

ECCLESIASTES 12:1-14 WHAT IS LIFE ABOUT? The Wise Person Fears And Obeys God.

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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?

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?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE TWILIGHT (ECCL. 12:1-8)

V. 1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them” — V. 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; V. 3 when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; V. 4 when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; V. 5 when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. V. 6 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, V. 7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. V. 8 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”

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).

Verse 1 is connected 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 trouble come 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 find no pleasure 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.

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 keepers 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 grinders are the teeth. Chewing food becomes more difficult as gums deteriorate and teeth are lost. Those looking 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 closed seem to refer to the ears. Rising to the sound of birds is an accurate description of what many aged people experience—waking up earlier in the morning.

A fear of heights and of dangers in the streets 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 drags itself along most likely refers to one not having the energy and the strength to do what one once was able to do. The phrase desire no longer is stirred 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. People go to their 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 ground 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)

V. 9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. V. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. V. 11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—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?

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?

THE CONCLUSION (ECCL. 12:12-14)

V. 12 Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. V. 13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear

God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. V. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is 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?

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 commandments.

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?

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?

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?

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?

[LifeWay Adults (2020). (p. 126). Explore the Bible: Adult Personal Study Guide - NIV - Summer 2021. LifeWay Press. Retrieved from <https://read.lifeway.com>]

ADDITIONAL VERSES

2 Timothy 3:7 Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Jeremiah 23:29 Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?

Romans 2:16 In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.