

What Is Life About?

The wise person fears and obeys God.

As I write this session, I am anticipating the celebration of my seventieth birthday in a few days. We commonly recognize certain birthdays as being somewhat special. For example, a child's first birthday typically calls for some kind of special celebration—even if the actual celebrating is done more by the child's parents. A sixteenth birthday can take on special importance if it means the teenager can now obtain a driver's license. Birthdays number eighteen and twenty-one can have a similar importance. When I turned forty years old, my two younger siblings had fun letting me know that I was now an old man, over the hill. Now that I am about to turn seventy, forty would feel like a return to adolescence.

These birthdays divide our lives into decade-long experiences, and our perceptions of each decade depends on which one we are in at the time. Different ages pose unique challenges. When I was in my early twenties, I almost dropped out of attending Sunday School. I was a college student. My wife and I were newlyweds adjusting to married life. All the other couples in our Sunday School group were in their thirties. They had careers and multiple children. They seemed old to me at the time. Happily, our pastor challenged me to help start a new class for young couples. It spawned in me a new purpose for participating in Bible study. A decade later, I was a seminary student preparing to minister to people of all ages. In every stage of life, the most important factor is to have reverence for God and obey Him.

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 12:1-14

In Ecclesiastes 12:1-14, Solomon concluded the report of his quest for life's meaning. In verses 1-8, he described the physical and psychological changes that occur in old age. If a person lives long enough, these changes are inevitable. They signal that life is winding down and that death is ahead. Verse 8 echoes

Solomon's opening claim in Ecclesiastes 1:2, forming a thematic bracket around the entire book. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 lays out Solomon's conclusions from observations he made during his quest. Real meaning in life is found in fearing God and keeping His commands. Without that relationship and purpose in life, all else is futility.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE TWILIGHT (Eccl. 12:1-8)

Solomon reflected on life, encouraging the younger person to live in fear of God and to never forget Him. Solomon painted a word picture of old age, identifying issues faced as a person ages. He noted the end result coming in death with our bodies returning to the dust from which they were created.

VERSE 1

So remember your Creator in the days of your youth: Before the days of adversity come, and the years approach when you will say, "I have no delight in them";

Solomon's admonition to **remember your Creator in the days of your youth** identifies what is appropriate in rejoicing. The Hebrew verb translated *remember* denotes an internal mental act that results in an applicable action. The warning has a twofold emphasis. First, it reminds us that God is our *Creator* and therefore we ultimately belong to Him and owe our lives to Him. This reality reflects both human subordination to God and God's sovereign authority to govern events in our lives. Thus, it serves as a stern reminder that God is our Judge.

Second, the admonition demands that people live life from beginning to end according to God's will. Remembering one's Creator should not be limited to the years of youth. But it needs to begin when one is young. Thus, the term *youth* in this context refers to the beginning of life. Youth is an age when many people feel as though they are the center of the universe and are invincible. Such self-important feelings easily lead to reckless, rebellious behavior. Solomon warned against such futile self-indulgence. Instead of wasting the years of youth on meaningless activities, people needed to live from the start with a keen awareness of God's presence.

The phrase **days of adversity** refers to the final years of an average lifespan. The phrase does not disparage the senior adult years. It points to

identifiable aspects of the aging process. Solomon's analysis was graphic and straightforward. His vivid portrayal of aging entreats people to love life intensely and to concentrate relentlessly on God.

From the moment a life is conceived in the womb, the physical body undergoes continuous change. During the first few years of life, these changes occur rapidly and usually are dramatic. A newborn cannot turn over. Within a couple of years, however, that same infant can walk, talk, and do lots of things with his or her arms and hands. The child's size grows exponentially. The physical body continues to change. Such changes continue until death.

On the other hand, physical strength and endurance generally begin to decrease as people pass a certain age. Hearing and vision become less acute. Senior adults sometimes feel frustrated that they no longer can perform tasks the way they did previously. Solomon echoed the deep frustration of reaching the point in one's days when a person admits, **"I have no delight in them."**

VERSE 2

before the sun and the light are darkened, and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain;

Most Bible scholars agree that Solomon used the descriptions of nature in this verse to symbolize physical changes associated with old age. Thus, the darkening of **the sun and the light** may refer to a loss of pleasure in life or to diminishing eyesight. The words **the clouds return after the rain** present an enigma in that clouds normally precede rainfall. In the figurative depiction of aging, however, the statement may suggest that clear vision fails to return even after the eyes are moistened; instead, one's vision remains cloudy.

Another possible interpretation of *clouds* returning *after the rain* suggests that the phrase represents troubles that come into an aging person's life. The same kinds of troubles that might present minor, temporary setbacks to the young can prove to be catastrophic for the elderly. Whatever one's view about the symbolism's precise reference, the underlying meaning is the same: with old age come physical changes and challenges that can make former daily activities less than delightful.

VERSE 3

on the day when the guardians of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, the women who grind grain cease because they are few, and the ones who watch through the windows see dimly,

This verse employs images from the household of an affluent and powerful individual. It should not be interpreted as predicting a literal decline of

one's household assets in old age. Instead, the household presents another metaphor of aging. Four common characteristics of growing old are depicted.

Affluent people in the ancient world often employed bodyguards. The phrase **guardians of the house** figuratively refers to a person's hands. The hands are vital for self-protection. Clinched into fists, they can be used as weapons. Moreover, they can lock doors to bar intruders or unlock doors to flee. Hands can grasp medicine and smear it on an open wound. In old age, however, hands frequently tremble. They no longer are steady, and ordinary tasks can become difficult if not impossible.

Similarly, the phrase **strong men** as a metaphor is likely a reference to the back and major muscle groups that allow a human being to perform heavy lifting and other strenuous work. The imagery of *strong men* being stooped over depicts the loss of erect posture and physical strength that typically comes with age. The phrase **women who grind grain** probably is a figurative way of depicting one's teeth. In an affluent household, servants (usually women) regularly produced the family's daily bread by grinding the grain, mixing and kneading the dough, and baking it. Only then could the family eat the bread for nourishment. In a figurative sense, one's teeth served to grind food to make it palatable for swallowing. To lose most of one's teeth in old age (**because they are few**) could complicate the most basic daily activity of eating! The final analogy, **the ones who watch through the windows see dimly**, reiterates the challenge of diminishing eyesight that many elderly people faced in ancient times—without the benefit of glasses or cataract removal.

VERSE 4

**the doors at the street are shut while the sound of the mill fades;
when one rises at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of
song grow faint.**

Verse 4 is comprised of two couplets, and Bible scholars have debated the interpretation of each couplet. The first couplet appears to envision a household at the end of the day. The house was made secure for the night by shutting and locking **the doors at the street**. This may be a reference to *the doors* or gates in a wall encircling the entire property, including an outdoor courtyard that separated the main house from the street. Further, the hustle-and-bustle sounds of daily chores quieted as **the sound of the mill** faded. In applying these word pictures to the challenges of aging, some Bible scholars connect them to the loss of one's teeth as in the previous verse. Other scholars relate the analogies to the elderly no longer being physically capable of engaging in the bustling activity of commerce. They are now confined to the house and the doors to strenuous business activity **are shut**.

The second couplet contrasts the household's response to a bird versus a chorus of female singers. Some scholars suggest that the words **when one rises at the sound of a bird** refers to an elderly person's tendency to become frightened by even minor sounds such as that of a bird's chirping. Another possible interpretation—in my judgment the stronger one—understands the entirety of verse 4 to be a description of a growing loss of hearing that many elderly people experience. In a world before hearing aids and medical procedures could protect or even restore hearing, the loss of hearing would isolate people from the daily lives they once knew. They no longer would awaken to the new day at the sound of their “alarm clock”—the early birds' loud chirping. Further, they no longer would be able to enjoy the melodious sounds of **all the daughters of song**—they wouldn't hear their favorite music!

VERSE 5

Also, they are afraid of heights and dangers on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper loses its spring, and the caper berry has no effect; for the mere mortal is headed to his eternal home, and mourners will walk around in the street;

As people grow old, they often experience an increasing sense of fear: **they are afraid of heights and dangers on the road**. Such fears are not limited to the elderly, of course, but older adults realize their capacity to protect themselves from danger or bounce back from injuries has diminished.

Solomon then included three metaphors from nature that depict the changes and losses experienced in old age. The statement **the almond tree blossoms** likely depicts the changing color—and perhaps eventual loss—of an elderly person's hair. The bloom of an almond tree is white and soon drops off to reveal the “hairless” almond husk. The word picture of a **grasshopper** losing **its spring** is self-explanatory: the elderly no longer can (or should) run and jump as they once did. Their muscles are diminished, and their bones are brittle. The Hebrew word rendered **caper berry** (“desire,” KJV; ESV; NIV), found only here in all of the Old Testament, likely refers to a type of fruit that in ancient times was thought to stimulate sexual desire. Solomon noted that in a person's old age, the fruit **has no effect** any longer.

When these realities occur, human beings (**the mere mortal**) usually start to admit that physical death is approaching—they are **headed to their eternal home**. The statement **mourners will walk around in the street** depicts the public rituals of grief that follow a person's death.

Death is inevitable. Eventually everyone moves into an eternal home. The nature of that home is determined by one's response to the gospel—God's offer of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

VERSE 6

before the silver cord is snapped, and the gold bowl is broken, and the jar is shattered at the spring, and the wheel is broken into the well;

The metaphors in verse 6 are somewhat obscure. Some Bible scholars have suggested **the silver cord** may refer to the spinal cord, **the gold bowl** may represent the head; and **the jar** may depict the heart. The point of these explanations is that vital parts of the physical body can break down in the process of aging.

This interpretation of the first three figures of speech is further supported by the fourth analogy: **the wheel is broken into the well**. This imagery clearly depicts the drawing of water from a well or cistern—a common sight in ancient Israel. Then, as now, water was vital to the survival of human life. Further, the seasonal nature of rainfall in a semiarid environment meant that water storage systems were equally crucial. Damage to the machinery used to draw water from a cistern (*the wheel*) was thus a threat to survival.

VERSE 7

and the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

In this verse, Solomon affirmed the reality of physical death by depicting the physical and spiritual processes that occur at the time of death. Genesis 2:7 states that at the time of creation “the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.” Ecclesiastes 12:7 depicts the reversal of that creative event. At death, **the dust returns to the earth as it once was**. That is, the expired body of flesh decays and eventually becomes turned into dirt. The **spirit** aspect of the deceased person, on the other hand, **returns to God who gave it**. The Hebrew word translated *spirit* can also refer to human breath or to the wind. A fuller understanding of both the spirit-aspect of human beings and the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Godhead would come with Jesus Christ and the writings of the New Testament (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 15:35-46; 1 Thess. 5:23). Yet even in his time, Solomon recognized that human life, both physically and spiritually, had its origin in God.

VERSE 8

“Absolute futility,” says the Teacher. “Everything is futile.”

Solomon concluded again that apart from a right relationship with one’s Creator, human life under the sun was **absolute futility** (“vanity of

vanities,” KJV; ESV; “meaningless,” NIV). Human life is finite. Beginning at conception, the human body is changing constantly. At first, the changes signal the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. At some point, however, abilities and aptitudes decline. These are more pronounced as physical death approaches. Fearing and obeying God early in life strengthens us for meeting the challenges of aging. We can finish life well by continuing to focus on God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Death” on pages 405–406 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. As a believer, what is your perspective on physical death? How does Jesus’ resurrection impact the popular (erroneous) view that “this life is all there is”?

THE TRUTH (Eccl. 12:9-11)

As the Teacher, Solomon explained to others what he had discovered. He also recorded many sayings. He emphasized that true wisdom comes from God.

VERSE 9

In addition to the Teacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge; he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs.

Solomon identified himself as **a wise man**. This label may have referred more to a leadership office than to a self-congratulatory compliment. In a later period, the prophet Jeremiah identified three such leadership offices among God’s people: the priest, the wise, and the prophet (see Jer. 18:18). The reference in Ecclesiastes 12:9 to Solomon’s being *a wise man* may also mean that the king highly valued true wisdom as a guide to life and thus **constantly taught the people knowledge**. Moreover, **he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs**. Many ancient cultures, including the Israelites, developed and preserved proverbial wisdom. Solomon not only wrote proverbs (see Prov. 1:1) but also collected them. In doing so, he was careful to ponder and explore their meaning and application for God’s people.

VERSE 10

The Teacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately.

Solomon used various methods to teach God’s people, employing a variety of literary forms. At the same time, he did not stop learning himself. He sought new ways to be more effective in communicating **the words of truth accurately**. The same challenge exists today. We as believers have a responsibility to share our knowledge of God and His truth with others accurately and faithfully.

VERSE 11

The sayings of the wise are like cattle prods, and those from masters of collections are like firmly embedded nails. The sayings are given by one Shepherd.

Solomon described the collections of godly wisdom as being **like cattle prods** (“goads” KJV; ESV; NIV) and **firmly embedded nails** (“nails fastened by the masters of assemblies,” KJV). *Prods* were wooden sticks used by farmers and shepherds to direct or spur work animals. *Nails* were a handy invention used to secure wooden parts together. These two items from everyday life in the ancient world pointed to the function of learning. First, wise sayings motivated people and guided their actions. Second, the sayings when applied helped people “keep it together.”

Solomon acknowledged further that the origin of true wisdom was from one source: **the sayings are given by one Shepherd**—that is, the Lord God. The Holy Scriptures were composed over a period of more than a thousand years by a wide variety of human authors. However, the Holy Spirit inspired each human author to record what God said to them and through them to others. This is why believers rightly refer to the Scriptures as God’s Word. As we read, study, and teach God’s Word, the Lord spurs us to new levels of spiritual maturity and discipleship even in times of challenge and turmoil.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read James 1:5-11; 3:13-18. What are some ways you can share the spiritual truths that you have learned from personal experience? Why should you share these truths with others?

THE CONCLUSION (Eccl. 12:12-14)

Solomon concluded by giving a warning against learning for the sake of learning. He called for God’s people to fear and obey God, since God will ultimately judge every human being.

VERSE 12

But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wears the body.

The phrase **beyond these** likely refers to the many wisdom sayings mentioned in the previous verse. Solomon cautioned his **son** that **the making of many books** and **much study** could be detrimental if people lost sight of the real purpose of knowledge and learning. The two statements urge that the appropriate goal of study is to guide and improve the actual living of one's life. Learning just for the sake of producing books is an empty enterprise.

VERSE 13

When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity.

Solomon now stated the bottom-line **conclusion of the matter** he had investigated: a human being's highest purpose in life is found only in rightly relating to God and keeping **his commands**. The fear Solomon referred to was not abject terror but rather an awareness of and reverence for God. Thus, to **fear God** is to live one's life with the keen awareness of God's holy, righteous character. The words **this is for all humanity** ("this is the whole duty of man," KJV; ESV) emphasize that all human beings in every nation throughout all generations of time share this common purpose. Revering and obeying God today starts with trusting Jesus as Savior and Lord.

VERSE 14

For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Solomon's final words in the Book of Ecclesiastes remind us that **God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil**. Hebrews 9:27 expresses this same conclusion when it says, "Just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment." Life that is lived apart from faith in Christ and oblivious to the reality of the final judgment is indeed absolutely futile!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Ecclesiastes 12:13. How can you use this verse as an introduction to presenting the gospel to an unbeliever?