

An Extraordinary, Ordinary Life

WAITING FOR HEAVEN

Arguably one of life's greatest challenges is growing old. It seems that one of the things we most want to avoid is, in fact, growing old. In fact, we seem to spend lots of time, energy and maybe money trying to stay young!

And especially for you this morning here are 30 tips to help you keep young!

- Be Happy
- Eat Vegetables
- Avoid sugar
- Moisturize
- Don't raise your eyebrows
- Sleep
- Eat Fish
- Wear Sunscreen
- Don't smoke
- Step out of your comfort zone
- Take Vitamin D
- Eat Fruit
- No foundation or powder make up
- Hydrate
- Whiten Teeth
- Wear Sunglasses
- Eat beans and lentils
- Tea
- Cardio
- Strength training
- Eat intact whole grains
- Olive Oil
- Kill your television
- Don't stuff yourself
- Eat nuts
- Avoid Dairy
- Avoid processed meats
- No processed carbohydrates

Coconut oil
Red wine

The teacher has something different to say.

Remember Your Creator While Young

⁷ Light is sweet,
and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

⁸ 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.

⁹ You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.

Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment.

¹⁰ So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigour are meaningless.

12 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;
³ when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
⁴ when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,

but all their songs grow faint;
⁵ when people are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags itself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

⁶ Remember him—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.

⁸ “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!” (Ecclesiastes 11 v7 – 12 v8)

One thing we know from the teacher so far is that he is not in any way trying to tell us how to avoid getting old. Actually his teaching hasn't really been anything to do with how we handle getting old. His teaching has been about living well in the light of our certain death. His teaching has been about helping us to see that the truth of our death can shape our life. But here, in these verses, the teacher does now talk about ageing and growing old.

He is refreshingly realistic about the challenges of an aging body and the truth about dying. But the teacher is not going to talk about it in the way we might expect. He's going to tell us to rejoice! He's going to tell us to remember!

The teacher began Ecclesiastes with a description in poetic form of the cycle of nature. There, generations come and go, but the earth remains forever. Here, in these verses, it is the cycle of the young who become old! As we read these words we may make a mistake in understanding what the teacher means here by young and old.

In verse 8 the teacher makes a point he's made before, but which is really important: “however many years anyone may live.” The teacher says maybe you'll enjoy a long life, maybe not! The point here is maybe this: The teacher is probably not so much talking in these verses about old versus young – more likely, he is talking in relative terms. How many times have you heard

someone say something like: “Well I’m not really any older,” or “I don’t feel any older!” or “Well I’m still young at heart!” That kind of thing is what the teacher is driving at here.

We do have to face the truth that sometimes our body gets to the point where it doesn’t work physically, and our mind ceases to work properly. The teacher’s point is that until that happens – grab hold of life! And grab hold of it in the same way young people often do! The teacher is saying – grab hold of life in all the ways you can, while you can, however old or young you might in fact be! It may be that one day you can’t enjoy it in the way you can now – so live now!

We might expect the teacher to talk in this kind of way because that’s what he’s done all the way through his book, but here’s what we might miss and might not expect him to say. The teacher says: “Let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart, and whatever your eyes see. (v9)

It seems the teacher is saying, find the joy in life! Well we’ve sort of already bumped into this idea haven’t we? Here though, it’s spoken of in the way of a command, the teacher seems to be giving a command of God to enjoy life all the time you can.

So... is this an invitation to an anything goes kind of enjoyment? Well... verse 9 ends this way: “But know that for all things God will bring you into judgement.” It seems to suggest that God says: “go enjoy life, but not too much and don’t forget I’m watching!” Well – you could read it that way and, if I’m honest, I think that’s how many of us live our lives as followers of Christ.

We know as Christians we can enjoy life, but not too much! And we often get in a bit of a mess trying to figure it all out! Maybe though, the teacher is driving at something slightly different, something better, but something equally, if not more, challenging.

Perhaps a better way of understanding this is that the teacher is saying that one of the things God will hold us to account for, is our enjoyment, or not, of his world.

Enjoyment is, in fact, a gift from God and God will ask: “what did you do with what I gave you?” God gives gifts because he is good and he just loves to give. By enjoying the gifts God has so generously lavished upon us, we show how

much we have grasped the goodness of God. The more we have grasped God's goodness, the more we are able to enjoy his gifts.

So the teacher asks.... How are you doing?

When God gives gifts what he most wants is to see his children enjoy his gifts. So....how are you doing?

You remember Adam and Eve? One of the most fundamental things that happened in the Garden of Eden was that Satan planted the seed of doubt about God's goodness in the minds of Adam and Eve. He sowed into their minds the thought that somehow God was withholding something from them. They allowed that seed to take root and they doubted the goodness of God. They wanted to get for themselves that which they thought God had withheld. One commentator writes it this way: "This was the nerve the serpent had touched in Eden, to make even paradise appear an insult."¹

How are you doing?

So... here's the challenge. Not to live joyfully, gladly or deeply from the wells of the abundant goodness God has lavished upon us – is a sin. It's a sin because it questions, even denies who God is. To live with joy is to live in the presence of who God really is. Joy is not contingent on my circumstances, or how my body is, or how old or young I may actually be. Joy comes from knowing God's nature and character.

You are loved more than you will ever know, by the Almighty, the all -powerful, all knowing, majestic, gracious, compassionate God. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you...You are, and always have been, and always will be, on his mind. You are part of his dream... and he is always, always working to keep his dream alive. He notices you, every detail of your life... he notices.

He will never give up on you, never, never ever! He is always behind the scenes, waiting, longing, hoping and loving. His arms are always ready to welcome you, support you, hug you and carry you. He'll do everything he can to win you. He longs to guide you, protect you, rescue you and help you. He takes great pleasure in giving you gifts to enjoy. He is the master gardener who toils over you with great care and compassion and who longs to see you

¹ Kidner page 262 quoted in Gibson D, "Destiny," IVP 2016 page 134

reach your full redemptive potential. He finds great joy in planting in you. He delights in all he does and he delights in you. His knowledge of you is more than you know yourself. He is able to do all things well, he is able to do abundantly more than we can ask or imagine

He is always, in everything, working to bring about good. He is faithful to all his promises – all he's said and all he's done. Nothing you can do can make him love you more. Nothing you can do can make him love you less. He will not be able to love you any more tomorrow than he loves you today. And he is the one who lavishes good gifts on his children.

So...the teacher wants us to understand we have a choice: we can choose to see God's goodness to us each and every day and live in constant wonder at his daily provision; or... we can choose to doubt God's goodness to us believing he is withholding his best from us... causing us to feel slighted by God and others and allow bitterness, not joy, to be our experience. The teacher says that one day we will be called to account for the way we have embraced the gifts God has lavished upon us.

So...how are you doing?

The teacher insists we rejoice in life, but also that we remember the truth. Some commentators see chapter 12 v 1 - 8 as a description of growing old, and maybe it is! You can have some fun looking at these verses trying to work out which part of the body he is talking about growing old! Others take a different view and look at a bigger picture. They interpret these verses as talking about the gradual, inevitable end of the world! They certainly talk about ageing and point to the truth that nothing will last forever.

I want to take a slightly different approach, but one which links with what we were challenged about at Body Talk a couple of weeks ago. There we were challenged to think about how we might help our children and young people in their Christian lives. I think the teacher might have something to say. Perhaps he suggests, through these words, that children and young people need to be told two things.

We must teach them the truth about the reality of death. That's not meant to be a harsh statement – it is in fact a profoundly deep expression of love. Young people often think, feel and live as if they are indestructible. Maybe, sometimes, they live in ways in which they don't think matters! Friends, we

must teach them and tell them the truth about how life really is. We must not pretend it is otherwise. We must teach them their true identity and value.

Secondly, he says, maybe, we must teach them how to live in response to the lavish goodness of God.

How do we best do that?

The answer is, I think, profoundly simple and yet profoundly challenging. We must live well our lives in front of them so that they see what it means. So... how are you, how are we, living out lives in front of the children and young people in this community? What, in truth, are we teaching them? What are we, in truth, teaching them about God, his goodness, the best way to live, death, life... by the way we live in front of them?

Here's a quote I came across which I think is very powerful:

“Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a fulfilment.”²

I trust and hope that you have found the road which makes death a fulfilment. How are you going to help the next generation to find that road too?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 2nd April 2017, by Rev. Ian Phillips.

² Provan, I *“The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs,”* Zondervan 2001 page 222