

XVI. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

From Vanity to Vitality

“The Last Word from Solomon”

Ecclesiastes 12

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This is our last study in the book of Ecclesiastes as we will be looking at the last chapter of this book. It's interesting to hear from people when I do expository preaching because I typically hear three different responses. One is 'why are you going so slowly.' Another is 'why are you going so fast' and then I will hear 'I like the way you're going through this book. It's just right.' But when I get to the end of going through a book of the Bible I feel like I have just said 'good-bye' to a close friend, at least for a while until I move on to another one. Ecclesiastes has been an enjoyable book to go through and I'm grateful for the opportunity to do it.

As we look at this last chapter I want to point out a few things and tie a few things together. The book of Genesis is not only history but it records the beginning of history. It immediately presents us the challenge that we have with a Biblical world and life view. In terms of origin you really get down to what is eternal. When you have something that 'is' you have to ask yourself 'has it always been or has it had a beginning point and does it have an ending point.' Then when we look at ourselves, we ask the same thing.

Ultimately we almost always get to the place that Carl Sagan did when he wrote his book Cosmos where he gave you his confession of faith. The cosmos means creation and he said this, 'The cosmos – that's all there is, that's all there was and that's all there ever will be.' This is his trinitarian statement of faith. The cosmos – space, time and matter. It is, it was and it always will be. In that notion if you give space and matter enough time then you get this. Not to be overly simplistic but to be accurately simplistic that's ultimately where you are. He is saying you are a cosmic accident that somehow has intelligent design when there is no intelligent designer. Yet space, time and matter are eternal for they have always existed and always will and if you give it enough time you will get what we have that is here before us.

For a little bit more of an intelligent option I usually will give this; in the beginning was God and it is this God who made us. He has also made the heavens and the earth and in the opening verse of Genesis 1 we have those three elements. Space is the heavens. The earth is all that is matter and then the beginning. Immediately you are confronted with what makes the most sense and what do you believe. There is a God who is, who was and is to come. Then with His wisdom and purpose has made all that there is – space, time and matter.

Time is a created reality. Time is not eternal. Time which is *chronos* is a succession of moments that is a created reality, just like matter is a created reality, just like the heavens are a created reality. It is here because there is a Creator who created it. So Genesis 1:1 is not only historical but it documents the moment that history begins – time. Then we who have time, we're even told by the Word of God that our time, our days have been appointed/numbered. This time is a resource that you have that unlike any other resource, God has not only determined how much of it you will have but that resource of time given is non-renewable.

If I have \$10 and I spend \$10 trying to be a good steward I can get another \$10 after I have spent it but I made every decision of what I was going to do today and you did the same thing. We don't get it back. This is why I seldom talk about time management. Have you ever noticed how time manages itself? It manages itself pretty well. There is the old phrase that says

‘redeem your time’ yet after you have spent it you don’t get it back. In other words think of this illustration. You were born into this world with a sovereignly ordained number of sunrises and sunsets. There will come a day you get up one morning and will not go to bed that night.

In the 1990s as a pastor in Charlotte I had to deal with those boomers who were going through a ‘mid-life crisis.’ I felt like I was dealing with it all the time. I thought the next guy who pulls up to my office in a corvette, permed hair, wearing a silk shirt and a gold chain, I would shoot before he got out of the car. I had one guy who told me he was in a mid-life crisis and I asked him how old he was. He told me he was 55 and then I said ‘How many 110 year men do you know?’ This isn’t really a mid-life crisis here for you’re already on the back nine and you can see the clubhouse from where you are. That’s where we are.

One guy challenged me to put a marble in a jar every day for that would be my estimated life span. Let’s say you get the average lifespan and you pull out one marble every day, you don’t get to put any back in because that is done. So what is your stewardship of time? I want to give you a beginning point of this stewardship of time here at the concluding chapter of Ecclesiastes. Remember your Creator and the days of your youth. I will give you three progressive statements given in this concluding chapter.

One of the reasons I believe Solomon wrote this book is here in Ecclesiastes 12. I believe this is a penitent Solomon that has told us so much about a world and life view because he keeps telling us about all kinds of things that are offered to us for meaning, security, strength and significance in life, but they do not work. They are striving after the wind, vanity, and emptiness. They may have moments of exhilaration but they do not give gravitas, direction or purpose in life and they are not life. They are facsimiles but do not make life. I love the street sign that says ‘no outlet’ or ‘dead end’ and Solomon has walked us right through it. Materialism, idolatry of work, wine, song, women, sex, and knowledge are all dead ends. Anything that may in and of itself be valid in the right context that you put in front of, above or before God as that world and life view whereby you embrace the direction, adoration, allegiance and affections of your life, it will result in a dead end. In other words, Solomon was Mick Jagger before Mick Jagger – I’ve tried it all, I can’t get no satisfaction. I can get nothing for everything is a dead end.

Periodically Ecclesiastes forbids you to try and outline it because when Solomon is laying out this vanity for us in the chapter, he just punches out of the ceiling the phrase ‘above the sun’ to the One who is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer and he will give us something that makes sense in life. In this chapter, he is not punching through he is concluding. Now let’s look at Ecclesiastes 12.

Ecclesiastes 12:1–8 says [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”*; [2] *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain*, [3] *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*, [4] *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—* [5] *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—* [6] *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*, [7] *and the*

dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. [8] Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

He starts off with a pointed concluding entreaty in this concluding chapter. Then he gives a concluding engagement and then a concluding event. The concluding entreaty is remember the Creator in the days of your youth. Some of you are saying that I didn't quote that right and you are correct but many times it is quoted like this. It actually says remember *also* your Creator in the days of your youth. There are other things that are helpful to understand so what does he mean by using remember? It certainly means much more than remember that the Creator God made me. It means to bring full concentration with intentionality for the purpose of affection, adoration, and allegiance. It is something that sanctifies, governs and frames you.

What are some of the other things you remember? The Lord's Supper is one where Jesus says 'remember the body and blood of the Lord' through the Apostle Paul. Intentionally understand from the Word of God what that means, who that is, what He has done in His body for us and what He did when He shed His blood for us. The Bible says to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy and probably within the church this is the most broken of the commandments. It's the first positive commandment and it brings a promise for life. What does it mean? It means to bring sacred focus for the purpose of affection, allegiance and adoration. It is not a burden, in fact it's a gift from God. Mark 2:27–28 says [27] *And Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. [28] So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."* This is foundational for the stewardship of time because it blesses the other six days.

There are numerous other things he tells us to remember but my point is not just to jot it down or a fact just to forget, but it is a reality that ought to shape and direct our lives. When he says to remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, he means to start now. You might think you're not young but you're young now compared to what you're going to be tomorrow. Have you ever noticed the emphasis in the Bible when it uses the word *now*? Now, this day, is the day of salvation. Everything is dead end except the life lived to the glory of God by the grace of God so here is a beginning point so set the nail deep on this – remember with intentional consecration and reverence your God the Creator, for the purpose of adoration, allegiance and affection. There is no reason to seek Him as Savior if you don't know He has made you. He formed you in your mother's womb mysteriously, in His own way and purposes, your soul and spirit. You came forth in the image of your parents physically but in the image of God spiritually. He made you in His image with dignity.

He is also telling us not to spend time apart from remembering the God who made you. This is the beginning point of a world and life view. It is not life under the sun but life for the One who made the sun. What constitutes youth? It is any time before what he is about to explain to us here in this chapter. Then these beautiful almost poetic verses begin to unfold for us. He tells us what is ahead in life, for tomorrow and the next day, etc.

If you really know your God then those evil days really never come. What is open for you are those like the days of Caleb. When Caleb was 40 years of age he went and spied out the land with Joshua and they came back and told Moses the giants they say were like grasshoppers. Then 40 years later he goes to him and says 'give me the hill country for I am as strong today as I was then.' With all due respect, unless God had done a miracle he was not as strong at 80 as he was at 40, but his perspective was that his God's strength was the same in him. However if you don't remember your Creator in the days of your youth out in front of you is coming a time where there is no pleasure in them, no hope, no ambition, no sense of significance.

Referring to Ecclesiastes 12:2, the sun, moon and stars are not darkened when you get older but we don't see them as good because our vision gets physically dimmer. Their light doesn't help you like it used to as you get older because the eyes are being dimmed. There is that sense of depression, darkness and storm after storm as he refers to the 'clouds return after the rain.'

Referring to Ecclesiastes 12:3 have you ever noticed when you're young you don't necessarily go around locking all the doors but when you get older you do? All of a sudden every door has to be locked and every protection has to be in place, why? It is because of the insecurity of the older years apart from the strength of the Lord begin to creep in and the guys you once thought were strong are no longer as strong any more. By the way, they are bent over now.

I confessed to my wife this week and to you now that I have asked forgiveness for every time I made fun of my grandparents of all the doctors they visited it seemed all the time. I don't know how many doctors my grandmother had or how many pill cases she filled up but I now get that and I repent of all I said in those days about her in this. My reason for this is because of recently how many doctors I had to see for various issues. One of the doctors I saw this week asked me how tall I was. I used to be six foot one but now I'm not even close for gravity is winning. I might have been six foot one but soon I'll be six foot under.

I remember those guys I used to watch in professional sports and then see them on some reunion show so many years later and think 'what happened to you?' We remember them in their youth and then look at them now, yet those are the days that are coming. So right now, today is the day you remember your Creator so that those days will be different when those days come. He doesn't stop there.

Then he says 'the grinders cease because they are few.' Here he is talking about your teeth. The tops ones are not numerous enough to meet the bottom. If you make friends with dentists you could possibly get some implants. Before long you don't bite into the corn on the cob but you shave off the corn and suck on the cob. As you go to the next phrase it's not that there are no shades on the windows it's just that the eyesight is dimmed.

In Ecclesiastes 12:4 he is referring to the fact that people are closing the doors to stay in rather than going out. Then it refers to the fact that when you get older you don't sleep as much and you end up getting up when the birds are singing yet you can't hear them much anymore because your hearing gets dim as well. As the daughters sing low is a phrase referring also to our hearing. As he goes into verse 5 we see how the older we get the more we tend to be afraid of heights due to a lack of stability and typically increased falling as we age. Christian medical doctors say that the fear of heights is a gift from God as you get older due to the fact you tend to lose your balance more. So that is God keeping you away from the edge because you are losing your balance with age. We also tend to see things out there that is about to get to us or is after us.

In Ecclesiastes 12:5 he uses the phrase 'the almond tree blossoms' and he is talking about your hair. Almond blossoms are white. I used to worry about turning white but I don't have to because it's all turning loose. The next phrase is probably a tactful illusion to the loss of the sex drive when he says 'the desire fails' in the life of a man and a woman, because man is going to his eternal home. The day of death is coming closer and as he says then the mourners go about the streets.

My aunt was one like this. I love my aunt in Charlotte but it did not matter who was dying for when I went to a particular funeral home in Charlotte, she was always there it seemed

at every funeral that was there. I used to think the funeral home paid her to be there but she said she just knew everybody and thought she ought to be there. It's almost like professional mourners are in place because of this season of death that is there. The mourners are there in anticipation of the silver cord that is snapped or as the older version says 'breaks.'

I love Franny Crosby's hymns. Here was this lady that was blind and one of my favorite hymns she wrote was *Some Day the Silver Cord Will Break*. The first verse says;
*Some day the silver cord will break,
And I no more as now shall sing;
But, O the joy when I shall wake
Within the presence of the King!*

And I shall see Him face to face... Her lifelong blindness would be gone in that day. That day is coming.

The wheel broken in Ecclesiastes 12:6 refers to the continual movement of life now ceases and from dust to dust they return to the earth this body that was born with such life for it has now come to an end. The spirit returns to God who gave it and all is vanity. So what is the antidote to this? There is only one. Right now with adoration, affection and allegiance remember your Creator. Then he gives us the engagement whereby we are able to remember our Creator. Let's continue in the passage.

Ecclesiastes 12:9–10 says [9] *Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. [10] The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.*

Verse 9 is one of the reasons I think that Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes and he is the preacher for this is exactly what he did in his life before he got off track. He asked God for wisdom and would arrange the thousands of proverbs and he would do so with great care. So what is it that we need to engage in? We need to engage in the Word of God and the preaching of that Word. This isn't the only way to engage in God's Word. Singing to Him is another way. When we confess His Word as a call to worship is another way we engage in it. We engage in it in our Bible study, discipleship but in this verse he tells us to engage with the preacher who has been called by the Lord to arrange them so that we can understand them and that we'll apply them so that we know the God of the Word.

The preacher takes the Word of God and looks for the word of delight that will explain it and to bring it forth rightly. This is another way of what it says in II Timothy 2:15; [15] *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.* If you want to remember the Creator then get in the Word, be under sound preaching and preachers if you are going to be faithful to the Lord and His Word then take the time to study it. That is why we give the tithe to support the preacher. I Timothy 5:17 says [17] *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*

Did you ever have a teacher, preacher or professor that meant something to you, that really effected your life? You do what Ecclesiastes is doing – you find a way to affirm it and thank them. Ecclesiastes 12:11–12 says [11] *The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. [12] My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*

This Word didn't come from the preachers that are called, it came from the Preacher and that is the one Shepherd who is Christ. It is that Shepherd who speaks through His Word preached. Romans 10:13–17 says [13] *For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” [14] How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” [16] But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

So our Shepherd has given His Word to be preached and the Bible says you're hearing Him when His Word is being faithfully preached by His Spirit. Jesus, the Great Shepherd tells us in His Word that 'My sheep know My voice and they follow Me.' The words of the wise are like a goad which means you can't pass by or fall back for it was put in certain places so that the cattle could only go forward and not backwards. These are goads that are fixed so that you can't get off track.

Then the writer gives another picture which really resonates with me because I not only had a grandfather who was a lay minister in the Methodist church but I had a grandfather who worked so hard at carpentry that he was an unbelievable carpenter. I remember one time when I was helping him and I had nailed something down. I said to him 'I'm through nailing it down' and he said 'No you're not son.' He went and got a silver thing out of his pouch and put it on the nail, hit it with his hammer until that nail had dug down deep in the wood.' He said 'you haven't finished nailing until you have set the nail.' That is what God's Word preached is called to do, to be nailed down deep the truth of God's Word in life and for life with words of delight that are upright.

Will everybody want this in life? No, that's not our job. Our job is not to create the appetite but our job is to fill the appetite for only the Spirit of God will give you a desire for His Word. To remember your Creator you need His Word, which needs to be arranged, filled, applied and thought through. Then the goads need to be put into place and the nails set.

Ecclesiastes 12:12 I hope is not saying not to write books because I do and I don't think writing books are worthless, but the books that come from any of us in this world is nothing compared to the book given by the Shepherd – the Word of God. I find it interesting how we'll read blog after blog, tweet after tweet, technical journal after technical journal but we'll have no time for the Word of God which is profitable, every page of it. II Timothy 3:16–17 says [16] *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

Now the writer brings us to the concluding matter. Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 says [13] *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. [14] For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*

Paul calls upon this when he says in II Corinthians 5:10, [10] *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* In Revelation 20 you will see that you are either in the books or in the Book of Life. If you're in the books your sins will be revealed in thought, word and deed and then you bear the penalty of it. If you're in the Book of Life your judgment is a

judgment of stewardship because there is no judgment for those in the Lamb's Book of Life, because Christ has already taken that judgment.

That Day will come for every one of us and every day brings you closer to it. So now know your Creator, keep His commandments and here the Gospel has been put in for us. Why do you keep the commandments of the Creator? He has called me to and this text develops a life that doesn't fritter away in despair or dead ends which is right but the reason you keep the commandments is that Jesus the Shepherd in His Book tells you John 14:15, *[15] If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

Our reverence of the Lord God who made us is propelled by the Lord God who is our Creator and Redeemer. How do you get there? You keep His commandments because you love Him and why do you love Him? It is because He first loved you. He when He didn't need you, wanted you. You, when you needed Him, didn't want Him. This One who made you sent His Son to save you. Now His love constrains you and when it constrains and compels you, you keep His commandments because you love Him who first loved you.

There could be someone reading this that keeps coming back looking and you found it. The answer isn't the preacher giving this study or Briarwood but the answer is the Shepherd who gave His life for sheep, who loves you. Then when you come to love Him you will remember Him and it's the same One who made you, who died for you. Colossians 1:16–17 says *[16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

Christ gave His life for you so that you could have everlasting life. Now that He is your life a great joy is to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind and to love others even as we would be loved and that means we keep His commandments. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You so much for the richness of the book of Ecclesiastes. I ask You God to overcome all the inadequacies of the preacher in this pulpit in light of the challenge of this text but we have attempted to be faithful to it so would You now apply it into the hearts and lives of those who have read this? O God, if there is anyone reading this now who has not come to their Creator as their Savior and Lord would You this day bring them? Please call us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 if you want to talk about that commitment to Christ. Then Father I pray that those who do know You, would You bring us back today, now, before the days of despair come? Help us to know You, love You and keep Your commandments so that when the days in the future come they are no longer days of diminishment but days of anticipation because our best days are ahead of us for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

THE LAST WORD FROM SOLOMON

The Concluding Entreaty

The Concluding Engagement

The Concluding Event