

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

by Steve Zeisler

The book of Ecclesiastes is the record of an impressive royal adventure. Chapter 1:12,13:

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.

Solomon marshaled all of his considerable resources, and from the heights of his regal authority in Jerusalem set out to take on life and make things happen. In our final study today we reach the end of the book. Here we will discover that the perspective is very different from the beginning. Solomon continues with the counsel which we saw last week, that life should be seized and lived with joy, but the thought which dominates this closing section is that we grow old and die. The clouds cover the sun, darkness sets in, our bodies deteriorate, and we die. These are not the findings of the youthful man meeting life head-first. Solomon is old and failing. He is still offering counsel, but now his advice is quite different indeed.

ADVICE TO THE YOUNG

We begin with verse 7 of chapter 11 :

The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. Everything that is to come will be futility. Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. So remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them..."

Earlier this month I ministered at the funeral service of a woman who had been married for 62 years. I talked with her 82-year-old husband in their home, and listened as he reminisced about his wife and their many years together. Even as I was preparing to speak at her funeral, I was getting ready to teach our high school students Sunday School hour. I hoped to urge them to prepare for a lifetime of service to God. As I studied for this morning's message I remembered my preparation for these other speaking engagements. Solomon is now an old man, long past his prime, and in this closing section he urges young people to consider his words of advice while they yet have opportunity. I find myself somewhere in between these two age groups. I have high school children of my own, and I minister among some older folk who are nearing the end. (Ogden Nash measured his own progress toward old age in these words: "Old age begins and middle age ends,/The day your descendants outnumber your friends".) It is important that young people hear the wisdom of their elders.

"REJOICE, YOUNG MAN"

The aged Solomon gives two words of advice here to young people. First, enjoy life, he counsels. Put away vexation; avoid making life unduly difficult while you are young. Nowadays young people are under constant pressure to act older than their years. From first grade on they must contend with pressures toward higher

education and academic achievement. Divorce forces some children to take on adult roles, with resultant emotional damage to their personalities. These are just some of the ways in which young people today must contend with pressure toward early maturity. Solomon's word, however, is that young people should enjoy being young. There is so much to experience, so many skills that can be acquired, so much adventure to be enjoyed. Thus, he counsels, "remove vexation from your heart." Enjoy your youth.

When I look back, I must admit that there are I things I wish I had done in my teen and college years. I was in college during the Vietnam war years when students felt the burden to change the course of the nation. Other generations of students enjoyed more time for relationships and learning. As a student at Stanford, I could have played on the beautiful Stanford golf course any time I liked, for instance, but I rarely did. I regret not doing so because it's almost impossible to get on the course now. I wish I had learned to snow ski when I was younger. Once when I was invited by a friend to be in his wedding I declined because I felt I could not afford to travel the long distance required. I wish I had done this. I feel that our friendship has been damaged by my frugality.

I know people who regret giving themselves over to dissipation when they were young. They regarded pleasure as a god and gave themselves to rebelliously serve that god. On the other hand, I know others who regret taking on excessive responsibility, duty and hard work at an early age. But I don't know anyone who looks back and regrets having made good friends. I don't know anyone who regrets seizing the moment to enjoy fellowship, joy and accomplishment. Thus, Solomon counsels the young to enjoy life.

But he gives two boundaries to his advice. First, God will judge what you do. We should not make a god of pleasure. Our joy in living should be informed by righteousness. But most of what God approves of is delightful and joyful. So the first boundary is to recognize that God will judge what you do. Then, says Solomon, the prime of life is fleeting. Youth does not last forever. Later you may not have opportunity to do some of the things you perhaps should be doing now. Sitting in Ron Ritchie's office this morning was a good reminder to me that God has given us much to enjoy in life. The walls of Ron's office are covered with photographs of people he knows and places around the globe where he and his family have visited. He has taught me much in this area.

"REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR"

Solomon's second word of advice to young people is contained in the words of 12:1: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no delight in them.'" If you are excited and joyful at the created world, then take time to appreciate the Creator also. The day is coming, as your body deteriorates, when pain and restriction will cloud the beauty around you. The word "remember" here is not referring to a recollection of a list of things, but rather it is a call to know and grow to love God. As we walk with him and listen to him, he will explain his world to us.

Solomon's advice to youth then is, rejoice in the created world, and know the Creator. As time goes by and you become set in your ways, as resentments are built, as distractions, pain and pressures grow, it is much more difficult to know and delight in your Creator. We could say that Solomon is advising against self-love. One of the ways we can succeed in doing this is to love what God has made, and also to love him.

GROWING OLD

Now let's look to Solomon himself and what he has to say about the aging process. 12:1-7:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through the windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and the daughters of song will sing softly.

Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. Remember him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the Spirit will return to God who gave it.

Solomon uses a variety of metaphors to describe an old person's body as well as the aging process: the clouds and the heavens, a great estate whose building is dilapidated and whose staff are old and weary, a lamp, a well, the insect world, etc. All of these metaphors testify to the certainty of growing old and losing one's faculties.

Stuart Hamblin, a Christian songwriter of some years back, made similar observations about age with these lyrics,

I ain't gonna need this house no longer,
I ain't gonna need this house no more.
Ain't got time to fix the shingles,
Ain't got time to fix the floor.
Ain't got time to oil the hinges

Or fix a broken window pane.
Ain't gonna need this house no longer,
I'm gittin' ready to meet the saints.

Let us consider in detail Solomon's observations. He begins in 12:2 by referring to the heavenly bodies becoming darkened and the clouds returning after the rain. Here is what Derek Kidner says about this in his helpful little book *A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance* ::

There is the chill of winter in the air of verse 2, as the rains persist and the clouds turn daylight into gloom, and then night into pitch blackness. It is a scene somber enough to bring home to us not only the fading of physical and mental powers but the more general desolations of old age. There are many lights that are able to be withdrawn, besides the senses and faculties, as, one by one, old friends are taken, familiar customs change, and long-held hopes have to be abandoned. All this will come at a stage when there is no longer the resilience of youth or the prospect of recovery to offset it. In one's early years, and for the greater part of life, troubles and illnesses are chiefly set-backs, not disasters. One expects the sky to clear eventually. It is hard to adjust to the closing of that long chapter: to know that now, in the final stretch, there will be no improvement: the clouds will always gather again, and time will no longer heal, but kill.

The light fades, the clouds gather again after the rain. Our hope that things will be different, that a new door will open, is lost in great old age.

THE LOSS OF STRENGTH

Solomon goes on to describe the failing physical body. The "watchmen of the house," the hands, begin to tremble. The "mighty men stoop": the legs become bent and bowed. The "grinding ones stand idle because they are few": many teeth are missing so chewing is difficult. "Those who look through the windows grow dim": the eyes grow dim and seeing clearly is impossible. "The doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low." This may be a reference to the failure of the digestive system. "One will arise at the

sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly": the faintest sound, even a bird singing, awakens the old from their sleep. But, paradoxically, their hearing is not as good as formerly; everyone's voice seems fainter. "Men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road": the old are fearful of losing their balance and falling; they are fearful of venturing outside because of the dangers involved. "The almond tree blossoms": the white heads of the old resemble the white blossoms of the almond tree. "The grasshopper drags himself along": the one who formerly had a sprightly gait, who hopped and skipped along, now must drag himself along. "The caperberry is ineffective": in ancient times a caperberry was thought to have been an aphrodisiac, thus here we have a reference to diminished sexual desire in old age.

"For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed."

One picture here describes a beautiful lamp hanging by a silver thread. The thread breaks and the lamp is crushed. A second metaphor describes a pitcher being lowered by a wheel into a well, and both pitcher and wheel are broken. Pictured here are our mental faculties and our ability in old age to think clearly: the light from the lamp, the water drawn up from the well. Remember God, says Solomon, before your mind fades in its ability to do what you call on it to do .

Ray Stedman made some humorous observations on this passage in his study in Ecclesiastes Solomon's Secret:

Just when your face clears up, your mind begins to go!

Your knees buckle when your belt won't!

Let us acknowledge that modern technology has helped solve many of these problems. We can buy wigs when our hair falls out and dentures when our teeth rot. Glasses, contact lenses, even glass eyes will help with vision problems. Artificial legs, hands and arms can be fitted. All of these are great devices. With all the help that modern technology avails, it must be quite a sight when some people get ready for bed. It would be like watching the demolition of a house.

Young people therefore should seize the opportunity and rejoice in the creation and love the Creator. The aging process, according to Solomon, is negative. For the purposes of this book he is not able to testify, as we can, that there is life beyond the grave. So he gives the good advice to young people to know the Creator. We can add much more to this. The New Testament tells us that we should seek out and know God because we can have a relationship with him that can last forever.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The last section of Ecclesiastes is in many ways the most important. Verse 9:

In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

These verses are a postscript to the book of Ecclesiastes, which comes to an end as it began with the words of 12:8: "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" Solomon stuck to the ground rules with which he began his observation of life lived "under the sun." He gathered truth and expressed it beautifully in eloquent words and observations. He did not cheat and ask God for answers.

So we have this remarkable document describing life without benefit of revelation from God. As he comes to the end of his literary work, however, Solomon realizes that there is more to say. What he has tried to do is awaken hunger for God by leaving God out of the analysis, by talking of hopes and joys that fade after a time, by recognizing the difficulty of having self-worth if we are no different than the generations which preceded us, by acknowledging the repetitious nature of life. All of that has a way of making us hunger for answers. "Eternity has been set in man's heart," says Solomon. The life that ends in the manner he describes in the first part of this chapter, in the degeneration of the body and the mind, does not answer the call for hope that rises up inside. There must be more. This is why he wrote this book: to make us anxious for more information which comes from beyond the natural world. He had a plan to carefully, truthfully and beautifully say what he had to say so that we would engage ourselves by seeking deeper answers.

THE WORK OF THE SHEPHERD

Then in verse 11 he begins to point to something much greater:

"The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body."

Solomon is saying that there are places where nails have been driven, where pegs have been set that are sure and will not change. He has talked about life being an endless cycle where nothing lasts forever; there is no secure thing to take hold of. But then he refers to well-driven nails given by one Shepherd, places where we can hang on. But we also have the goad of a Shepherd who uses his words to prick us and guide us back to where we should be found. These goads will not let us settle for phony answers. They poke at us and stir us, making us face things which we would not otherwise see. The Shepherd who cares for us is the one who awakens us to something that is more than this book reveals. There are better answers. There is sufficient hope. There is truth that goes farther than what we see "under the

"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."

Solomon's quest "to explore by wisdom all that has been done under heaven" (1:13) partook of an arrogance that kept him from finding answers. At the end he advocates humility. If you are going to ask questions, be willing to receive the answers. This is the point in his warning on excessive devotion to books. You can become so enamored with the process of observation, and your own ability to articulate the nuances, that you will never come to any conviction about anything. C. S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce* described a man who stood at the gates of heaven and was offered answers to all his questions, but the thought of this was so distasteful to him he responded, "Let the winds of free thought blow." He went back to hell to join a discussion group because he did not want final, definitive answers to his questions.

HUMILITY IN OBEDIENCE

Solomon's conclusion here is, fear God, humble yourself before him, and keep his commandments. Live as God has directed. If we would have life, we must not be so arrogant as to insist that we can live life alone.

"God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."

God, not us, is the one who evaluates everything. Things which we think are hidden, concerns that we are not adequate to judge are all brought to light and judged. In him and in him only does the whole process of being human make sense.

Solomon asked all the questions and looked squarely at all of life, its hopes, dreams, joys and sorrows. In the last analysis he declares that we must cease asking questions and worship God. Our most important choice is to bend our knee before God and receive answers from him.

Jesus Christ is the answer. He has paid the price of our debt. We have truth, knowledge and awareness of life eternal, not just life "under the sun." Here we recognize that although our bodies deteriorate we are destined to receive new bodies one day. God speaks from heaven and he can be known in the great message of the gospel. "Fear God and keep his commandments," Solomon concludes. The heart that obeys these commands is the heart will find its way to faith in Christ.

In Romans 8, Paul speaks about the end of futility, vanity, uselessness, weightlessness, the same word used in Ecclesiastes. Here is how the apostle puts it:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Creation has a futility about it. There are vain, frustrating elements to life. The children of God are waiting for their final redemption, their new bodies. Our intimacy with God is waiting for a fuller expression when we behold him face to face, no longer through a glass darkly. It is the heart that fears God and obeys his commandments that comes to know Christ. In him we have certain hope. The vanity and foolishness of life on a rebel planet is only temporary. The day is coming when the glory of the children of God will be revealed.

Lord, young and old alike, we want to hear your truth. Although we see and feel the process of deterioration taking place, we need not fear it. Keep us from the arrogance that refuses to bend the knee before you, the insistence that we can understand and master life alone. Make us humble men and women who desire to live as you have given us to live, who look forward to the day when we and creation both no longer have to partake in futility, but in life itself. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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