entirely centered on living a consistent, obedient life in God, doing all the “normal” things that are required each and every day?*
- *Do we sometimes forgo the “small stuff”, worrying about how to accomplish “big things” in Christ? What does that, in reality, do to us?*

[Read 12:9-12]

Q: Is this stating that knowledge, higher education, and/or wisdom is a useless pursuit, even counterproductive?

A: Verses 11:1-12:8 have focused on our actions, behavior, and ways. The point here is that pursuit of knowledge—no matter to what depth—is no substitute for putting God's ways into practice. You can be an expert on the physiology and workings of the human body, but it's of no value if you've never trained for the marathon you've been entered in. The biblical definitions of “hear” and “listen” is to obey and put into practice.

[Read 12:13-14]

Here is the plain and simply stated application of the book of Ecclesiastes. How does it compare to your own life? To what is the Spirit testifying concerning the strengths and weaknesses of your own fear, obedience, and actions?