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Ecclesiastes 11: 9-10

The Time of Youth under the Sun

Text: Ecclesiastes 11: 9-10.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 11: 1-10.

Singing:

Hymn 42: 1, 4, 5.

Psalm 25: 3.

Psalm 110: 1, 2, 3.

Psalm 119: 4.

Hymn 45: 1, 2, 3, 4.

Theme and Points:

The LORD teaches us that the time of youth is a very special and decisive time in our life under the sun. We will consider:

- 1) the enjoyment of youth*
- 2) the excitement of youth*
- 3) the entanglement of youth*

Ecclesiastes 11: 9-10

The Time of Youth under the Sun

Be happy, young man, 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 to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.

Previously I mentioned that it is remarkable how the Preacher who has said that life is meaningless and utter vanity especially addresses the *youth* at the end of his book.

In fact, I know of no other Bible book that pays more attention to the youth than Ecclesiastes. I suggest to you that, seeing the contents of the whole book, a word of special advice to the youth of the church is quite appropriate.

Of course, this word to the youth is meant also for the *entire* people of God. We should not think, “Oh, this is a message for the youth, so the older people can go home now.” The Bible does not break up the generations into separate groups, but sees the gathered congregation as *one*. You will not therefore hear me advocating a youth service. What is said here to the youth also pertains to those who must guide the youth, as parents, grandparents, office bearers, and as teachers. We are all in this together and we need one another, young and old.

A double standard here?

Someone remarked to me as we were moving ever closer to this particular passage that the text seems somewhat ambiguous, setting a bit of a double standard. What was meant is this: on the one hand the text seems to tell us to go ahead, enjoy our youth, and do as we please, but, on the other hand, it says to be careful because we will be judged for everything done in our youth. It is almost like 11: 10 takes away what was given in 11: 9.

Well, there is no real contradiction here. Parents often say to their children who are going out for the evening, “Enjoy yourself...but behave yourself. Have fun, but don’t do anything foolish!” This is simple and solid

advice. The Preacher takes it one level higher: enjoy your youth, but remember, your whole life will be judged by God.

“Sins of youth...”

We sing from Psalm 25, “Sins of youth remember not...”, and there is good reason for that petition, but we are accountable for our *whole* life, also for our youth. This is especially true when we consider, as the Preacher does, that youth and vigor are “meaningless”, that is, passing, transient, and fleeting. Some people can say reflectively, “Well, I was young once...” and they fondly remember some of the naughty things they did, but sin is sin, whether you are young or old. Do not turn youthful sin into mere naughtiness.

The LORD teaches us that the time of youth is a very special and decisive time in our life under the sun. We will consider:

- 1) *the enjoyment of youth*
- 2) *the excitement of youth*
- 3) *the entanglement of youth.*

The Preacher has made some disparaging comments about life. He has even said that he *hated* life (2:17). That was not just a loose statement, but one that fitted the context: life is a meaningless chasing after wind. Yet now when he begins to come to his conclusion, the Preacher does focus on the positive aspect: life is a great gift of the LORD. No matter how hard life can sometimes be, it is true that light is sweet and it pleases the eyes to see the sun (11:17). It is good to live under the sun. It is not natural to want to die.

The Lord does not condone suicide. It is a sin to seek to kill oneself. Sometimes, the tendency to commit suicide is caused by long-term mental illness. Those who make an attempt to kill themselves need much patient and loving pastoral care. They need to come to appreciate again the beauty and joy of life.

Because of sin, there are many adverse conditions and negative factors which have brought a deep shadow over mankind, but we may still seek to enjoy life. The Preacher first says in general, “However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all” (11:8). Notice the word “all”. All of life is to be enjoyed, every day received as a gift from above, and in each phase of life there are blessings to be enjoyed.

The days of darkness

But one phase in life is easier than another. There are also what is called here “the days of darkness”, or in the next chapter “the days of trouble”. We

will focus more on that later, but the days of darkness are obviously the days when we are *old*. There is a saying –and it is a true saying– that it is nice to *become* old, but not always nice to *be* old. Some experience good mental and physical health into a very high age, but others are not so fortunate in this respect. Most are not so fortunate. The days of darkness, it says, will be *many*.

Therefore it is so important to enjoy one's youth. The word used here for "youth" is similar to the expression for the light of dawn, the early morning sunshine. That is remarkable. Life is compared to but *one day*, which has dawn, day, dusk, and darkness. It says: "Be happy, young man, while you are young and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth", in the time of the dawn of your life. The time of youth is like Spring.

The time of our youth

Happiness and joy should characterize the time of our youth. Both words are very similar and close in meaning. The time of youth is one that is to be fully enjoyed. Please note that it is not happiness or joy based only on outward or external circumstances. It does not say be happy *because* you are young, but be happy *while* or when you are young. We should be happy *throughout* our life, and happiness is not a privilege of youth alone, but it is especially then that we should experience happiness and joy.

Notice also that the text says, "Let your heart give you joy." The joy does not come from the outside, for that would be superficial and circumstantial, but the joy is a *joy in the heart*. This already means that the Lord God is in the picture. For how can we truly be happy from the heart if the LORD is not in our lives? So this cannot be interpreted as a go-ahead to live life as you want to when you are young. The context does not allow that interpretation, and also the text itself directs us otherwise. Let there be Christian joy in the heart. "Rejoice in the Lord, always", wrote Paul (cf. Philippians 4:4).

Why enjoy youth?

Youth, particularly, is a time to be enjoyed because then you are strong and vigorous. Compare that with waking up in the morning after a good night's rest. You went to bed so tired, but you wake up fully refreshed with new strength and abundant energy. The day lies before you, and you are ready to tackle it.

Is it necessary to *tell* the youth to be happy? It may not necessarily be a *command* here in our text, but it is certainly a strong encouragement. Go ahead, be happy, enjoy. Do young people tend not to be happy? I think that also older people, mature adults, can learn from this encouragement.

All young people are not happy

Youthfulness, by itself, does not give or guarantee happiness. Not all young people per definition enjoy their life. There are many unhappy, distraught children and young people in this world. Teenage suicide statistics are not to be laughed at. The life of a youth can be very difficult. 11:10 speaks about anxieties and troubles. We will get back to that later. Puberty and adolescence are not always an easy time, and that goes a lot deeper than a few zits.

Do we as parents, families, office bearers and teachers encourage young people to be happy? Do we try to set the right atmosphere in our homes and schools? Are we aware of the things that can and do bother our children, and do we undertake to address their concerns? I know we cannot give happiness, no matter how hard we try, but we can try to promote the right atmosphere.

Unfortunately the atmosphere in some homes is very unpleasant and disturbed. Children cannot grow up in the proper manner. Discipline is absent or amplified. Some parents exasperate their children, contrary to God's specific command (Eph 6: 4). It is a great challenge to nurture children wisely in the fear and instruction of the Lord. When this is not done in a careful and loving manner, damage is inflicted which has effect for generations.

Ask the youth if they enjoy life...

Family visits start again every fall. A good question for family visitation is whether we, and especially the youth, are *enjoying* life. Let the visiting elders specifically ask that question.

And what is it that we enjoy in our youth? We are allowed, indeed encouraged, to enjoy life, you know. Why should we, when we are young, be laden with all kinds of burdens? Some young people can be such "opas" and "omas" already. Why would a young Christian person not enjoy life? There is something very disturbing about that.

We even read in 11: 9b, "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see..." Someone might think, "Whoa, hold on here, no so fast, because young people always need to be reigned in, not let loose". But you must understand the text does not say, "Follow the *sinful* ways of your heart." On the contrary. Or, "Look at whatever *evil* your eyes see." Not at all. But when you are young, you have dreams and you make plans, and life is still so very exciting. I'm not saying that being fifty-plus has no excitement, far from it, but the text says that youth is the time of anticipation and enthusiasm.

The church needs the enthusiasm of youth

Not too long ago I read this message on a local church sign: “as long as there is enthusiasm, there is youth”. I am not great fan of such roadside messages, but this one struck a chord. A church that wishes to keep and nurture its youth must show enthusiasm in the service of the Lord.

The church needs youthful enthusiasm. I mention this because it is so tempting for older people to be concerned about the youth. We say, shaking our heads, “...the youth of today...” Well, there are always concerns, legitimate or not, but the enthusiasm of youth should be encouraged and channelled, not snuffed out. “Follow the ways of your heart” means do what you really feel you want to do! “Whatever your eyes see” means pursue what you admire, do not hesitate or hold back, go ahead, and follow your heart to obtain what you really like.

This passage refers to the excitement of youth. There is so much to see and do. Youth is a time of *discovery*, and children should not be held back from exploring and discovering things. Every new day brings new experiences. This is how it should be. As older people we should appreciate the youth’s zest for life. We should enjoy their enthusiasm and be positively affected by it, because the youth do with boundless energy what older people no longer can do or want to do.

There is a warning here. Youthful freedom is not a licence to do whatever you want. The Preacher adds, “But know that for all these things, God will bring you to judgment.” Follow your heart, go for it, but God’s eyes are upon you, and He will bring also the deeds of youth into judgment.

The youth are to keep that in mind. This is not said to frighten or discourage, but to keep things in the proper perspective. Young people also need to know that God’s judgment covers all of life. You cannot get away with something simply because you are young. As such, there is no Young Offender’s Act in heaven. Youthful excitement should not lead to sinful entanglement.

The conclusion

For the conclusion in 11: 10 is this: “So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.” I pointed earlier to the words “anxiety” and “troubles” and said that we would get back to them.

The time of youth can be a very *anxious* time. Growing up is not easy. There are a lot of pressures. Parental expectations are high and peer pressure is immense.

I think that, in the context, the word anxiety means more anxiety because of *sins*. We can get entangled in something sinful that causes us much anxiety.

I chose the word “entangled” because I think it rightly conveys the proper sense here: you walk into something, not realizing how dangerous it really is, and before you know it you are entangled, caught and trapped, and you cannot get loose. Everyone can get entangled, but it is especially a danger when we are young because we do not have the experience of life to know when serious dangers lie ahead.

Sin causes anxiety. It can take away your enjoyment and enthusiasm. The Preacher also writes, “Cast off the troubles of your body.” I wondered about that expression. He is writing about *physical* aspects, the troubles of the *body*. What physical problems can youth have? He does not mean sickness, because you cannot cast off sickness.

I therefore conclude that the expression “troubles of the body” indicates the physical aspects of growing up, when there is hormonal change and when our sexuality comes into play. Perhaps one of the greatest struggles for young people is to come to grips with their sexuality, their new identity as an emerging adult, and here the youth must be instructed and cautioned. You can get into a lot of “trouble” in this matter, which will affect your entire life.

Banish and cast off

Notice the two *verbs* that are used in this verse. The Preacher says that you must *banish* anxiety and *cast off* the troubles of your body. See those verbs? They are rather powerful. “Banish” means to expel completely. Get rid of anxiety completely. “Cast off” the troubles of your body means to take decisive steps, and throw these troubles far away. We may not get entangled, but must retain our freedom. That takes effort and decisive action.

Young people need to make important commitments and decisions. I will not become entangled in sinful things. I will not engage in illicit sexuality. Just say “no”. These things only cause anxiety and trouble, and destroy youthful vigor.

Easily entangled?

Entanglements can really weigh us down and take away our joy. Of course, I understand that it is not easy to avoid entanglement. Satan ardently preys on young people. He tries to abuse their immaturity to his advantage. If he can turn us away from God when we are still young, he could perhaps entangle us for the rest of our lives.

Perhaps you can ask your growing children if they are *entangled* in anything. Is there something or someone who controls their lives other than the Lord Jesus Christ? Be honest and open with each other.

Is it a hopeless cause? Not at all. We are baptized as infants. That is a great start. We do belong to Jesus Christ. He covers our whole life, for He, too, was a child and an adolescent. He knows all about the problems that young people can have. He understands the temptations that come our way, especially when we are young. He wrote these words. He watches over the flock, also and especially over the lambs. "Loving Shepherd, ever near." So you have to commit your life to him, already as a child.

Especially as a teenager, seek the Lord and the fellowship of his church. I become particularly concerned when young people do not regularly attend church. Then you are really in the danger zone. I warn you, then you will get entangled and will not be able to break loose.

We have each other, young and old

We have each other, young and old, and we are to be responsible also for one another. The elderly need the youth and their enthusiasm. The youth need the elderly and their wisdom. We cannot allow or afford a generation gap in the church. Together we need to be committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. He will protect us. Everyone who goes to the Lord Jesus Christ, also every young person, will not be turned away.

There is often a distance between the generations, between young and old. We grow up in different times and under different circumstances. We should never underestimate this truth, especially not when we have become older. The gap can be bridged only in Christ. The differences can be overcome only in the way of Christian love and understanding.

The time of our youth is very special and decisive. It is soon gone. Youth and vigor are meaningless. You cannot stay young forever, no matter what the song says. You *can* live forever and receive eternal youth. Be not entangled in Satan's snares, but safe in Christ's embrace.

AMEN.