

Facing Old Age And Death

Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

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Introduction: Solomon, who was a King of Israel, wrote the book of Ecclesiastes (Ecc. 1:1). Solomon's concern for people can be seen by the name of the book. The term "Ecclesiastes" (Greek "ekklesiastes") means "one who addresses the assembly" or (Hebrew "qoheleth") means "one who calls, leads or gathers the assembly."¹ This term "ecclesiastes" illustrates a preacher who teaches people and shares his knowledge with others, (Ecc. 12:9). This book was probably written in his later years (probably around 931 B.C.). The key theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is, "It is a futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God."²

Solomon wrote much about life and death. Barry Davis gives six principles about life and death from Ecclesiastes. **First**, all die, (Ecc. 2:14-16; 3:19-22; 9:3). **Second**, death has certain advantages over life, (Ecc. 4:1-3; 7:1-2,26). **Third**, death cannot be avoided, but it is best not to act foolishly to rush it, (Ecc. 3:2; 6:6; 7:17; 8:8,12-13; 9:11-12). **Fourth**, studying the reality of death can be instructive on how to live life to the fullest, (Ecc. 7:4; 12:1-7). **Fifth**, life has certain advantages over death, (Ecc. 9:4-6,10). **Sixth**, living solely for this life is meaningless, (Ecc. 5:15-16; 6:3-5; 8:10).³

Ecclesiastes chapter 12 is one of those wonderful timeless passages on life and death that relates to both young people and elderly people. Solomon writes to young people about life by stating, "Remember now your Creator (Hebrew "bor'eka") in the days of your youth," (Ecc. 12:1). Your days of youth have a tremendous effect on your life when you grow old. It is in your youth that you prepare for old age. Solomon wrote to older people about life by stating, "Remember your Creator (Hebrew "bor'eka") before... you die," (i.e. when the "silver cord is loosed," Ecc. 12:6). Solomon probably wrote chapter 12 to warn both young and elderly people to avoid walking through life solely on human wisdom.

Commentator Barry Davis writes, "Death has a voracious, insatiable appetite. Much like an animal, it silently stalks its prey and then strikes with great fury and often little warning. It tears asunder hopes and dreams, and declares that life itself is vanity, futility, meaningless, or emptiness. Thus death can make a man hate life, not because he wants to die, but because it renders life so futile. Since death cannot be circumvented, Solomon argued that the key to life and living is to be found in facing death and dying."⁴

Solomon shares three focal points concerning growing old and facing death, that help reinforce his conclusion. He then gives two concluding applications that will help those facing old age or death, cope with these areas.

1. SIGNS OF OLD AGE

In the first focal point, Solomon gives us a vivid picture of growing old. He writes with metaphors that have a wide range of understanding and "has given rise to the wildest flights of fanciful interpretation. No writer has consistently expounded the passage in terms of a single consistent allegory."⁵ Some writers suggest that this section (Ecc. 12:1-5) depicts a ruined house. The wisest and most plausible approach seems to be that old age is pictured here without one line

of thought being maintained through out the section. "Solomon saw death and dying as such debilitating and devastating events that he determined to portray them through a multiplicity of analogies with great rapidity to ensure that the thrust of his message was clearly understood."⁶ Solomon explores the "days of old age."

A. Age affects the hands.

The "keepers of the house tremble," (Ecc. 12:3).

B. Age affects the shoulders.

The "strong men bow down," (Ecc. 12:3).

C. Age affects the teeth.

The "grinders cease because they are few," (Ecc. 12:3).

D. Age affects the eyes.

Those that "look through the windows grow dim," (Ecc. 12:3).

E. Age affects the lips.

When the "doors are shut in the streets," (Ecc. 12:4). (some refer to this as "reduced access" in public)

F. Age affects the jaw.

The "sound of grinding is low," (Ecc. 12:4).

G. Age affects sleep.

One "rises up at the sound of a bird," (Ecc. 12:4). (some refer to this as "erratic sleep")

H. Age affects the ears.

All the "daughters of music are brought low," (Ecc. 12:4).

I. Age affects stability.

Also "they are afraid of height," (Ecc. 12:5).

J. Age affects the hair.

When the "almond tree blossoms," (Ecc. 12:5).

K. Age affects the legs.

The "grasshopper is a burden," (Ecc. 12:5).

2. THE SEVERITY OF OLD AGE

In the second focal point, Solomon addresses the many hardships older people face.

A. These days are "difficult," ("evil," Ecc. 12:1).

Commentator George Barton writes, "The evil days do not refer to the days of darkness in Sheol [the grave] mentioned in 11:8, but to the period of old age which he now goes on to describe. They are evil in the sense of miserable because less full of pleasure than youth and prime."⁷

B. These days are "short," (Ecc. 12:1).

The "years draw near" meaning "time is now growing short."

C. These days are "painful," ("no pleasure" Ecc. 12:1).

There is "no pleasure" in old age and the enjoyment of life becomes less, (i.e. "while the moon and the stars, are not darkened"). George Barton writes, "This may be taken two ways: it may either refer to failing eye sight, so that the lights of all sorts become dim, or it may refer to the fact that, as age advances, the brightness or enjoyment of life becomes less."⁸

D. These days are "fearful," (Hb. "yare" Ecc. 12:5).

This is the emotional side of fear.

E. These days are "terrifying," (Hb. "hathat" Ecc. 12:5).

This has the idea of "to be broken."

F. These days are where "desire" fails, (Hb. "abiyona," Ecc. 12:5).

"Desire" is literally "caper berry" a metaphor for "that which satisfies."

G. These days are filled with continual sorrow, (Ecc. 12:2).

The clouds leave, however, there is always the "return of the clouds." Even if the storm ends, another one comes soon after.

3. THE SENTENCE OF OLD AGE

In the third focal point, Solomon addresses the fact that time is going quickly and death is waiting. Barry David writes why Solomon injects thoughts about death here. "Going to a wake will help one become awake to the realities of life (Job 7:2,4). Perhaps to his surprise, Solomon discovered that the meaning of life can be found only by facing the inevitable reality of death."⁹ Solomon explores "the days of the end of life" as seen in the words "loosed, broken, shattered."

A. Soon the older person will go to his or her eternal home, (Ecc. 12:5).

B. Soon the mourners will go about the streets on his or her behalf, (Ecc. 12:5).

C. Soon the spinal cord will stop working.

When the "silver cord is loosed," (Ecc. 12:6).

D. Soon the brain will stop working.

The "golden bowl is broken," (Ecc. 12:6).

E. Soon the lungs will no longer hold air.

The "pitcher shattered," (Ecc. 12:6).

F. Soon the heart stops working.

The "wheel broken at the well," (Ecc. 12:6).

G. Soon the body goes back to the ground.

The "dust will return to the earth," (Ecc. 12:7).

H. Soon the spirit goes back to God.

The "spirit will return to God," (Ecc. 12:7).

If Solomon would have stopped here with these three major point containing descriptions of old age, life in old age would have no meaning. However, Solomon makes two concluding applications dealing with "the godly view of how to live life in old age" and "how to live in light of the anticipation of death."

4. THE SANCTITY OF OLD AGE

Solomon concludes with the importance of old age to the Lord.

A. You can prepare for the future no matter what it holds for you, by leaving your self-sufficiency and trusting God, (Ecc. 12:1,6, "remember").

Solomon states to both the "young" (Ecc. 12:1) and the "old" (Ecc. 12:6), to "remember" (Hebrew "zakar") which means "to pay attention to."¹⁰ Commentator Derek Kidner writes, "To remember Him is no perfunctory or purely mental act: it is to drop our pretense of self-sufficiency and to commit ourselves to Him."¹¹ Solomon is saying, "you need to act decisively on behalf of God whether young or old."¹²

B. You must rely on the "Creator" who made you and knows all about you, (Ecc. 12:1,6).

Commit yourself to His care and stop trusting in your own self-sufficiency. Commentator Michael Eaton writes, Solomon has constantly described the life of faith as one that is enjoyable, (Ecc. 2:24-26; 3:12,22; 5:18-20; 9:7-10; 11:8-10). "Now he presents another aspect: where God [the Creator] has been neglected, the capacity for joy will be lost."¹³

C. God gives us time to use wisely, (Ecc. 12:6).

Solomon warns them to remember "before" the vital time is lost and death awaits us.

D. There is more to life than "self" because this is empty, ("all is vanity," Ecc. 12:8).

E. God gives life and takes life, (Ecc. 12:7)

There is more to life than this physical aspect which is continually growing frail. Life continues well beyond the physical.

F. Stability in old age and preparation for the crisis within old age will not be found in the wisdom of man's books, (Ecc. 12:12).

5. THE STABILITY WITHIN OLD AGE

Solomon summarizes his conclusion of the whole matter of facing old age by stating how to live wisely at any age, (Ecc. 12:13). Solomon gives the answer to those who find their earthly existence unsatisfying and possibly finding they are in a crisis.¹⁴ They may even be elderly facing death.

A. Fear the Lord, (Ecc. 12:13).

"Surrender to the sovereign purpose of God; respect Him; resolve to discover His intentions for your life."¹⁵

B. Keep His commandments, (Ecc. 12:13).

"Probably refers to all that is known to be God's will."¹⁶

C. Remember that the Lord will take every deed into account, (Ecc. 12:14).

"Man knows enough to be held responsible for what he does or fails to do."¹⁷

Conclusion: Without God, old age and death make no sense and have no meaning.

End Notes:

¹The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Walvoord and Zuck, "Ecclesiastes" by Donald Glenn, Victor: Wheaton, 1985, p. 975.

²The MacArthur Study Bible, Word: Waco, 1997, p. 924.

³Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes, Roy Zuck, "Death, An Impetus For Life," Barry Davis, Baker: Grand Rapids, 1994, Pp. 349-350.

⁴Reflecting With Solomon: p. 348.

⁵Ecclesiastes, Michael Eaton, IVP: Downers Grove, 1983, p. 147.

⁶Reflecting With Solomon: p. 351. ⁷p. 367. ⁸p. 368. ⁹p. 348.

¹⁰Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Harris, Archer, Waltke, Moody: Chicago, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 241.

¹¹The Message of Ecclesiastes, Derek Kidner, IVP: Downers Grove, 1976, p. 100.

¹²Living On The Ragged Edge, Charles Swindoll, Word: Waco, 1985, p. 349.

¹³Ecclesiastes, Michael Eaton, p. 148.

¹⁴Ecclesiastes: The Mid-life Crisis, Don Anderson, Loizeaux Brothers: Neptune, 1987, p. 242.

¹⁵Ecclesiastes: The Mid-life Crisis, Don Anderson, p. 242.

¹⁶Ecclesiastes, Michael Eaton, p. 156.

¹⁷"Ecclesiastes," J. Stafford Wright, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, by Frank Gaebelin, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1991, Vol. 5, p. 1197.