

# Riding the Storm Out

**Ecclesiastes 11:1** Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

<sup>2</sup> Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

<sup>3</sup> If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

<sup>4</sup> He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

<sup>5</sup> As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

<sup>6</sup> In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

<sup>7</sup> Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

<sup>8</sup> So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

<sup>10</sup> Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

**Ecclesiastes 12:1** Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";  
<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,  
<sup>3</sup> in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed,  
<sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut-- when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low--  
<sup>5</sup> they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets--  
<sup>6</sup> before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,  
<sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.  
<sup>8</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 11:1-12-8)

## The Storm

Thursday, [October 5, 2017](#). The day was supposed to be over. The President had retired to the State Dining Room for dinner with his top military brass. Unexpectedly, the leader of the free world summoned the media back into action. At 7:18 p.m., everyone was escorted into the dining

room where the military's senior commanders and their wives were lined up around President Trump and the First Lady for a photo op.

Suddenly, Trump's right hand moves sideways, down and up, up and down. Some say he was gesturing to the commanders. But it looked like he is making **some kind of letter** of the alphabet. "**You guys know what this represents?**" he asks them. After a dramatic pause he continued, "**Maybe it's the calm before the storm.**"

"**What's the storm?**" one reporter called out.

"**What storm, Mr. President?**" another asked loudly.

"**We have the world's great military people in this room, I will tell you that,**" the President said.

Again, another reporter asked, "**What storm, Mr. President?**"

Then the now famous and cryptic words were uttered. "**You'll find out.**"<sup>1</sup>

The President's "storm" has itself been obscured by the fog of meaning since that day, and no one is quite sure what he had in mind, though it is certainly something **political**.

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<sup>1</sup> Every major news outlet reported on this episode. I took this particular distillation of that evening from **Jenna Johnson**, "What storm, Mr. President? Trump puts world on edge with cryptic cliffhanger," The Washington Post (Oct 6, 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/what-storm-mr-president-trump-puts-world-on-edge-with-cryptic-cliffhanger/2017/10/06/4f88c7d2-aacc-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/what-storm-mr-president-trump-puts-world-on-edge-with-cryptic-cliffhanger/2017/10/06/4f88c7d2-aacc-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975_story.html).

We are used to much more common kinds of storms—**natural disasters**. The Galveston Hurricane of 1900 that took the lives of 12,000 people or Ian that ripped through much of Florida and the Carolinas this past week. The Tri-State Tornado of 1925 that killed 695 in the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. The 1996 blizzard on Mt. Everest that claimed eight climbers in the “Dead Zone.”

Then there are the **metaphorical storms** told by our troubadours. Typically, many sing of lost love as a kind of storm. “It’s raining again, my love’s at an end,”<sup>2</sup> sings **Supertramp**. “Here Comes the Rain Again | Raining in my head like a tragedy | Tearing me apart like a new emotion,”<sup>3</sup> **Annie Lennox** says. **Adele** intentionally made her storm worse, “Set[ting] fire to the rain” of love gone bad.<sup>4</sup>

But it isn’t just love. **Bob Dylan** retells a story he calls “hurricane,” the insane tale of racism, profiling, and mistaken identity that landed Rubin “Hurricane” Carter in prison for 20 years, though he could have been the middle-weight “champion of the world.”<sup>5</sup> **David Wilcox** laments that “need for speed” (drugs) that convinces a young girl whose “hope is gone” that “she can hide | Hide in the

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<sup>2</sup> **Supertramp**, “It’s Raining Again,” ...*Famous Last Words...*, A&M (1982).

<sup>3</sup> **Eurythmics**, “Here Comes The Rain Again,” *Touch*, RCA Records (1983).

<sup>4</sup> **Adele**, “Set Fire To The Rain,” *21*, XL Recordings (2011).

<sup>5</sup> **Bob Dylan**, “Hurricane (Part II),” *Desire*, Columbia (1975).

pouring rain” as “She rides the eye of the hurricane” until she runs full speed on her “rocket bike” into a parked truck.<sup>6</sup>

Some see all of life as a storm. **Etta James** brought life to the 1933 “torch song” called “**Stormy Weather**,” first sung at Harlem’s famous Cotton Club. “Don’t know why | There’s no sun up in the sky | Stormy weather ... Life is bad | Gloom and misery everywhere | Stormy weather, stormy weather | And I just can’t get my poor self together | Oh I’m weary all of the time.”<sup>7</sup> **Jim Morrison** said he was the rider on the storm. “Into this house, we’re born | Into this world, we’re thrown ... Riders on the storm.”<sup>8</sup> In another song, **Dylan** was seeking “Shelter from the Storm.”<sup>9</sup> **Stevie Nicks** called herself the storm. “So I try to say goodbye, my friend | I’d like to leave you with something warm | But never have I been a blue calm sea | I have always been a storm.”<sup>10</sup> **Muddy Waters** very name may be the result of a storm!

**Creedence Clearwater Revival** asks you about the storm. “Someone told me long ago | There’s a calm before the storm | I know, it’s been comin’ for some time | When it’s over, so they say | It’ll reign a sunny day | I know, shinin’

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<sup>6</sup> **David Wilcox**, “Eye of the Hurricane,” *How Did You Find Me Here*, A&M Records (1989).

<sup>7</sup> **Etta James**, “Stormy Weather,” *At Last!*, Argo (1960).

<sup>8</sup> **The Doors**, “Riders on the Storm,” *L.A. Woman*, Elektra Records (1971).

<sup>9</sup> **Bob Dylan**, “Shelter from the Storm,” *Blood on the Tracks*, A & R Recording (1975).

<sup>10</sup> **Fleetwood Mac**, “Storms,” *Tusk*, Warner Records (1979).

down like water | Yesterday and days before | Sun is cold and rain is hard | I know, been that way for all my life | I wanna know have you ever seen the rain? | Comin' down on a sunny day?"<sup>11</sup> How do you view the storms: disasters, politics, your love life, this crazy world, or even yourself? Does it feel like yesterday and the days before are nothing but rain? How might wisdom teach you to think on such storms? This is the penultimate point of the book of Ecclesiastes.

## Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8 – Context and Structure

Many have **not recognized** that the passage we are looking at today (**Ecc 11:1-12:8**) is a single unit of thought. Some see **11:7-12:8** as a unit, and prior to that the first six verses are either seen as part of what comes before and/or are split up as one or two separate units of their own. I'm convinced that this is incorrect and that how you read this makes a difference on how you understand the meaning of this, the last main section of Ecclesiastes prior to the conclusion.

Let's recall that **the entire book is chiastic**, with the structural and thematic center being the fourth of seven joys

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<sup>11</sup> **Creedence Clearwater Revival**, "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" *Pendulum*, Fantasy (1970).

(5:18-20), of which our passage contains the last (11:7-10).<sup>12</sup> The parallel to what we are looking at today is Ecc 1:2-11. This is easily seen in the common “creation” imagery such as sun, wind, streams, sea in the former and now “the waters” (11:1), “the earth” (2), “clouds” and “rain” (3; 12:2), “the wind” (4), and “the sun” (7; 12:1) here. As Yoreh explains, “The beginning and end of the book are virtually identical ... Both deal with the inevitable [cyclicity] of nature (not really found elsewhere in the book), according to 1:4 the sun rises and sets and then rises again, and according to 11:3, if the clouds be full of rain, they empty *themselves* upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.”<sup>13</sup> Hamilton shows that the former deals with the circularity of life while the later is about youth and old age. So, same thing.<sup>14</sup> It is a great way to wrap up the observations he has made that take place throughout our lives. This circularity is also seen by noticing more Genesis 1 language of “morning” and “evening” (11:6), and words like “youth”

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<sup>12</sup> See my sermon on this passage, “Joy in the Midst of Evil and Vanity.” <https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/5a5d1f0f-b7a8-4f5f-ad3d-2f8658b364cf~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>.

<sup>13</sup> Tzemah Yoreh, “Symmetrical Structures in the Writings; Ecclesiastes Symmetries English,” *Biblical Symmetries*, [http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical\\_structures.html](http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical_structures.html).

<sup>14</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), Table 4.6, p. 319.



(9, 10, 12:1) and returning to the “dust” (12:7) when you die. All this language takes us back to things that are common to all mankind, things we share in God’s creation.

**But we are Christians**, and so must not think about such things merely as men. This is the key point that we can identify much more easily if we understand how our passage operates. Though noticed by very few scholars, as with many, though not all, of the units in Ecclesiastes, this one is clearly chiasmic.

Earth Clouds Rain Tree Spirit God (11:2-5)

Light Sun (7)

Years (8)

Days of darkness (8c)

Vanity (8d)

Youth (9, 10)

Heart (9b)

“But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (9c)

Heart (10a)

Youth (10b, 12:1a)

Vanity (10c)

Evil days (1b)

Years (12c)

Sun Light (2)

Clouds Rain Tree Earth Spirit God (2b, 5, 7)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is my modification of the excellent chiasm and discussion in **Daniel C. Fredericks**, “Let’s Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11.1-12.8,” *JSOT* 52 (1991): 101-05.



Here are two reasons why this is significant. **First**, it creates **an obvious center**. This center is **the heart of how a Christian should understand our passage**. “**But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment**” (11:9). If you don’t see the structure, you don’t see this center. In fact, because they haven’t seen it, some who read Ecclesiastes very negatively actually see this verse as a later addition of some pious scribe who is trying to tone down the harsh rhetoric and outlook on life in this book.<sup>16</sup> You will hear all about this harsh rhetoric today. But this statement regarding God’s judgment of how we live our common profane lives in this world is **in perfect harmony** with his earlier statement of God’s judgment concerning how we live our religious and sacred lives (5:1-6). He judges both. When you see this center, you no longer have to try to force this verse to fit into an otherwise inexplicable setting. It was part of his thought all along.

This leads to **the second point**. The **repetition of ideas** on either side of this center helps us read this long passage not as independent, though perhaps related proverbs, but as **a long poem that interprets itself**. The importance of this for the storm is especially important when we come to **12:3-8**,

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<sup>16</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 138.

a passage which at first does not seem to be related, but when read as a whole becomes very obviously describing “**the storm’s disastrous effects**”<sup>17</sup> on creation.

This all **sounds incredibly bleak**, and like I said, you’ll see even more of that later. But that’s where the “**heart**” (figuratively and literally, see **vv. 11:9, 10**) of the matter comes in and why the structure is so important. For the word “**heart**” most immediately surrounds the center statement on both sides. And that heart brings us once more to our seventh and final “joy” of the book:

A. Heart and Joy (9a)

B. Judgment (9b)

A’. Heart and Joy (10)

When we compare this joy to the center of God’s judgment, it makes for quite an amazing way to think about the storms, and it is nowhere near as bleak as it seems.

## Initial Advice (Ecc 11:1-2)

The passage begins with some **initial wisdom**. It comes in the first two verses in the form of parallel proverbs. “**Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many**

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<sup>17</sup> **Fredericks**, 103.

days” (11:1). “Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth” (2). As we have seen with many verses in this book, these have been given **very different interpretations**.

Think about **vs. 1 literally**. If you throw your bread to the water, won't it make that bread soggy and nasty? Remember, they didn't have plastic wrap back then, so no Wonder Bread floating on the ocean here. Would anyone really want it after that? And doesn't bread outside, even if it is protected, get moldy and hard after several days?

Because of these kinds of observations, some commentators, using a couple of Egyptian sayings as their guide,<sup>18</sup> think this refers to **sowing seed in a floodplain** like the Nile. “The time for sowing the seed, is just when the waters are going down, leaving a loamy bed, in which the seed apparently lost is deposited, and produces a most luxuriant harvest.”<sup>19</sup> What is found after many days is a harvest of grain. So primarily what is in mind is **working hard and getting a good reward for it**. Similarly, they interpret **vs. 2** as **diversifying your investments** among several people, so that when hard times hit, you won't take as hard of a loss, because you

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<sup>18</sup> “Do good, throw your bread on the waters, and one day you will be rewarded” (*The Instructions of 'Onksheshonqy* 19.10). “A deed happens to its doer” (26.10).

<sup>19</sup> **Charles Bridges**, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1860; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 263.

were wise in how you worked. This idea certainly fits the larger context of work, as we will see shortly, but I'm not sure it makes much sense of the actual words here.

Others see here a reference to [the making of beer](#). We know that beer was often made in those days by throwing the ingredients like *happir* bread and dates into the water. On this suggestion, the advice is back to *carpe diem*: make beer and drink it with your friends (i.e. seven or eight people), for you do not know what evil is coming.<sup>20</sup> This also [fits the theme of joy](#) that we will find later.

I've always assumed they refer to [generosity](#), the thing it took Scrooge several ghosts and potential disasters to figure out. This is the traditional interpretation as seen in [the Targum](#)<sup>21</sup> and [most Church Fathers](#). If you throw your bread to the waters (a metaphor for other people; [Isa 17:12](#)), you will find more later in the same way that if you give to seven or eight people in good times, then you will gain friends and when disaster comes and you lose everything, you will not be forgotten by them.

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<sup>20</sup> [Michael M. Homan](#), "Beer Production by Throwing Bread into Water: A New Interpretation of Qoh. XI 1-2," *VT* 52.2 (2002): 275-78. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1585093?read-now=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1585093?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>21</sup> "Extend your *nourishing bread to the poor who go in ship* on the surface of the water, for after a period many days you shall find its *reward in the world to come*" (Eccl Targum 11:1).

If this is the case, Ecclesiastes is focusing on **what you can gain from it personally**. He is appealing to your **love of self**. But the Fathers used this as a way to teach us about godly, rather than selfish, generosity. One said, “It happens with most people that they give indeed, but they do not do so freely and readily, which is the greater and more perfect thing than the mere act of offering itself” (**Gregory of Nazianzus** [329-390], *On the Death of His Father*, Oration 18.20). Another was **anti-woke** because he knew the Scripture when he said, “When you give, give generously, with a joyous countenance, and give more than you are asked for, since it is said: ‘Send forth thy morsel of bread toward the face of the poor man,<sup>22</sup> and soon you will find your recompense.’ Do not separate the rich from the poor, nor try to discriminate the worthy from the unworthy, but let all persons be equal in your eyes for a good deed” (**Isaac of Nineveh** [613-700], *Ascetical Homilies* 4).<sup>23</sup> Combining these, many Fathers (**Didymus the Blind**, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 317.15; **Ambrose**, *Letter 50, To Horontianus*) also took their traditional interpretation of **seven and eight** to refer to the OT and NT

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<sup>22</sup> Interpreting “water” as the “poor man,” as does the Targum.

<sup>23</sup> In **J. Robert Wright**, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 274.

(Jesus rose on the eighth day) and that we as Christians are all the more obligated to be generous because of our Lord.

I do not see any of these as mutually exclusive. What I do know is that these **two verses are setting us up** for real context and setting of the passage: the storms of life. How will you respond when they come?

## The Storms and Their Damage (11:3-5; 12:2-8)

The end of **vs. 2** introduces them to us. “**You do not know what disaster may happen on earth.**” What kind of **disaster**? “**If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth**” (**3a**). That doesn’t sound so bad; a nice rainy day. “**... and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie**” (**3**). This is the key. This is not just any old tree falling (Reminding me of the **Steven Wright** Joke, “**I was once walking through the forest alone and a tree fell right in front of me, and I didn’t hear it.**”), it happens *because of the storm*. **The disaster is destroying the forest** and no one cares.

We know this is the right interpretation as we keep reading. “**He who observes *the wind* will not sow, and he who regards *the clouds* will not reap**” (**4**). This refers to the worry



people have as a storm approaches. They are too busy worrying about themselves to care about some fallen tree that the same storm blew over. The storm causes them to stop working. They get so caught up in what might happen to them that their normal lives are put on hold. Thus, *the disaster effects our work*, the same kind of work we were supposed to be doing in **vv. 1-2**.

The next verse is also related. “*As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything*” (5). This seeming change of subject is *still on point*. Now the disaster is affecting *our knowledge*. This disaster is “*the work of God.*” He is the only true Rider of the Storm (**Ps 104:3**; cf. **18:10**; **Isa 19:1**; **Jer 4:13**; **Dan 7:13**; **Matt 26:64**). He is the one who holds the storms of creation in his hands and yes, rides on them in sovereign majesty. In the storm, his ways are mysterious, like knitting bones in the womb from seeming nothingness. *Yet, we worry*. We fret. Because the reality is, we do not understand or know his way in the storm. And most times, *we are too busy being upset* to bother to ask. These responses that we so often have, as natural as they are, demonstrate our *lack of*



knowledge and wisdom, for if we knew what he was doing, how could we respond like that?

Vs. 6 returns us to **our work**. First we were supposed to work (1-2). Then we stopped working (4), because of God's mysterious work (5). Now we are encouraged to continue to work. He gives us **the first response** we should have in the face of calamity. "In the morning *sow* your seed, and at evening withhold not *your hand*, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good" (6). Luther was supposedly once asked, "If you knew the world would end tomorrow [sounds like a calamity to me], what would you do today?" He said, "I would plant a tree." He was referring to the **goodness** of work and of God's creation, but also was making fun of how people **really do not know** the future. In other words, "No one could know that! So I will keep doing what I do." This is very much like Ecclesiastes 11:6.

Many people **do not see this verse as connected** to much either before or after it, save perhaps the idea of working hard. But the overall structure necessitates that, while it certainly gives good advice about work, it seems to answer the question of not working because the wind and clouds are preoccupying your attention. Notice again how **vv. 2 and 5**

talk about a **coming disaster** that you cannot understand. **Vs. 3** tells you it is a **storm**, while **vs. 4** tells you that because of the storm, men will not sow or reap. “**Sowing**” is the same word in **vs. 6**. There’s your direct connection. Furthermore, he has been citing many things that we find in creation: earth, clouds, rain, trees. This takes our mind to Genesis 1, as other parts of Ecclesiastes have also done. “Morning and evening” do the same. So vs. 6 is clearly related.

Even more, notice **vs. 7**. “**Let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.**” This shows us the continuation of storms in his thinking. Perhaps not the same one, but the idea has never left his thoughts. Now, at this point, he seems to totally change subjects, but if we go to **12:2ff**, we see that the clouds return again. When you see what he will do in these verses, you will know with certainty that this proverb in **11:6** is not just a stand-alone. It is very close to the center of his wisdom for your life, even as it has been throughout his sermon. Let’s turn to those verses and see what they say.

**12:2** talks about the **sun** and **light** and **moon** and **stars** all being darkened. This **apocalyptic language** is fitting of a storm. Indeed, he then says, “**... and the clouds return after**

the rain.” This is the **same subject** as we have just been seeing in ch. 11.

From here, he gives **13 different descriptions** of the storm’s disastrous effects on other parts of creation (**vv. 3-5**). It isn’t just the trees that fall over. First, he describes **the community**. **1. The keepers of the house tremble (12:3a)**. We all know what a tornado can do to a trailer park. Most houses in ancient times were not much sturdier. Severe storms could bring every homeowner to his knees. Will my house be gone in the morning? **2. The strong men are bent (3b)**. The **keepers** and the **strong men** are parallel to one another. Fredericks puts it this way, “**While the encroaching clouds obscure the luminaries, both hired and noble men are humbled; they tremble and even cringe to minimize their bodies’ exposure to the storm’s onslaught.**”<sup>24</sup> These rich and powerful, strong and courageous men are now anxious and fearful. “**This storm has no respect for human might or dignity.**” Perhaps it isn’t just the house that may be blown away in this storm. Maybe the strong men will too.

First it was **the men**, next it is **the women**. **3. The grinders cease because they are few (3c)**, **4. Those who look through the**

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<sup>24</sup> Fredericks, 108.

*windows are dimmed (3d); 5. The doors on the street are shut (4a); 6. The sound of the grinding is low (4b).* Note the chiasm:

Grinders

Windows

Doors

Grinding

Most are **fleeing their work** because the storm's fury is upon them. They are running to their homes, closing the doors behind them, and now look out the windows in sullen resignation of the impending disaster. They are helpless and can only sit it out.

At this point, **animals** are introduced. First it is birds. 7. *One rises up at the sound of a bird (4c).* Bob Marley sings, “**Rise up this morning, smiled with the rising sun | Three little birds pitch by my doorstep | Singing sweet songs of melodies pure and true | Saying, ‘This is my message to you—ou-ou.’**” Ironically for this part of our passage, Marley continues “**... Don’t worry about a thing, ‘Cause every little thing is gonna be alright.**”<sup>25</sup> While the birds were singing

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<sup>25</sup> **Bob Marley and the Wailers**, “Three Little Birds,” *Exodus*, Island Records (1977).

early this particular morning, their song is quickly hushed. They are also affected by the storm. They are worried!

8. *The daughters of song are brought low* (4d). 9. *They are afraid also of what is high* (5a); 10. *And terrors are in the way* (5b). “The calm of the morning, introduced by the song of birds, is only the lull before the ominous fury which the clouds, wind and rain are about to bring. They fear from the heights in which they fly or perch themselves, and even find terrors on the road as well.”<sup>26</sup>

The impending disaster includes **vegetation** and **insects** next. This harkens back to the fallen tree. 11. *The almond tree blossoms* (5c). This doesn't seem to fit. But as Longman says, this verb is difficult. Most ancient translations and modern commentators think the root word here is “**to bloom**” (*nšš*). However, it could be “**to despise**” (*n'š*).<sup>27</sup> I can't see how a blossoming almond tree would work with this storm (unless the storm forced the blossoms out early), but the idea that the **almond tree is despised** by the storm which couldn't care less, and ends up making it look disgusting,<sup>28</sup> I can understand.

This works well with the last two. 12. *The grasshopper drags itself along* (5d). Normally hopping and flying about, he

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<sup>26</sup> Fredericks, 109.

<sup>27</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 266, n. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Fredericks, *ibid.*

is powerless against the gale-force winds and rain. His wings are soaked. His legs are impotent. He can only crawl. **13. *And desire fails* (5e)**. This translation from the ESV certainly fits the bleak picture, but it seems better that what is in mind is the untranslated **caperberry bush** (NAS). Even though it is low to the ground, it too is useless, defenseless, helpless, just like everything else.

At this point, I need to ask a question. **What is this storm in mind in Ecclesiastes?** I believe it is a storm that **works on two levels**. On one level, it can be a **literal** storm, like we might think of a hurricane. Though rare, and nothing like what we have in North America, Israel can have blizzards, sandstorms, tornadoes, and flooding. But the storms in mind here can also be the storms God brings into our lives in so many **other ways**: financial storms, health storms, relationship storms, political storms, you name it. These are not rare.

But the point of his long discussion on storms is to something even more bleak. This is made clear in what follows. **“Because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets” (5fg)**. This storm is a **foreshadowing** ... of death, **the one storm that we are all guaranteed to go through**, unless the Lord Jesus returns in glory first. Death is that great leveler of all men and truly, it is a storm, one



that even the Lord Jesus did not desire to go through, the result of the curse, the thing that makes creation moan and groan.

Several metaphors are given. “Before the silver cord is snapped” (6a), “or the golden bowl is broken” (6b). Life is a cord that can be cut. It is a bowl that when dropped easily breaks, and they represent the life God has given us. Yet, though it is fragile, it is still *silver* cord and *golden* bowl. Gold and silver belong together. They are treasures. This will have more meaning as we go back and think about the center of the passage.

He continues, “Or the pitcher is shattered at *the fountain*” (6c), “or the wheel broken at *the cistern*” (6d). Now life is likened to a pitcher of life-giving water and a wheel that allows the bucket to take the water out of the cistern. In other words, life itself is like water, life-giving and nourishing and hydrating and glorious. Life is wonderful. Life is incomparable. Along with the previous, it is rich. It is something to treasure and long for.

But it does not last forever, not in this form at least. The final image of death takes us back to Genesis, in an image we have seen before. “And *the dust* returns to the earth as it was, and *the spirit* returns to God who gave it” (7). As we return



to Genesis, so we return to the cause of death—sin. Death is part of the curse, and the curse came because of sin.

The greatest curse of death is **the separation of body and soul**. This is not natural; they were designed to be together. This verse, however, teaches that when we die, **our soul is separated from our bodies**. It does not cease to exist, but it returns to God who gave it. I wouldn't make too much of this as it regards unbelievers' souls going to God or as it regards the question of the origin of the soul. His audience is those who fear God and we aren't in a systematic treatment of the doctrine of the afterlife, as we are in other places such as Paul's letters. It is enough to say that it is clear that **Solomon believed in the afterlife**, from this and other passages.

**The conclusion** is the way we opened the book. “**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity**” (8). Life is a **vapor** and a **mist**, a mere **breath**, here for a short moment and then gone. That's the book in a nutshell in terms of its observations about life on this planet. But this is **not his most fundamental point in our passage**. As with so many other parts of this book, it is easy to get overwhelmed with the negative. This seems no truer than in this next-to-last section of his sermon. The subject for so long today has been bleak and dire. But to see this as the point is to miss the point. The

Preacher is not shy about being honest about the stark and difficult realities of life. But **he never leaves you here**. His purpose is as redemptive as it is raw and earthy.

## Our Response to the Storms (Ecc 11:7-12:1)

We've seen how one of the fundamental points of the passage is that we continue on, working as we should, doing what we were created to do, even in the midst of the storms. We do not know God's ways and to pretend otherwise by failing to carry out our God given mandates is to be dishonest. But even this is not the main point. We turn now **from death and darkness to light**. The disaster is dark, because the storm blocks the sun. But, he says, "**Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun**" (11:7). Imagine that you've been sick in bed for months. Finally, you are taken outside. You are terrified of the dark as a child and can't wait for morning. You've been trapped down in a cave for a week and your rescuers finally get you to the surface. Sunlight! The greatest gift of all. Warmth. Light. Peace. Life.

Is he thinking here about **the light before the storm**? Is he thinking about **the light after the storm**? The next verse explains, "**So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in**

them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity” (8). He has in mind the light that you see before *or* after the storm. It is the light you see throughout your life, between the storms, and even, in them. In other words, he has your entire life in view.

It doesn't matter if you are five years old and have much light now or if you are 75 years old and feel as if there isn't much left. **Vs. 8** speaks to the elderly. “If a person lives many years.” It gives you two last bits of wisdom on how you are to live your life. Don't just work, but *rejoice* and *remember*. As you remember, rejoice. As you rejoice, remember. They go together.

Rejoice in *all* your years. To not rejoice, is to sin. “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.” Don't fixate your mind on the evil, on the trouble, on the toil, on the terror, on the darkness, on the sin. Rejoice. Not at the storm, but in the storm, through the storm. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (**James 1:2**). “Those who plan peace have joy” (**Prov 12:20**). “The hope of the righteous brings joy” (**10:28**). “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (**John 15:11**).

And yet **remember**. This idea that you are to rejoice is not some delusional pretending that nothing is wrong in this world. “**Remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.**” But the Christian can see both, simultaneously. We’ve seen in this book **the hedonistic way** that unbelievers approach life in their *carpe diem* view of seize the day for tomorrow we die. We’ve also seen how so many take **a defeatist view** of life into everything they think and do. Perhaps this is the easier of the two today, because the subject has been so bleak with all these terrible storms of life. Many people are good at one or the other. But the Christian is called to rejoice *and* remember. Simultaneously.

These two are discussed in more detail in **vv. 9-10** (rejoice) and **12:1** (remember). **The young man** is called to rejoice next. “**Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.**” (**9a**). How many children live miserable lives, troubled lives, thoughts of depression and even suicide. Much of this is brought on to them by adults. This ought not be. Our young people ought to be free to rejoice. The comedian **Brian Regan** tells the story of how his son was doing something ridiculous with spaghetti and the sauce, flipping and flopping the stuff

all over the room, totally entranced and having the time of his life. So, he stopped his kid. “Hey, man. Knock that off. Can’t you see that the paint on the walls is more important than the joy in your heart?” I’m not advocating we let them do anything they want, but I think you get the picture.

“Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity” (10). The Living Translation gets part of the sense here when it says, “Young people, it’s wonderful to be young! Do everything you want to do; take it all in.” And yet, based on Numbers 15:39, this verse bothered the Rabbis to no end. Moses had said, “And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, *not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after.*”

Number is talking about sinful inclinations, not good ones. Here you need to understand that “vexation” can be translated as “anger” and “pain” can be translated as “evil.” There is a double-entendre here with the words. On one hand, enjoy your youth, as the NLT said. However, do not sin as you do it. Obey Numbers 15.

Augustine said, “Therefore, if anger has held out with most shameful boldness in the heart of any one of you until

these holy days, now at least let it depart” (Augustine, *Sermon* 208.2). Didymus said, “The passage therefore means: Even if we sometimes are caught up in anger, this ‘anger’ should not be allowed into the ‘heart,’ so that the anger does not become a permanent condition . . . Otherwise it becomes a permanent condition and not just an affect or a precondition for this affect, but simply evil” (Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 337.20). Why might he start to talk about anger here? Because the effects of the storms can create great anger in our hearts. This ought not be, especially when you understand that God is sovereign over all these storms, and the Sovereign Lord himself willingly underwent the greatest Storm your behalf, so that you might have forgiveness and life and happiness and peace.

Thus, **Ecc 12:1** tells you to remember. I’ve told you to remember your own Lord, the Suffering Servant and his storm for you. Ecclesiastes tells you, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’” Forgetting your Creator when you are young is one of the chief and easiest sins, precisely because the storms do not seem to come as often or hard. That’s how you get Pagans and hedonism.



The same pagans are able to rejoice in the storms in ways that often make Christians look bad. In the famous musical, **Gene Kelly** sings, “I’m singin’ in the rain, just singin’ in the rain. What a glorious felling, I’m happy again. I’m laughin’ at clouds, so dark up above. The sun’s in my heart and I’m ready for love.”<sup>29</sup> **Eddie Rabbit** seems to understand to some degree, “I love a rainy night | It’s such a beautiful sight ... Showers wash all of my cares away | I wake up to a sunny day.”<sup>30</sup> And **The Eagles** certainly understand the longing, “Sitting by a foggy window | Staring at the pouring rain | Falling down like lonely teardrops | Memories of love in vain ... I know a place | Where we can go | Where true love always stays | There’s no more stormy nights | No more cloudy days.” But all of these forget the Lord.

But **the Christian knows the fuller truth**. At the heart of this truth is the Creator, sovereign over the storms. At the heart of our passage is the end of **Ecc 11:9**. “**But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.**” If you are not a Christian, that judgment will be **according to your works**. But for the Christian, it is a judgment rooted in faith in Christ, who took the judgment for you according to

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<sup>29</sup> **Arthur Freed**, lyricist (1929). “Singin’ in the Rain,” *Singin’ in the Rain*, singer/director Gene Kelly, MGM (1952).

<sup>30</sup> **Eddie Rabbit**, “I Love a Rainy Night,” *Horizon*, Elektra (1980).



*his works*, in the heart of the Gospel. If ever a storm was brought upon a man, it was the storm of our sins upon the tempestuous cross. If ever anyone rode through the storm with his heart set on joy, it was he “**who for the joy set before him endured the cross**” (**Heb 12:2**). If ever words were spoken and fulfilled by someone, it is these words of Solomon about the storm, fulfilled by our Savior for us.

So let us fix our eyes on Jesus. Solomon isn't all that off from telling you this, as he concludes his book that the whole point of life is to fear God. Not merely out of terror, but out of faith. It is this judgment of God that gives our lives in the storms meaning and perspective, and in Christ, allows us to enjoy and work as we do it.

Whatever storms you've been through or that you or we may go through in the future, **don't merely be like REO Speedwagon** who recognizes high up in the secluded Rockies in a house with a lady that it's better to **ride the storm out** there than around all the crazy people in the city.<sup>31</sup> Instead, **ride above the storm on the great chariot** with the Cloud Rider himself through faith. Our Lord Jesus who conquered death itself, that greatest of storms said, “**I tell you, from now**

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<sup>31</sup> **REO Speedwagon**, “Ridin' the Storm Out,” *Ridin' the Storm Out*, Epic Records (1973).

on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64).

“There is none like [our] God ... who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty” (Deut 33:26). “O Kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord ... to him who rides in the heavens” (Ps 68:32-33). “Bless the Lord, O my soul! ... He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind” (Ps 104:1-4). Rejoice and remember and carry on your work until you are called home.

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places (Hab 3:17-19).*

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