

Remember Your Creator... Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

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I have so looked forward to this section of Ecclesiastes! After I read it you may think I'm seriously disturbed. Why? Because it describes human life in its final years. Who wants to think about those days? We largely live in denial but I think our seniors here would say, "Young people, it's coming!" So what is that like and why is it so critical that we think now about the nursing home years?

"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'; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, 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, 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—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—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, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 ESV)

This is poetic language incorporating the literary device of allegory. An allegory is when one thing is used to describe another thing, and it often reveals a hidden meaning. Old Testament Scholar Walter Kaiser calls it "one of the most beautiful of all allegories in Scripture." (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*, p. 180.) Here, Solomon uses the imagery of an approaching storm and a collapsing household as allegory of what awaits each of us in the aging process and our elderly years.

The key verse is verse 1, "*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, **before the evil days come***" (emphasis added). So Solomon isn't writing to feeble old people, he is writing to anybody not yet there and saying, *this is what's coming*. We will return to verse 1 at the end.

So what is coming for all of us? "*Evil days.*" Unless we die young, we are all going to die by slowly deteriorating. How does that sound? I'll sometimes ask some of our elderly men, "*How are you doing?*" I sometimes hear, "*Not bad for an old guy.*" In other words, bad when you are old is a different bad than bad when you are young. In fact, you could probably say it this way: your worst day when you're young is likely better than your best day when you're old. We may discover our worst day young without aches and pains is better than our best day old. Further, when you are young, you have confidence that the bad is temporary. Yes, it hurts but this pain in my back will get better. The young generally only have to deal with temporary setbacks. Even in career or finances, if you are young you still have time to make a comeback. When you are old the one thing you don't have is time. When you are old, time is short and you live every day knowing that you are getting closer to the day when you check out from planet earth.

I worked at a nursing home to help pay my way through seminary. They had a little saying among the nursing home staff, *"People only leave here feet first."* Now that's morbid, but it's the truth. Don't we all leave planet earth feet first? It's probably with a sheet over us on the way to our embalming friend and our last hair appointment. That's just the way it is.

Old Age is Like the Dread of an Approaching Storm (Verse 2)

"Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain." (Verse 2)

You know that sense of dread when the sky to the west is black? Off in the distance you hear a weather siren wailing. You know this is going to be a bad one. Here it comes creeping across the horizon. The sun disappears. The initial storm wind bends the trees and then the lightning and thunder comes. It gets dark when a bad storm arrives.

But what happens after the storm passes? The sun comes out. It's so nice. You sometimes see a pretty rainbow. There's a damp and refreshing smell in the air.

What is it like to be old? The clouds return after the rain. In other words, storm after storm after storm. The pains and close calls are unrelenting, one after another in quick succession. To the doctor. To the doctor. Sorrow after sorrow. No sun. Just more rain.

Remember Your Creator Before Old Age Gets You (Verses 2-7)

It sounds like a house or estate falling apart but it's an analogy. He is using a falling-apart house as a picture of a physically failing elderly person.

"In the day when the keepers of the house tremble." (Verse 3)

What part of the body "keeps the house"? Hands. But they are trembling. We all know the trembling look of old age.

"And the strong men are bent." (Verse 3)

This is plural. There are at least two. Who are the strong men? The legs that once were straight and strong are now bowed and weak. Remember your Creator before getting around is hard.

"The grinders cease because they are few." (Verse 3)

This is poetic language for teeth. Over time, in a day with no dentures, the teeth disappear and the ability to chew as well.

"Those who look through the window are dimmed." (Verse 3)

The eyes look through the window. But now their ability to see is dimmed. There were no corrective glasses back then. I'm nearsighted so without my glasses things at a distance look to me like they aren't well lit. Things appear dim. Remember your Creator while you can still see clearly.

"And the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low." (Verse 4)

We can't hear like we used to. They are still grinding wheat out there but I don't hear it. It's like the doors are closed because no sound is getting in. I'm shut off from the activities of the world around me.

"And one rises up at the sound of a bird." (Verse 4)

Here is a cruel reality, in old age you can't hear well but just the tweet of a bird is enough to wake you up and you can't sleep anymore. I'm already there. In college I remember sleeping till late morning or even noon. Now if I make it to 6:00am I feel like I slept in. I once heard a guy talk about this who said, in college an all-nighter was when he stayed up all night. Now an all-nighter is any night he doesn't have to get up and use the bathroom. Young people, things change.

"And all the daughters of song are brought low." (Verse 4)

We can't sing like we used to. Those vocal chords aren't the same. Have you ever heard some of these famous old singers try and do the national anthem before a game? It's not pretty but everyone cheers anyway. The vocal chords of song are brought low. Can it get any worse?

"They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way." (Verse 5)

The elderly tend to be more fearful than they used to be. They are afraid of falling. They are unsteady. They see terrors all around. They don't go out after dark. Things that wouldn't have bothered them at all when they were younger are now reason to stay home. Remember your Creator before fears isolate you.

"The almond tree blossoms." (Verse 5)

The almond tree gets white flowers when it blossoms. The elderly blossom with white hair. We call it gray hair. "Blossom" sounds better.

"The grasshopper drags itself along." (Verse 5)

Ever see a grasshopper? They don't drag, they leap. They fly. They flitter here and there. They are incredibly mobile and fast and light on their feet. But not this grasshopper. This one used to do that, but now is awkwardly dragging itself along. Legs that you used to run and dance and leap now barely move the body. This is a vivid picture of the former athlete or soldier or ballerina who now can barely get up the steps. Think of that picture of Mohammed Ali shaking and barely able to light the Olympic cauldron.

"And desire fails." (Verse 5)

"Desire" translates as the word *caperberry*. A caperberry was an aphrodisiac. Solomon who has encouraged through this letter the enjoying of marital intimacy brings the harsh reality. Even this desire will wane and end. Remember your Creator before the days come when nothing sensual is really that desirable anymore.

Remember Your Creator Before Your Funeral (Verses 5-7)

"Because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets 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, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Verses 5-7)

The snapped silver cord and broken gold bowl and wheel are poetic descriptions of the fragility of life. He is describing an estate that once had glory but now is in ruins. Things are broken down everywhere. If you've ever been to the home of an elderly person in their last days, there often is that sense. If you're in their home or nursing home room, you'll see pictures on the wall of them when they were young. The wedding photo. The military picture of the person in his/her dress uniform in the best shape of his/her life. But then before you is the reality that Solomon urges upon us, *these days are coming*. Brokenness. Shatterings. Why?

The answer goes all the way back to the curse in Genesis 3:19, *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

What does it look like to return to dust? It looks like a body worn out. A body's strength taken by disease. Feebleness. Weakness. Then death. The spirit or soul of man leaves the body and goes into eternity and the body continues to decay and return to dust. Solomon's final assessment of life is, *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 12:8)

How does he begin Ecclesiastes? Verse 1:2 says, *"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* He ends where he begins. His twelve-chapter search for meaning apart from God ends with a funeral and a grave. So much for man's fleeting glory and achievements. In the end, we are all dust.

So what is Solomon urging? Remember verse 1. *"Remember...your Creator...before the evil days come."* (Ecclesiastes 12:1) Why would this be his conclusion? Don't forget Ecclesiastes' purpose, describing man's pursuit of meaning apart from God. Or you could say, forgetting God. This is what mankind has largely done. They have forgotten God. We were made for God and for ultimate joy in relationship with him. But ever since the Fall, we have been like Jason Bourne, we can't remember who we are.

Nothing makes ultimate sense and every time we look in the mirror there is another wrinkle, another pound, another ache or pain, another reminder of what is coming.

Forgetting God means everything is vanity. Everything is fleeting. Everything is absurd and meaningless. Everything goes to the grave with us. But here Solomon provides a glimmer of hope. Remember your Creator before Parkinson's and dementia and cancer take away your ability to remember or do anything at all.

How to "Remember your Creator"

Know him as Creator and heavenly Father

All Solomon had was God as Creator. Jesus' ministry centuries later introduced a whole new level of relationship with God when he taught his disciples to pray, *"Our Father who is in heaven."* Remembering God as your Creator is important but knowing God as your heavenly

Father is some kind of wonderful. How? This is the gospel of Jesus. To know God as your heavenly Father requires him to forgive us of the sins that stand in the way of that relationship.

Here's the good news. God personally made a way for that to happen. Long after Ecclesiastes was written, Jesus came to earth. He was God's Son. He came on a mission to fulfill all righteousness by perfect obedience to the Law. He died in our place on the cross paying God's required payment for our sin. He was raised to life on the third day overcoming the power of death on our behalf.

God becomes our father when we humble ourselves in repentance for our sin and put our personal trust in what Jesus did on our behalf. Our Creator forgives our sins and in doing so becomes our spiritual father forever. *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* (John 1:12)

This is the necessary first step out of Ecclesiastes' despair and absurdity—for your Creator to become your heavenly Father. Do you know God this way? Let every wrinkle, ache, or pain remind you of what is coming and the urgency of trusting in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and life eternal.

Fight forgetting by daily habits of remembering

If forgetting God is a path to the despair all around us, then remembering him is not like memory remembering. It's not like I remember 5th grade. Remembering him means centering my daily life on him. Forgetting him means centering my life on me. We have this constant gravity toward self. We wake up with spiritual amnesia about God and life and death and eternity. We just feel our bad knee as we walk to the bathroom. What do I need?

I must remember who I am really am and who he is. Creator there is in the plural which speaks to his majesty. Remember your glorious Creator. Don't forget him or move him down your daily priority list. Remember him while you still have energy and vigor and can serve him with enthusiasm.

Great! But how? Here is where we all need daily reminders lest we forget. Things that remind us, oh yeah, I'm not ultimate. There is a God. There is the gospel. I need to remember who I really am in Christ.

We remember by reading God's Word. We remember by praying. You can't bow your head in prayer and not remind your soul that someone else is God. The weekly practice of gathering for worship is a powerful way to remember. Christian fellowship does it. Go to breakfast with a brother in the Lord and talk about what God is teaching you. You both walk out of the restaurant remembering your Creator. Why is this so important?

Remembering means not regretting

Not long ago I attended my 30-year high school reunion. 30 years. I'm here to tell you I blinked...and 30 years were gone. Now young people, I remember when I was your age I heard people that were my age now, and I sat there thinking, "OK, old guy, that's the way it is for you, but I'm 19 years old, the world is my oyster. I've got my whole life ahead of me. It's going to be different for me." No, it's not. You are going to blink and all of a sudden you're not only going to be your mom or dad's age, you're going to look a lot like your mom or your dad. You're going to blink and a decade or two is suddenly going to have passed and you're going to think like I think, *what happened? Where did that time go?*

How easy it is to fritter away and waste your life doing all sorts of silly things that when you are a pile of dust in the grave, you look back and think, *why did I waste my life on those things? Why did I spend so much time and energy worrying about those things?* If it doesn't matter when you're dust, it doesn't matter. Orient your life toward that pile of dust that you're going to be and live your life in a way that when you get to the end of it you don't look back at your life and think, *I regret so much of what I did. I regret so much of the time that I wasted. I regret so many of the things that I cared about that now I look back on them and I think, who cares about that?*

Remember your Creator when you're young and you can make that change and write the story of your life still. Because when you are old, that story is largely written. And you can't go back. You're getting ready to step into eternity. You're getting ready to give an account for your life to him who will judge the living and the dead. You're getting ready to give an account for all that time and all of that energy and all of the things that you were passionate about. All those years of not really remembering your Creator, but living for you. You're about to stand before Almighty God. And you better be ready for it. And now is the time before the evil days come to live in the way you'll be glad you did when you're that pile of dust. That's what Solomon is saying. And that's a powerful message in a world today that lives for the moment.

We can say, someday I'll get to remembering God but today I'm intentionally forgetting because I have some things I want to do. There are some sins I want to enjoy. I'll get serious about spiritual things someday. That day often never comes. What's worse than being a geezer? A geezer with regrets, but now no energy or opportunity to redo his or her life.

Young people, now is the time to live for the Lord, not to sow wild oats. Not to presume on the grace of God. Not to litter your life with regrets that will haunt you at the end of your life. *"Many have remembered too late. None too soon."* (Charles Bridges as quoted by Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, p. 273.)

Ever see a bitter old man? He's grouchy. Self-centered. Bitter about his life. What's going on there? He forgot God in his youth and he's forgot God in his old age.

Compare that to the man or woman who remembered God, served God, loved God. As his life comes to a conclusion, while not without missteps along the way, he looks back at a life of remembering God and how it shaped his time and service. His perseverance in trials. His joys and sorrows. He looks at his trembling hands and his dentures and his bowed legs and thinks, *"Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."* (2 Corinthians 4:16)

Remembering our Creator day by day allows us to rejoice in him at the end of our days. That is not a meaningless life. That is the meaningful life. Forget God? Life is meaningless. Remember your Creator? Meaningful, meaningful. All is Meaningful.

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