

The end of us and the end of the matter

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Ecclesiastes

By Rev. David Silversides

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Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian

22 Main Street
Loughbrickland, Co. Down
Northern Ireland
BT32 3NQ
UK

Website: www.loughbrickland.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/ldrpc

Ecclesiastes chapter 12, verse 1 reads, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." We can sum up the contents of this chapter, which naturally divides into two, as the end of us and the end of the matter. The end of us and the end of the matter. Firstly, the most important thing to do when young, the most important thing to do when young, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." The first eight verses of this chapter really belong along with verses 7 to 10 of the previous chapter. This is the great exhortation following the truth that we have in verse 9 of the previous chapter, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." And that verse is telling us that whilst the young man may feel it's great to be alive and have that feeling of strength and vitality and that he can have a pleasant life fulfilling his desires, the desires of his sinful heart, yet his youth will not last always. Decline will come and the end will come. So verse 10 of the previous chapter, "Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity." This is telling us that the young man or the young woman also but the young are inclined to think they'll always be as they are; they know it's not true but they live as though it will always be so and verse 10 is saying that they should remove sorrow and evil from them, recognize that childhood and youth are vanity, that they don't last, therefore they should seek that which does last by remembering their Creator in the days of their youth. In other words, prepare for old age and death by remembering our Creator, because childhood and youth are vanity. They don't last.

God brings into judgment and so to avoid the sorrow of old age and worse death and judgment in an unforgiven state, then remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. It tells us who to remember, thy Creator, the one who has absolute rights over us. He is our Creator and we have an obvious duty arising from the fact that he is our Creator. He made us. He tells us what we are to do. It implies accountability to him, the one who made us commands us and judges us in the end. And when are we to remember? In the

days of our youth. Old age is not promised, neither is the grace to repent in old age. We are to seek the Lord early. Early. We may not be given old age, and if we are we may not be given grace to repent in old age. To say, "Well, I'll seek the Lord sometime," is to express our contempt for him. The man or woman who hears the Gospel and says well sometime later, they're presuming there will be a later, but also they are expressing the fact that the very idea of seeking the Lord now is obnoxious to them. So that those who say, talk about and it happens a lot in this province, they talk about, "Well, I'll get saved sometime," well they don't know that that's true because it's God who saves not man, but also what they're saying is that Christ is offensive to them, that they do not want to come to Christ, and so though their conscience is troubled a little and so therefore they tell themselves, "Yes I'll seek the Lord sometime," they hate him. They hate him. So that far from this, "Well, sometime, yes, sometime," being an expression of some residue of piety or goodness, it is an expression of utter contempt for the Lord Jesus Christ. What it expresses is, "I'd like to think I'll be safe sometime but I don't want Christ and the idea of seeking him now is obnoxious," and it needs to be seen for what it really is, as well as the presumption, as well as the misplaced presumption that later will be given to them, that they'll see many days, and also the presumption that they have the ability, a so-called free will, to be able to just come to Christ whenever it is convenient. There is presumption, there's false doctrine, but there is also in itself an expression of contempt for Christ. It's saying, "I don't want Christ, but I'd like to think that sometime I'll have the safety that Christ can give, but I don't want him, and I don't want his ways, and I don't want his truth, and I want to go on in sin," but with the hope that sometime, somehow everything will work out all right.

And how are we to remember our Creator? Not with a mere fleeting thought or a righteousness that is as the dew of the morning, appears for a little while and then it's gone, but with a hearkening to his word and the message of forgiveness in Christ Jesus and a wholehearted turning to him. But then secondly, youth will be replaced by old age and death. Youth will be replaced by old age and death. Verse 1 says, "while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shouldst say, I have no pleasure in them." Note here the wretchedness of old age without Christ. The wretchedness of old age without Christ. The evil days, the days of trouble, of decline, and the ungodly old man says, "I have no pleasure in them," because his pleasures were so dependent upon his youthfulness, upon his health, and upon his strength, that when his health and strength is gone, he's got nothing and so he has no pleasure in them. What pleasure is there for an old man whose pleasures necessitated him being a young man? There's nothing left.

And the declining process is described in verse 2 to verse 6. Verse 2, "While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain." This is a general description of entering into the winter of life as far as the physical world is concerned. Everything is dull and darkness. It compares with the light in verse 7 of the previous chapter, "Truly the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." This is life under the sun but here everything is, the sun is, the light is declining and life is coming to an end and the clouds returning after the rain is indicating the constancy of trouble in the decline of old age. Normally when there's a storm the clouds stay away for a while but not so in this case, there's a storm and then the clouds are back

again for the next storm and the next one. In youth, in younger days, an illness was seen as just a temporary setback, ordinarily not always but ordinarily recovered from, but as the decline sets in one thing comes after another, one storm then the clouds of the next one and the next one.

Verse 3, "In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened." The keepers of the house would appear to be the arms, the arms that once could protect the body or could strike a blow and do so much, but now these arms tremble and the strong men, the legs bowing under just struggling to support the body, and the grinders, the teeth have become few and so they are useless now. And those that look out of the windows be darkened, that is the eyes, and you remember Isaac was so stricken in years, his eyes were dim because of age. He couldn't tell was it Esau or was it Jacob? The eyes of those that look out of the windows are darkened.

In verse 4, "And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low." The doors shut in the streets because the grinders are low. This seems to refer to the power of speech, the idea that the man communicates his mind and will and thoughts through speech and his words go out into the streets, they go out amongst men, but now he's old and his mouth is sunken and he has few teeth and he doesn't speak or very little. And he shall rise up at the voice of a bird. When he was a young man he went to bed, he slept solid and long and got up refreshed, but now he doesn't sleep properly. The sound of a bird in his awake. And all the daughters of music shall be brought low. His hearing is declining. He can't hear the music. Remember Barzilai in 2 Samuel chapter 19 and verse 35, "I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil? can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king?" The pleasures he once had in music, in listening, are fading.

In verse 5, "Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets." Afraid of that which is high, climbing up a hill, climbing up steps. When he was a young man, it meant nothing but now it's a problem. Afraid in the way, afraid of stumbling. It used to be that he could walk or even run anywhere, but now every little journey is a burden. The almond tree shall flourish. The almond tree, when it blossoms, blossoms in pale white. It's talking about the hair growing white with age. And the grasshopper shall be a burden. Either a grasshopper landing on him is a burden, or more likely, the idea that the agility of the hopping grasshopper, the ease with which it springs up, and now it's dragging itself along. And desire shall fail. The desires of youth. Appetite for food gone. And it could also include sexual desire. These desires are gone. and the end comes, verse 5 in the middle, because man goes to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets. His long home, beyond the grave, while the funeral takes place in the streets on earth, he's gone to his long home.

Verse 6, "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern." The silver cord may refer to the spine and the golden bowl to the head or skull, and the pitcher and the wheel may simply convey the idea of that by which the water of physical life, as it were, is conveyed or more particularly the arteries from the valves of the heart which is represented as the fountain or the system and it's not flowing anymore. The blood has stopped its course.

Then in verse 7, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." This is the fulfillment for the individual of Genesis 3 and verse 19, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Death is universal because guilt is universal, and man's sinfulness is universal. And the Spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Job 14 verse 10, "But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?" His soul returns to God for judgment, though full public judgment is at the last day when the body is raised, yet also at death there is a judgment, and the souls of men go to heaven or hell. Our Lord Jesus Christ pointed out that God described himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He says, "Wherefore God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Our Lord Jesus on the cross said to the thief who believed in him, "Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in paradise." In 2 Corinthians 5:6 to 8, the apostle speaks of his ultimate desire to be clothed upon, that is, with the resurrection body, but nevertheless he has a desire even to be absent from the body and present with the Lord so that at death the souls of believers pass into the immediate presence of the Savior.

This is a point I've noticed that sometimes people are a bit unclear on. At death the soul goes to be with Christ, "For me to live as Christ, to die is gain, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better." But for those without Christ, the soul goes to hell immediately. Luke 16 and verse 22, "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." The reference to the burial of the body and his being in hell and in torments indicates that the ungodly, the soul of the ungodly immediately goes to hell and awaits the resurrection of the body to damnation.

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Death is ahead of us all. If we're still young, there may be old age between youth and death, though that is not certain. But death is certain. If death is delayed, it's simply in order that we should grow old and decline. So verse 8, "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity." That is, if this is all there is, then there is nothing worth anything. If only in this life we should have hope in Christ, we would be of all men most miserable. If all that there is is that which is under the sun, then nothing makes sense, nothing has meaning. All that we can anticipate at best is this prolonged process of dilapidation and decline and then death. But that isn't all. That's why he says, remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, so that when all that depends upon the physical senses, these things are diminishing because the outward man is perishing, the inward man is renewed day by day. We need to seek lasting treasure in the Lord Jesus Christ because for those who are in Christ, the decline of the body cannot

take that away. Fellowship with Christ continues as the body declines and goes to the grave, fellowship with Christ continues throughout that decline and is perfected in holiness in the world to come.

Thirdly, the conclusion of the whole matter, verse 9 to verse 14. Firstly, he has Solomon's aim, verse 9, "And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth." Because he was wise, truly wise, he taught. Truly wise men do teach. They don't keep it to themselves. And he labored in this. It says that he still taught the people knowledge, because he was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. Yet he gave good heed and sought out and set in order many proverbs. That isn't incompatible with the infallible inspiration of this book. The Lord uses means and causes, the thoughts and the words to be exactly as he intended, and Solomon labored to find acceptable words and he sought out words that could be understood. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. He sought to teach so as to be understood and to teach that which is true. What a model for every preacher to be understandable and truthful. He didn't conceal truth. He didn't make it a means of showing how learned he was, but he made it known and taught knowledge so as to be understood.

And note then the quality of this truth, this divine truth, verse 11, "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd." Goads spurring to action, that's what a goad is, that stick with a point on it to get an animal to move. The real truth demands response, the obedience of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and then that godliness which is in accordance with that faith. So truth is not mere theory, the real truth. And as nails fastened by the master of assemblies, the word assemblies means collections, and they would seem to refer to those who were the instruments of collecting the inspired writings, a fixed body of truth, nails fastened. Coming from the one shepherd, the Creator of verse 1, is also the shepherd of verse 11, from the good shepherd, from the Lord. So the words of the wise, that is the truth of God which demands action, is fixed like nails by the masters of those who gather these books together, and they're given by the one shepherd. So God's truth is both fixed and demanding. It is fixed, it's not unstable, but it requires us to move. It is fixed, the truth is fixed, but it demands movement, it demands faith and obedience.

And God's truth is to be listened to, verse 12, "And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh." He's not saying there isn't to be study, but he's saying this, that as far as human writings are concerned, there is no end and the ultimate answers are not to be found in them, but in the words of the one shepherd. By these, my son, be admonished. Whatever else you read, and there's no limit to it, make sure you read this, the writings that come from the one shepherd, the words of the wise.

And so verse 13 gives the whole duty of man, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Fear

God and keep his commandments. The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man. It's all in the scriptures. The Gospel of salvation, the message of forgiveness through Christ Jesus is in the Bible and those who believe that message and who desire to honor the Lord, the law of God is there defining right and wrong for them so that they can pursue holiness through faith in their union with Christ.

So all that we are to do to believe and all that we are to do is here in the Word of God. There is no doctrine that we are required to believe but that which is in the Word of God. And there is no commandment we are required to obey but that which is in the Word of God. There is nothing sinful but what this book defines as sinful. We've looked at this more closely, it's a long time back now, when we looked at the subject of guidance in one of our monthly after church meetings, that all that is required is here. There is no perfect will of God for our lives other than that contained in scripture. The only thing we ever need to avoid is sin, and sin is the transgression of the law. There is nothing sinful that this book does not show to be sinful. So if we say, "Well, but what if we've got two legitimate options? How do we decide which is the right one? Supposing you've got two job offers, how do you decide which to take?" Well, you seek the biblical, non-sinful priority order, you seek to know what that is and how it applies to these choices. In other words, you must seek the absence of sin, the modification of sin in the basis on which you choose the one from the other. There is always, always a biblical answer. Even in choosing two things legitimate in themselves, there is a priority order in scripture which will tell us which one should have priority over the other. There is always a biblical way forward.

We never need a guidance that is not biblical and here we are being told, yes, there are many books that can be studied, but when he represented the secular man searching for wisdom without this book, the result was vanity. He's saying you can weary your flesh seeking answers outside of the words of the wise that come from the Good Shepherd, but you'll never find the answers except in this book. By these words be admonished. And why it matters, verse 14, "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." What we see under the sun is not all there is. One generation passes to another, but there is an end not only for the individual at death, but for mankind as a whole in history. There is an end. He has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained. There is a last day. That seemingly endless sequence given right up back in chapter 1, it isn't endless. You know, one day following after another, one generation following after another. It isn't endless. It seems endless and the man who only looks at what's under the sun, he decides it is endless. But it's not. Because God has revealed that it's not, and purposed that it will not be. There is an end. There is a judgment. God's Word explains it all. Otherwise, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. And the unbeliever, with all his endless searching, with all his investigation, with all his wearying of the flesh, with the study of human ideas, all he ends up with is vanity and vexation of spirit. The despair that he ought to have at that, he camouflages. He tries to make the best of it. He tries to put a good gloss on it. He tries to pretend that he's found answers when he hasn't. He makes his empty words more complex and his scheme has to have an air of

sophistication to disguise the fact that there are no real answers in what he's saying. But the answers are here in the Word of God.

Well then, the lessons are very simple. Firstly, answers are needed. Answers are needed. It's no use just making the best of it, because it doesn't last. The young man fit and strong, the young man at his best, his fittest, most fit to enjoy pleasure under the sun, it doesn't last. He gets old, and his pleasures fade, and he has no pleasure in his days in this world, and then death and judgment. But the answers to understanding life under the sun are not under the sun, that is to say, the explanation of our lives under the sun are not to be found merely by studying what is under the sun, but by the truth that God has given, that God of heaven has given in his Word. You see, man is inclined to start with himself, what he sees and his existence, and to seek the explanation of his existence from within that existence, but this is saying, no, the answers have to come from outside of ourselves, from God who has given us his revelation, the written Word of God, the truth as it is in Jesus. It's part of man's pride that he wants to find the answers his way. He wants to do it his way. He doesn't want to depend. He doesn't want to listen. He doesn't want to be told by God. And so he rummages around looking for answers when the answers are God-given. And the Gospel, the way of life and the godliness that it produces they are profitable. All is not vanity for those who know the Lord, who trust in the Savior, who fear God and keep his commandments. It's not vanity. It's not a waste of time. There is an end. There is a judgment. God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, not just the outward but the inward, whether it be good or whether it be evil. So it is profitable to believe the truth as it is in Jesus and to follow that godliness which is profitable not only for this present life but also for that which is to come.