

## 13

# *What Is Life About?*

The wise person fears and obeys God.

## **ECCLESIASTES 12:1-14**

Reading biographies and autobiographies gives us a glimpse into the thoughts and events that shaped a person. We discover why they did some of the things they did and how their experiences impacted the decisions they made in life. We also see ourselves in some of the stories. In many cases, we discover wisdom that helps us deal with life and gives us perspective. In Ecclesiastes 12, the Teacher looked back at life and emphasized the importance of finishing well, giving us wisdom that will help us live our lives well.

**What biography or autobiography have you recently read? What insights did you gain about life in general from reading that book?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **ECCLESIASTES 12:1-14**

The Book of Ecclesiastes teaches at least ten essential truths for living life “under the sun”:

1. Anything that does not have eternal value has really no significant value. Everything humans achieve appears and disappears like a breath on a cold morning. Only what God does is lasting (Eccl. 1:1-11).

2. The wise person will find meaning in life through faith in God. All other pursuits to discover meaning in life—such as education, wealth, recreation, work, and power—are dead ends (1:12–2:26; 5:10–7:6).

3. Time is a gift from God. Wise people use time as God made it to be used—doing the right things, at the right times, in the right ways (3:1-15).

4. Obedience to God is more important than religious expressions of devotion. What’s more, God expects His people to have integrity and keep their promises to Him as well as to others (4:13–5:7).

5. Wise people trust God and His sovereign will for their lives (7:11-14).

6. God is not impressed with human efforts to achieve righteousness; He is pleased with humble devotion to Him (7:15-18).

7. Wisdom involves recognizing one’s own sin and leads to having compassion on others who also are sinners (7:19-22).

8. Wise people live their lives with a proper perspective of their mortality. They realize life is precious and that their window of opportunity is short-lived (11:7–12:8).

9. Wise people enjoy the life and blessings God has given them (2:24-26; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:1-10; 11:7-9).

10. Wise people fear God and obey His Word, realizing they will give an account to Him for how they lived their lives (12:9-14).

**As you read Ecclesiastes 12:1-14, consider what God’s wisdom looks like through the lens of maturity. How does the end of life serve as proof for all the Teacher was saying?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE TWILIGHT (ECCL. 12:1-8)

<sup>1</sup> 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”; <sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light are darkened, and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain; <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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; <sup>6</sup> 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; <sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. <sup>8</sup> “Absolute futility,” says the Teacher. “Everything is futile.”

### VERSE 1

Verse 1 is part of a larger unit of thought beginning in Ecclesiastes 11:7 that serves as the Teacher’s conclusion to the book. This conclusion contains two major themes. First, remember God, walk His path of wisdom, and enjoy the blessings such a life contains (11:7–12:8). Second, fear God and keep His commandments because God will hold everyone accountable for what they have done in life at the judgment (12:9-14).

The word **so** connects verse 1 to the previous verses, especially Ecclesiastes 11:10. To enjoy life to the fullest, you should begin living for God **in the days of your youth**. The phrase **remember your Creator** means to take God into consideration. In the context, there are three considerations concerning God that young people should take into account. First, to recognize that everything they have comes from God, their *Creator*. Everything they are and possess depends on

Him. Second, to enjoy the blessings God has given while they can, the window of opportunity to do so is small. Third, to keep in mind that the day is coming when God will hold them accountable for how they lived their lives. Failing to remember God in one's youth invites sorrowful regrets both later in this life and at the final judgment. The life of faith is a life of enjoyment now and hope for the future, but the life that shuns God is a life of loss both now and in the future.

The ***days of adversity*** refers to the inevitable physical and mental deterioration that comes with aging. It is a difficult season of life as one loses the capacity to enjoy the many blessings of youth. These days of adversity are difficult for one to accept. Hence, speaking of the final years of life the Teacher despairingly confessed, ***“I have no delight in them.”***

**How would you communicate the importance of considering God when younger? Does a person's failure to consider God when younger disqualify them in the future? Explain.**

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### VERSES 2-5

In verses 2-5, the Teacher used several metaphors to describe the deterioration of the body as old age approaches. It was all for the purpose of imploring young people to act on their opportunities to live for God and enjoy His blessings before it is too late.

Given the context, verse 2 may have been figuratively referring to one of two things. First, it may refer to death, since darkness can often mean death in the Scriptures. Second, it may refer to the dimming of one's vision that most often comes with aging. The ***clouds*** returning after the rain may be indicating that the vision never gets better, unlike the sun breaking through the clouds after the rain has passed. The teacher may also have been referring to the fading capacity to enjoy life. This seems to fit the context better given its proximity to the last line in verse 1.

In verse 3, the ***house*** seems to represent the body. The ***guardians*** of the house are the hands, and their trembling describes tremors that become more common with aging. The ***strong men*** who ***stoop*** are

the major muscle groups of the legs and back along with the bones. The **women who grind** are the teeth. Chewing food becomes more difficult as gums deteriorate and teeth are lost. The **ones who watch through the windows** are the eyes that fail to see as well as they once did.

Given the three references to sound in verse 4, the **doors** that are **shut** seem to refer to the ears. Rising to the **sound of a bird** is an accurate description of what many aged people experience—waking up earlier in the morning.

A fear of **heights and dangers on the road** points to a recognition of one's frailty and being at more risk of an accident. The blossoming of **the almond tree** refers to the whitening of the hair, like the almond tree's flowers turn white just before falling from the branches. The expression **the grasshopper loses its spring** most likely refers to one not having the energy and the strength to do what one once was able to do. In ancient societies, people believed **the caper berry** stimulated one's appetite. However, in Jewish tradition, the term referred to sexual desire, so this likely is a euphemism for a loss of sexual drive.

At the end of verse 5, the Teacher transitioned to metaphors describing what happens when we die. The **mere mortal** goes to **his eternal home**. *Eternal home* was a poetic way of referring to the grave, which seems eternal compared to one's short life on earth. It also emphasizes the finality of death. The universal nature of the statement is evidence it is not talking about heaven. Added to this picture are those who walk about in the street mourning, highlighting the loss and bereavement of death.

## VERSES 6-7

The Teacher used six idioms or figures of speech to describe death. Each of the items in verse 6 has something happen to it suddenly, rendering it no longer functional and emphasizing the abruptness of death. Also, each of the items was valuable, emphasizing the great value of life. Silver and gold were precious metals. Both a **silver cord**, probably a necklace, and a **golden bowl** would have been rare, expensive, and extravagant luxuries. Given water was the most important resource for life in the ancient Near East, a shattered bowl **at the spring** and a broken **wheel** that was part of the mechanism used to draw water from a **well** would have been serious matters. No water, no life.

In verse 7, the Teacher described death in terms more common to the Old Testament. The phrase ***the dust returns to the earth*** uses the language of Genesis 2–3, when Adam and Eve sinned and brought the curse of death on all of humanity. The ***spirit*** returning to God is appropriate since God is the One who gave us life in the first place.

## VERSE 8

As he closed this section and transitioned to his final point in the following verses, the Teacher expressed one last time the theme of the book. With 1:2, it serves as a bracket for the entire book before presenting the Teacher's final conclusion. It indicates his work was complete. Again, the Teacher stated that everything done under the sun is fleeting and therefore meaningless. It means anything that has no eternal value, in reality, has no value at all.

## THE TRUTH (ECCL. 12:9-11)

**<sup>9</sup> In addition to the Teacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge; he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs. <sup>10</sup> The Teacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately. <sup>11</sup> 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.**

## VERSES 9-11

Solomon committed himself to knowing and understanding the truth so that he could pass it on to others. He labored at employing modes of communication that would best convey the truth and enable his students to embrace it.

Shepherds used large rods or staffs to prod their herds to make them go in a particular direction. Sticking out from the end of these rods or staffs were nails. These nails inflicted some pain to encourage the animals to go where the shepherd wanted. The meaning of the analogy is that learning and taking heed to wise instruction is often demanding and painful. Furthermore, all true wisdom is ***given by one Shepherd***, and this Shepherd is God. In fact, all true wisdom comes from God and ultimately leads to God.

**What is the importance of passing on what a person learns?  
How does failing to pass on wisdom gained impact the next generation?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a Bible concordance to gain understanding.*

Using a Bible concordance, read references to the “fear of God” in Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (biblical wisdom literature) and develop your own definition or understanding of this term. How does the fear of God relate to a person’s trust in God?

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**THE CONCLUSION** (ECCL. 12:12-14)

**<sup>12</sup> But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body. <sup>13</sup> When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.**

**VERSE 12**

The Teacher warned his audience to beware of being overzealous in the pursuit of learning just for the sake of learning. Such a pursuit is a self-centered waste of one’s energy that produces arrogance. Paul warned Timothy about false teachers who preyed on people who were always learning but never gaining knowledge (2 Tim. 3:7). These people were looking for the latest and greatest new idea. They were constantly looking for new “truth” because they refused to recognize the revealed truth of God or to accept it.

## How can the pursuit of learning replace the pursuit of knowledge? What are the dangers of confusing learning and knowledge?

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### VERSES 13-14

Everything the Teacher has written leads to this **conclusion**. Life has meaning only when lived in a right relationship to God, and in Old Testament language this is the expression ***fear God and keep his commands***.

The New Testament reveals that a right relationship to God begins when a person puts his or her trust in Jesus for salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). This meaningful life continues as a believer faithfully does the work God has called him or her to do (Eph. 2:10). Fearing God and obeying His commandments means having a faith and reverence for Him that leads humans to want to please Him. It involves wonder, submission, worship, love, and devotion inspired by His eternal attributes and sovereign authority.

Verse 14 provides the reason why all of humanity should fear God and keep His commandments. All people will stand before God in **judgment** to give an account of what they have done with their lives. **Every hidden thing** will be laid bare. It is for this reason we should live circumspectly, recognizing there will be consequences for every decision we make, every thought we think, every word we say, and every deed we do. It is for this reason the Teacher exhorted his audience to fear and obey God. It is the only way to be prepared for final judgment.

**Why do people, even some believers, seem to wince when hearing the words “fear and obey God”? Why do these common expressions in the Bible, “fear God” and “the fear of the Lord,” get ignored today?**

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things*

Christ will judge all men in righteousness (2 Cor. 5:10).



# APPLY THE TEXT

- We can finish well by continuing to focus on God as we age.
- Believers can pass on to others the truth and wisdom they have gained.
- Purpose in life is found through fearing and obeying God.

**What things have distracted you from continuing to focus on God as you move toward maturity? What actions can you take to minimize these distractions?**

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**What are ways believers can be intentional in passing on to others the truth and wisdom they have gained? To whom can you pass on what you have learned so far and how?**

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**On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your readiness to give an account to God for your life? What needs to change in order to increase your readiness?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Job's Friends: Models of Compassion?*



*By J. Mark Terry*

All of us have gone to visit a grieving friend and have wondered what to say. Sometimes we say nothing. Other times when we do talk, we later question whether we said the right thing. Job's friends came to see him as he grieved over the deaths of his children (Job 2:11). How effectively did they comfort their friend? A

careful study of Job's three friends and their efforts will help us all become better comforters.

The Bible tells us Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar learned of Job's despair and agreed to meet and travel together to visit Job (v. 11). This demonstrates they knew each other and Job before the sad events transpired. Clearly, sincere concern prompted their visit, and they meant for their words to console Job in his loss and instruct him in righteousness.

When the three friends approached Job, grief overcame them, and they dramatically expressed their anguish. First, they wept loudly for their friend and his suffering. Second, they tore their robes. Third, they sprinkled dust on their heads. All of these actions expressed deep sorrow. Beyond these actions, they sat silently in Job's presence for seven days and seven nights.

This period of mourning was typical of mourning for a prominent person (Gen. 50:10). It showed their respect for Job and their identification with his sorrow. Who were these concerned friends?

### ***Eliphaz***

Eliphaz always spoke first. This indicates that he was the oldest and most prominent of the three men. He was the kindest of the three friends. Before coming to see Job, Eliphaz had a dream that affected him greatly (4:12-21) and likely set the tone for all three of his speeches. Eliphaz believed that all suffering was punishment for sin. Therefore, in Eliphaz's mind, because Job was suffering greatly, he must have sinned grievously against God.

Eliphaz made three speeches in the Book of Job (chaps. 4–5; 15; and 22). In his first speech, he reminded Job that sinful men suffer for their sins, and he promised Job forgiveness and restoration if only Job would repent. In his second speech Eliphaz used sharper words. He expressed shock at Job's defense of his actions. He called on Job to repent and seek reconciliation with God—lest Job experience the terrible fate of the wicked. In his third speech Eliphaz cast

off all restraint and accused Job of wickedness; nevertheless, Eliphaz ended his speech with praise for God's mercy on those who repent.

Eliphaz was a good man, a man of upright character and sympathy. Were he not kind and sympathetic, he would not have traveled many miles to see his friend. Still, his narrow and limited understanding of human suffering led him to misdiagnose Job's problem.

### ***Bildad***

Most Bible commentators believe Bildad was younger than Eliphaz, as it was customary for the oldest person to speak first. He expressed amazement that Job would question the traditional belief that suffering is the result of sin. The Book of Job includes three speeches by Bildad (chaps. 8; 18; and 25).

In his first speech he implied that Job's sin may have contributed to his children's deaths. In his second speech Bildad discussed the awful fate of the wicked, and in his third speech he extolled the power of God and the sinful nature of human beings. His last speech was quite brief (chap. 25), maybe an indicator that Bildad had grown tired of talking to

someone who would not agree with him.

## **Zophar**

The fact that Zophar spoke third suggests he was the youngest of the friends. Like his friends, Zophar focused on Job's disobedience as the cause of his suffering.

The Book of Job records only two speeches by Zophar (chaps. 11; 20), though some commentators suggest that a portion of chapter 27 might be Zophar's third speech.

## **Evaluation**

The Bible says Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar came to comfort Job. How well did they do? Job gave them a bad evaluation. He declared that they were "miserable comforters" (16:2). Surely they meant well, but they made Job feel even worse than he did before their arrival.

Job's friends did some things right, though. They did visit Job, which was good. Many persons will avoid those who are grieving. Second, they sat with Job in silence for seven days. Often silence is healing. Many times one's presence is more helpful than one's words. Third, they expressed their opinions to Job personally. They did not talk behind his back.

Still, they failed completely in their efforts to help Job. Why did they fail? They failed because they held these convictions: (1) All suffering is the result of sin. (2) God punishes each act of sin with a penalty that corresponds to the gravity of the sin. (3) Suffering is proof of personal guilt. These ideas prevented them from understanding Job and his problem.

Not surprisingly, the three friends struggled to understand suffering. Four thousand years later we still wrestle with this issue. Truly, some suffering is the result of sin, but in Job's case the friends' assumptions were wrong. The Book of Job presents a new understanding of suffering. Not all suffering is the result of sin. Sometimes the innocent do suffer in this life. However, "suffering may be used as a means of demonstrating the faith of the saints, strengthening the faith of the saints, and extending the influence of the saints." That which can easily be overlooked may be one of the most hope-filled lessons from the book: "Suffering, faithfully endured, defeats Satan."<sup>1</sup>

1. J. W. Watts, *Old Testament Teaching* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), 134.

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# COMING **NEXT QUARTER**

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## **PHILIPPIANS; COLOSSIANS; PHILEMON**

- Session 1*     **Joy in Prayer** • Philippians 1:1-11
- Session 2*     **Joy of Adversity** • Philippians 1:12-26
- Session 3*     **Joy Through Humility** • Philippians 2:1-15
- Session 4*     **Joy in Knowing Jesus** • Philippians 3:8-21
- Session 5*     **Joy Through Peace** • Philippians 4:1-9
- Session 6*     **Joy and Contentment** • Philippians 4:10-20
- Session 7*     **The Gospel's Power** • Colossians 1:9-23
- Session 8*     **The Gospel's Goal** • Colossians 1:24-2:3
- Session 9*     **The Gospel's Forgiveness** • Colossians 2:4-15
- Session 10*    **The Gospel's Freedom** • Colossians 2:16-23
- Session 11*    **The Gospel Lived** • Colossians 3:1-17
- Session 12*    **The Gospel and Relationships** • Colossians 3:18-4:6
- Session 13*    **Restoration** • Philemon 8-21

PHI/CO