

THINK OF THE DAYS
AHEAD
ECCLESIASTES 11



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Think of the Days Ahead: Ecclesiastes 11
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Ecclesiastes 11: Introduction

In this chapter Solomon wants to lift Rehoboam's vision beyond his fun-and-games present to realize that "dark" days are coming – death and beyond. We should be preparing for those days now, and not just squandering our present on frivolous selfish interests.

This is good advice for believers. Since we know where history is going, and what the long-term outcome will be, we should be preparing ourselves now by living our lives in every part "under heaven", rather than merely "under the sun".

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Look Ahead

Pray Psalm 139.1-3.

O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.1, 2.

Prepare.

1. What do these two proverbs have in common?
2. What do we learn about wisdom from them?

Meditate.

Solomon continues his attempt to focus his son's outlook beyond the present – beyond the “under the sun” vanity and folly toward which he was inclined – and to encourage him to think about the consequences of behavior, and to prepare for the long haul in life.

These two proverbs are perhaps best understood as counseling wisdom for the present, even if that means sacrifice. Rehoboam seems bent on a life of consumption and self-indulgence. But he can't know the future, and so he should take the counsel of wisdom and lay a little up in various places for unforeseeable contingencies.

Once again, by appealing to common sense, Solomon is looking for a thin entering wedge for wisdom to supplant folly in Rehoboam's worldview.

Americans have accumulated more debt than any people in history. We are not only squandering our present; we are squandering our future, and the future of our children as well. The wise person will not live beyond his means, or even up to his means; rather, he will spread his assets in various directions, forgoing consumption in the present to guard against times of want in the days to come.

This is good advice spiritually as well. Christianity focuses on far horizons and calls its adherents to lay aside the pleasures of the moment, put to death the lusts of the flesh, and bring holiness to completion, across the board in life, in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1). For this is the end of our journey; we should be preparing for it every day.

Reflect.

1. In what sense is the Christian faith a “forward-looking” way of life? To what do Christians look forward?
2. Verse 2 seems to counsel generosity in giving. Why should we be generous in giving and sharing?
3. All the promises of God are “Yes” and “Amen” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1.20). How should this affect the way we live each day?

*It happens with most people that they give indeed, but they do not do so freely and readily, which is a greater and more perfect thing than the mere act of offering itself. It is far better to be generous to the unworthy for the sake of the worthy than to deprive the worthy out of fear of the unworthy. This seems to have a bearing on our duty of casting bread upon the waters, not that it may be swept away or perish in the eyes of the just examiner, but that it may come to that place where all our goods will be stored up. And [it will] be there to meet us in due time, even though we may think otherwise. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), *On the Death of His Father, Oration 18.20**

Lord, give me a wise, prudent, and generous heart today as I...

Pray Psalm 139.23, 24.

Listen for the Spirit to search your soul. Repent of any sins, then seek His guidance for the day ahead.

Sing Psalm 139.23, 24.

Psalm 139.23, 24 (Ripley: *Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

Search my heart, O Lord, and know me,
as You only, Lord, can do.

Test my thoughts and contemplations,
whether they be vain or true.

Let there be no sin in me, Lord,
nothing that Your Spirit grieves.

Lead me in the righteous way, Lord,
unto everlasting peace!

2 If This, Then That

Pray Psalm 139.14.

I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And *that* my soul knows very well.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.3, 4.

Prepare.

1. These proverbs are *conditional* – that is, they have an “if this, then that” structure. Explain.
2. What is Solomon trying to do with these proverbs?

Meditate.

Three more proverbs assault the here-and-now worldview of Rehoboam. Additional appeals to common sense, they are again designed to arrest his mindset of conspicuous consumption and lead him to think about the consequences of a life of folly.

These two verses are difficult, and commentators are all over the board trying to explain them. I take them as intending to encourage *consequential* rather than merely *self-indulgent* thinking and living.

Rehoboam could predict the rain probably as well as anyone. And that fallen tree would be in the same place tomorrow as yesterday, so there’s no need to harvest it as soon as it falls. Farmers don’t want their seeds to be scattered by the wind, and they know that harvesting is more difficult in the rain. “If you see this”, the formula goes, “then you can expect that”.

What about the young man to whom these verses were addressed? Could he see that this life of his was leading to certain consequences? If not, he should look more carefully.

We should not be discouraged by the blindness to truth that characterizes many in our day. While we are preaching repentance, faith, and renewal, they are pursuing indulgence, materialism, and experiments in moral disobedience that will harm them and the society in which they live.

It would be easy to give up on this unbelieving generation and our witness to them. But God has left us here in this nation, at this time, to work by every means and in every season in order that some might be saved (1 Cor. 9.19-23). Like Solomon, we need to stay the course of our calling to the bitter end, appealing to every witness, from creation and common sense as well as from the Scriptures, in the hope of talking some sense into our unbelieving contemporaries.

Only the Spirit can break through to renew the hearts of men. But He is pleased to use our words. Let us be pleased for Him to use them.

Reflect.

1. These proverbs are on the order of “if this, then that”. How can such examples help someone to see the folly of his ways?

2. The Gospel is an “if this, then that” proposition as well. Explain.
3. These proverbs invite us to consider our ways and the consequences of our behavior. Why is this important for helping people to consider Jesus?

Let not much wisdom become a stumbling-block to your soul and a snare before you; but trusting in God, manfully make a beginning upon the way that is filled with blood, lest always you be found wanting and naked of knowledge of God. Isaac of Nineveh (d. ca. 700), *Ascetical Homilies* 6

Help me to think about the consequences of my behavior, Lord, so that I always...

Pray Psalm 139.1-5.

God knows your path and all your ways. Commit them to Him, and thank Him for His guidance and protection.

Sing Psalm 139.1-5.

Psalm 139.1-5 (Ripley: *Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

You have searched me, Lord, and known me,
when I sit and when I rise;
From afar, my thoughts discerning,
all my path before You lies.
Every word, before it's spoken,
You behold and know it well.
Both behind me and before me,
Your sweet presence I can tell!

3 What Do You Know?

Pray Psalm 139.5, 6.

You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot *attain* it.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.5.

Prepare.

1. What is Solomon's point in this verse?
2. We can't know all the works of God, but that's OK. Why?

Meditate.

Rehoboam may have been acting like a bit of a know-it-all: "I know what I'm doin', Dad. I don't need all this advice." But, of course, he didn't know it all. He couldn't. No one can. Life is filled with mysteries that even the brightest minds can't fathom.

And yet Rehoboam considered himself wiser than his father when it came to knowing what was best for his life. Solomon had "been there, done that." A wise son would have listened to his father's counsel, reflected on his ways, and sought the life of wisdom over the way of folly (Prov. 3.1, 2; 5.1, 2). Life is filled with so much uncertainty, so many unforeseeable events, that we need to trust ourselves to God and rest in His sovereign care. But if we won't do that with the everyday details of our lives, we're not likely to do it when push comes to shove in the hard patches that must surely come.

We don't like to be told that we aren't as smart as we think. The atheist who insists that he knows there is no God is simply a fool. Does he know everything? If not, would he be willing to allow that, within that vast universe of things he doesn't know, there might be a God? If he's not willing to allow that, then he doesn't know the limits of his knowledge.

A little further questioning can reveal to such a person that there are plenty of mysteries in life that he will never be able to understand, and yet he accepts them by faith. Faith in what? Chance? His own experience? Mere human authorities? These are shaky foundations on which to try to build a life of security and happiness.

And what about us? We act like we know better than God how much of Him, His Word, and communion with Him is needed in our lives. But have we consulted Him on the matter? Or are we satisfied that our own advice, feelings, ideas, and thoughts about so crucial a question are good enough?

Reflect.

1. If we can't know everything, can we know anything? Explain.
2. Life is full of uncertainties and changing circumstances, which is why it is so important to know

Him Who knows everything. Explain.

3. Do we ever know Jesus well enough? Why not?

Yet his work is not known, because even those who preach him venerate his impenetrable judgments. They therefore both know him whom they preach, and yet do not know his works: because they know by grace him by whom they were made, but cannot comprehend his judgments that are wrought by him above their understanding. Gregory the Great (540-604), *Morals on the Book of Job* 5.27.6

I don't know everything, but I do know You, Lord, and knowing You makes my life...

Pray Psalm 139.15-18.

Thank God for all the mysteries about your life that you can never understand, but that He knows fully.

Sing Psalm 139.15-18.

Psalm 139.15-18 (*Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

All my unformed frame You witnessed
when You destined all my days.
Precious to me, Lord, Your precepts;
all Your wondrous Word I praise.
More than sand, Your thoughts to me, Lord,
far too vast their sum for me!
When the morning breaks upon me,
in Your presence I shall be.

4 Diligence

Pray 139.14.

...Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.6.

Prepare.

1. Summarize the teaching of this verse in one word. Why did you choose that word?
2. How do good works serve the cause of the Gospel?

Meditate.

A man has to be willing to work if he wants to prosper in life. The Law of God commands men to labor for six days of every week, working at a variety of tasks in order to exercise stewardship over their resources and opportunities. Evidently Rehoboam was thinking that being king wasn't really a matter of work. The king gets others to work for him; his job is simply to enjoy the benefits of being king.

Rehoboam would find out soon enough that being king of Israel was hard work. Solomon's counsel in this verse is for Rehoboam to seek the good of the nation by every means, and that would mean a life of hard work – founded on trust in God, Who knows everything and does all things well.

In our day, work is viewed in various ways: necessary evil, source of self-actualization, a way to contribute to the economy, or the means to becoming wealthy. But the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work. We must work at our marriages, raising our children, caring for our property, participating in the life of our community, serving in our local church, investing for the future, nurturing friendships, and more. If we invest all our best energies in our job, then other crucial areas entrusted to us will not be as fruitful as God intends.

The wise person will accept all the work God has given him to do with gratitude, and labor at it continuously, seeking the good that comes to all from his labors.

Reflect.

1. What do we mean by saying "the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work"?
2. Meditate on Philippians 1.12. What does it mean to "work out" your salvation? Why should you do so in fear and trembling?
3. What can we do to ensure that all our work is according to the requirements of life "under heaven"?

Be not weary in well-doing, for in due season, in God's time, you shall reap, Galatians 6.9. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 11.6

You have saved me for good works, O Lord. Help me to be diligent in serving You today, especially as I...

Pray Psalm 139.7-14.

God is with us at all times, to help us in the work He has given us to do. Meditate on the wondrous works of God, and what they suggest about how you should to your work today.

Sing Psalm 139.6-14.

Psalm 139.6-14 (*Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

Just to know this is more wondrous
than my seeking soul can know.
From Your ever-present Spirit
there is nowhere I can go.
Whether high above the heaven
or below the earth in hell,
Even there Your hand shall lead me
and Your Right Hand hold me well!

Neither light nor dark conceals me;
day as night is with You, Lord!
All my inward parts You fashioned
by Your all-decreeing Word.
Praise the Lord, for You have made me;
all Your wondrous works I'll tell!
All Your works declare Your glory,
and my soul knows this full well!

5 Rejoicing in the Light of Life

Pray Psalm 139.11, 12.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
Even the night shall be light about me;
Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;
The darkness and the light *are* both alike *to You*.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.7, 8.

Prepare.

1. Solomon says it's good to be alive. Explain.
2. But yet he warns that we won't always be alive. How should that teach us to live here and now?

Meditate.

The "days of darkness" probably refers to death. The "light" that is "sweet" is that of the present moment, while we're still alive. Again, Solomon counsels making good use of the present to leave a good reputation and a legacy for the future.

Carpe diem! That seems to be the message here – "seize the day!" But not in revelry and self-indulgence, as Rehoboam appears to be thinking. Rather, live life to the fullest, being faithful in all your work, laying up for the future, thinking about others and their needs, and doing everything with a grateful heart and a desire to honor God, Who gives us all good things.

"Life's a bitch, and then you die": More wisdom from a contemporary bumper sticker. Many believers seem to embrace this view of life. They complain and grumble, criticize and condemn, fuss and fume about this, that, and the other. But of all people, Christians should know joy, contentment, peace, and hope every day of their lives, for they know each day is a gift, each day is fraught with opportunities for bringing glory to God; and at the end of their days, full and abundant life awaits them, not the vanity and darkness that so many of their gloomy and anxious unbelieving friends fear (Heb. 2.15).

We won't live this way unless we position ourselves "under heaven" at the beginning of each day, and look to the Lord consistently throughout it. We can know each day as sweet and pleasant, and we can weather each day's storms, but only because of the hope we have of life beyond death, and light everlasting beyond the darkness of the grave.

Reflect.

1. Why should we "remember the days of darkness"? How do we do so? Does the Christian remember these days differently from those who have no faith? Explain.
2. God wants our lives to be sweet and pleasant. But what is necessary for that to be consistently so?
3. How can we live in rejoicing when we know that we're not going to be alive forever?

Life is sweet to bad men, because they have their portion in this life; it is sweet to good men, because it is the time of preparation for a better; it is sweet to all. Here is a caution to think of death, even when life is most sweet. Matthew

Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 11.6*

Thank You, Lord, that in Your resurrection I have the hope of eternal life, so that I can live this day in...

Pray Psalm 139.1-10.

The Lord knows us and our needs. Thank and praise Him for that, and put before Him your needs for this day, in the sure knowledge that He will never fail you nor forsake you.

Sing Psalm 139.1-10.

Psalm 139.1-10 (*Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

You have searched me, Lord, and known me,
when I sit and when I rise;
From afar, my thoughts discerning,
all my path before You lies.
Every word, before it's spoken,
You behold and know it well.
Both behind me and before me,
Your sweet presence I can tell!

Just to know this is more wondrous
than my seeking soul can know.
From Your ever-present Spirit
there is nowhere I can go.
Whether high above the heaven
or below the earth in hell,
Even there Your hand shall lead me
and Your Right Hand hold me well!

6 Sin Boldly!

Pray Psalm 139.7-10.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.9.

Prepare.

1. Solomon is offering advice here about the “heart”. How would you summarize that advice?
2. For what will God bring us into judgment?

Meditate.

“Look, son,” Solomon seems to be saying, “if you’re dead set on living a life of sin, then, by all means, sin boldly! Let it all hang out. Shoot the moon. Go for broke. Knock yourself out. Indulge your every whim and passion. Consume everything you get, and get as much as you can. If life is all about sowing wild oats, then sow them furiously.”

By this point, Rehoboam had wised-up to his father’s sarcasm, and had become impervious to his proverbs and his pleading. But he would have been hard-pressed to deny that this was probably what was on his mind: “Let the good times roll!” It fell to Solomon to put his plans and purpose in an eternal perspective. God doesn’t just sit around while fools and rebels squander His gifts and take advantage of others. His wrath is being poured out even now on all who are determined to follow their “under the sun” way of life to the extreme (Rom. 1.18-32). And even greater judgment is to come for those who refuse to hear God’s call to repent.

The judgment of God is the bad news which makes the Good News of the Gospel make sense. If we fail to point out to those to whom we witness that God *is* judging and *will* judge their rejection of His truth, we’re doing them no favors. Over and over the prophet Ezekiel was told to reveal to the people of Israel all that God would do in judging them, so that, when it came to pass, they would remember that He is the Lord.

What can we tell the unbeliever who rejects the Gospel? Only what the Bible says: He is still in his sin. The wrath of God continues on him, blinding him to truth. His sins will get worse before they get better, but he will only become more and more hardened to them. And if he continues on this course until death, he can expect to be rejected from the presence of the living God forever.

And that’s a darkness that is very dark, indeed (Eccl. 11.8).

Reflect.

1. Meditate on Romans 1.18-32. In what sense is God currently judging the unbelieving world? How does this encourage us to pray for the unbelievers we know?

2. Solomon indicates that we cannot trust the strong desires of our “heart” or our “eyes”. Why? What must we trust instead?

3. Why is it important – for the lost of this world and for ourselves as well – that we understand that a day of judgment is coming?

How many give loose to every appetite, and rush into every vicious pleasure! But God registers every one of their sinful thoughts and desires, their idle words and wicked words. If they would avoid remorse and terror, if they would have hope and comfort on a dying bed, if they would escape misery here and hereafter, let them remember the vanity of youthful pleasures. That Solomon means to condemn the pleasures of sin is evident. His object is to draw the young to purer and more lasting joys. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 11.7-10

Thank You, Lord, that in Your resurrection I have the hope of eternal life, so that I can live this day in...

Pray Psalm 139.15-24.

Meditate on sweet thoughts of the Lord, and thank Him for His thoughts toward you. Ask Him to search out any idols in your life, or any wickedness, and to lead you in confession and repentance. Commit your day to following in His everlasting way.

Sing Psalm 139.15-24.

Psalm 139.15-24 (*Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

All my unformed frame You witnessed
when You destined all my days.
Precious to me, Lord, Your precepts;
all Your wondrous Word I praise.
More than sand, Your thoughts to me, Lord,
far too vast their sum for me!
When the morning breaks upon me,
in Your presence I shall be.

Let the wicked come to judgment –
flee from me, all who cause pain!
Lord, with malice they oppose You,
while Your Name they take in vain.
Shall I hate all those You hate, Lord,
all who rise against Your face?
Let them be my foes forever
who reject Your saving grace.

Search my heart, O Lord, and know me,
as You only, Lord, can do.
Test my thoughts and contemplations,
whether they be vain or true.
Let there be no sin in me, Lord,
nothing that Your Spirit grieves.
Lead me in the righteous way, Lord,
unto everlasting peace!

7 Repent!

Pray Psalm 139.23, 24.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if *there is any* wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.10.

Review Ecclesiastes 11.

Prepare.

1. What does Solomon want Rehoboam to do?
2. Why does he want him to do this?

Meditate.

Suddenly – out of frustration or love? – Solomon blurts out his desire for Rehoboam. He needs to repent of his folly, as Solomon himself apparently had done, lay aside all those foolish and destructive ideas and practices, and think about the rest of his life and all of eternity, more than just the days of his youth.

This is about as “point blank” as Solomon gets in Ecclesiastes. His message is true for every age. We cannot live “under the sun” and “under heaven” at the same time. Solomon had tried that (Eccl. 2), and folly always prevails. We must forsake the one to embrace the other. The way of wisdom will not tolerate compromises with or accommodations of folly.

Many Christians today are trying to have the best of both worlds – God’s Kingdom and the ways of the flesh. Jesus warned against this (Matt. 6.24) and Paul said it’s oil and water (Gal. 5.16ff).

Yet we don’t hear much about repentance within the Christian community. We prefer to think of God as infinitely patient with us, willing to bear with our sins and selfish ways, like the loving father of the prodigal son. And so He is; but He also calls us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.13), and to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1).

We need to rediscover the way of repentance, so that we may avert the Lord’s discipline and press on to prove our citizenship in the Kingdom of God (2 Pet. 1.5-11).

Reflect.

1. What is repentance? What is its role in the life of faith?
2. How can we know when we have actually repented of some sin? How do we keep that sin from coming back?
3. What is our responsibility to one another for working out our salvation in fear and trembling?

Put sorrow far from your flesh and sadness from your thoughts, except only that for your sins you should be constant in sadness. Cease not from labor, not even though you are rich, for the slothful person gains manifold guilt by his idleness.

Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), *Homily on Admonition and Repentance 15*

Let there be no lingering sin in me, Lord. Show me my sins, and I will repent, so that...

Pray Psalm 139.1-24.

Thank God for His Presence with you, and for His constant care and provision. Listen as His Spirit searches you for any sins to confess. Repent and go forward in faith.

Sing Psalm 139.1-24.

Psalm 139.1-24 (*Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul*)

You have searched me, Lord, and known me,
when I sit and when I rise;
From afar, my thoughts discerning,
all my path before You lies.
Every word, before it's spoken,
You behold and know it well.
Both behind me and before me,
Your sweet presence I can tell!

Just to know this is more wondrous
than my seeking soul can know.
From Your ever-present Spirit
there is nowhere I can go.
Whether high above the heaven
or below the earth in hell,
Even there Your hand shall lead me
and Your Right Hand hold me well!

Neither light nor dark conceals me;
day as night is with You, Lord!
All my inward parts You fashioned
by Your all-decreeing Word.
Praise the Lord, for You have made me;
all Your wondrous works I'll tell!
All Your works declare Your glory,
and my soul knows this full well!

All my unformed frame You witnessed
when You destined all my days.
Precious to me, Lord, Your precepts;
all Your wondrous Word I praise.
More than sand, Your thoughts to me, Lord,
far too vast their sum for me!
When the morning breaks upon me,
in Your presence I shall be.

Let the wicked come to judgment –
flee from me, all who cause pain!
Lord, with malice they oppose You,
while Your Name they take in vain.

Shall I hate all those You hate, Lord,
all who rise against Your face?
Let them be my foes forever
who reject Your saving grace.

Search my heart, O Lord, and know me,
as You only, Lord, can do.
Test my thoughts and contemplations,
whether they be vain or true.
Let there be no sin in me, Lord,
nothing that Your Spirit grieves.
Lead me in the righteous way, Lord,
unto everlasting peace!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. This chapter encourages us to live not merely for the present but for the days to come. How many different ways can you see this?
2. What do we learn in chapter 11 about the judgment of God? Why is it important to understand this?
3. Solomon insists we should be diligent to make the most of our opportunities. But for what end?
4. What is repentance and why is it important?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 11? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

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Thank you.