

Series on Biblical Wisdom: Ecclesiastes No. 4

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

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As I said at the outset of this series of sermons on Ecclesiastes, I do not intend to preach through the book paragraph by paragraph. We have considered the basic message of the book and have dipped into two paragraphs that confirm and elaborate that interpretation and tonight we take up another. Here is Dr. Max Rogland's summary of the book as I read it to you last time (*ESV Study Bible*).

“The theme of Ecclesiastes is the necessity of fearing God in a fallen, and therefore frequently confusing and frustrating world.” [*EVS Study Bible*, 1193]

“At the same time, however, the Preacher is distinctly original and creative in his thought and manner of expression and is not merely restating what other sages have taught. As a genuine wisdom teacher, he has a gift for penetrating observation and for stating things in a profound and challenging manner that spur the listener on to deeper thought and reflection.” [1194]

“One can see the Preacher's most distinctive contribution from the way he uses the term “find out”... Every human being wants to find out and understand all the ways of God in the world, but he cannot, because he is not God. And yet the faithful do not despair but cling to God, who deserves their trust; they can leave it to him to make sense of it all, while they seek to learn what it means to ‘fear God and keep his commandments,’ even when they cannot see what God is doing. This is true wisdom.” [1194]

And I should say this is where a great many people flounder. Life does not turn out as they wanted it to, their life does not turn out as they feel it should and they lose confidence in God or lose their interest in trusting and obeying him. Wisdom knows better.

Now this general theme is elaborated in the book in a number of different ways, as we have seen. Whether we are talking about the injustice of things, the psychological irony with which human life is always dripping (e.g. the disappointment we all feel in the very things that ought to satisfy us [e.g. 5:10]), the fact that the wicked very often appear to do as well or better than the righteous, or the seemingly random onslaught of death, life here “under the sun” for a believing man or woman is often surprising, confusing, disturbing, and deeply disappointing.

And yet God has given us many pleasures to enjoy and important things to do. We may not understand what is going on but we are not, for that reason, left with nothing to do or with no purpose to pursue in our lives. We are to fear God and keep his commandments, leaving the times and seasons to him to order, and meantime enjoying the many things there are to enjoy in our heavenly Father's world: from our families to our work to good food and drink. If you stop and ponder this, I think you will realize how profoundly true this view of life must be: both the limitations of our knowledge and of our lack of control of events on the one hand *and* what

remains for us to do in view of those limitations on the other on the other. A wise man or woman accepts these facts, does not chafe against them, and lives accordingly.

But, along the way, *Qohelet* gives a great deal of the same sort of practical advice and counsel that we find in other wisdom books, such as Proverbs. The first paragraph of chapter 5, for example, is a straightforward exhortation to be scrupulously careful to keep the promises that you make to God including the promises you make when you are in his house. If you participate in worship here, you are making promises to God every Sunday. It's very important to keep those promises. In 7:9 we have a warning against the foolishness of giving way to the temptation of getting angry, a warning we find in a number of other places in the Bible, and in our text for this evening we also have the same voice of wisdom that we get in many places in the Bible, but never more memorably than here. What we have in our text is a warning against *spiritual procrastination*, putting off until tomorrow what ought to be done today.

In Haggai 1:2 we read that the reason that the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon were once again in the spiritual doldrums was because they had got into the habit of saying to one another, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built." They were putting off what was crucial to their spiritual life: the proper worship of the Lord. The Lord famously sketched all-too-familiar characters in the church, the man who replies to Christ's summon to "follow me," by saying, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," or the man who replies "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

Augustine put his finger on the nature of his resistance to the necessity of submission to the Lord. It wasn't that he didn't believe he should surrender his life to Christ. It wasn't that he didn't think it necessary to do so. He just didn't want to do it *yet*. Or, as he famously put it in his *Confessions*:

"Give me chastity and continence, but do not give it yet."

The Apostle Paul also puts his finger on this typical problem in human and believing life. In 2 Cor. 6:1-2 in warning his readers not to delay in faith and repentance, he said, quite strikingly I think:

"Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, [and now follows a citation from Isa. 49:8]

"In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you."

Behold, *now* is the favorable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation."

You can receive God's grace in vain and one sure way of doing that is by delaying to give answer to it and to obey it and to embrace it when it is given to you. In other words, strike while the iron is hot because it isn't always hot and may never be again in your case. "Seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near," [55:6] says Isaiah. Why? Because he

can't always be found and isn't always near in the sense that you sense his presence and are compelled to recognize it.

As you know, this is a frequent theme in the OT prophets. Israel put off repentance until the opportunity to repent was gone, she had passed the point of no return: the Lord's patience had been exhausted and her heart had become too hard. They could have repented before, but they squandered their opportunity by putting it off again and again. *This is the theme of Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 and the lesson is put here in a particularly memorable way.*

Text Comment

- v.1 Here is the lesson; what follows in vv. 2-8 is the argument that's proves the point. The author's point is that without the active practice of faith, of love for God, of obedience, and of serving the kingdom of God, the trials and tribulations of life put increasing distance between the soul and God until unbelief and disobedience are second nature and it is too late. As with so much of biblical wisdom, this is one of those lessons one has only to open one's eyes to see proved over and over again.

- v.2 Think of the sunshine and a starlit night as an image of youth and the darkening skies and the clouds as an image of later life with its increase of problems, its accumulation of sorrows, and its fewer thrills. In the ANE, of course, as in the Middle East today, there was a dry sunny season and a clear night sky in that season, and then there was a rainy season clouds often blocking the moon and stars at night. Here the sun is youth and the rain and clouds are old age.

- v.3 Most of these metaphors are wonderfully clear and easily understood. The keepers of the house are the hands that begin to tremble in old age. As we grow older we begin to bend. I remember the last time I saw my brother-in-law. He had been sick with the cancer that took his life for some time but I could scarcely believe how much he had changed in physical appearance. He looked like an old man in large part because of the stoop he now had and with which he walked. The grinders are the teeth which, when lost, make eating a meal a chore for the old. Of course they didn't have the dental care we have today and often reached old age with few if any teeth left; but even folk today find that teeth become a problem in their old age. Or they find that they can no longer taste their food, which some of you have told me makes eating a much less pleasant exercise.

Carl Henry put it this way: "When one finds the fullness of life only in whatever one can stoke into the pantry, what does the creed 'eat, drink, and be merry' amount to if the chore of eating itself becomes high tragedy? The man who knows his Creator will think of a resurrection life to come; the pagan blames God for abandoning him in the only life he has, and of depriving him of sensual enjoyment." [*The Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 60]

- v.4 Now it is the hearing that is failing as one by one the senses are giving way. One can no longer hear the bustle in the world outside one's house and increasingly the person is "marooned" in the cramped house of his own body. [J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes,"

The Expositors Bible Commentary, vol. 5, 1193] The “sound of grinding” could refer to the fact that one can no longer hear even his own chewing, or it could refer to the sound of grinding grain that precedes the making of food, or it could refer to the voice of a person, now soft and sometimes indistinguishable as he or she tries to speak without teeth.

“Those looking through the windows” are the eyes. Eyesight fails as well.

The second half of verse 4 is somewhat difficult. If the old person’s hearing has gone it is doubtful that now he sleeps so lightly that the smallest sound disturbs him – though the light sleep of the elderly is a fact of life. Perhaps the point is simply that the elderly can’t sleep as they once could and awake early in the morning, that early hour when the birds begin to sing. Some have translated the line differently and taken it to mean that the old man’s voice now sounds like the voice of a bird.

The “daughters of song” brought low probably refers either to the elderly unable any longer to join in singing or to their inability to enjoy the singing of others because they can’t hear it very well.

- v.5 It is not the elderly that you see lining up at the Puyallup Fair to ride the *Extreme Scream*. Nor do you find them taking late night walks on city streets. They have lost their daring. Though not Laverne Roberts, known to some in this congregation, who went bungee jumping on her 60th birthday! In the ancient world, the narrow streets of a town or city were crammed with camels, donkeys and carts, bustling traders, and people: no place for slow-moving and unsteady older folk. [Wright, 1193]

The almond tree blossoms white. We moderns dye our hair to keep it dark but past a certain age a head full of jet black hair simply looks weird.

The late Dr. Carl F.H. Henry preached on this text years ago here at Faith, if some of you remember, and tall and lanky as he was he made a perfect grasshopper here on the front platform: an old man, bent over, knees stuck out, and elbows back.

“And desire is no longer stirred.” What is there to desire if you can’t taste it, see it, or hear it?

All that remains is to speak “of the inevitable end, the long home of Sheol, inaugurated with the wailing of the professional mourners.” [Wright, 1194]

- v.6 The “before” picks up the thread of the original thought in vv. 1 and 2. In fact, the NIV added a second “Remember him,” at the beginning of v. 6, which is not there in the Hebrew text; it’s just pulled down from verse 1.

The metaphors are not entirely clear but they certainly suggest total collapse. We know that ceramic bowls – perhaps in this case a lamp – were hung from chains, so when the chain breaks the bowl falls and is broken into pieces. It cannot be repaired. That’s how

archaeologists work as you know. They almost invariably date levels in a tell from the pottery that they find and the pottery was very often kept just in shards because it was so much less expensive as something to write on than paper. So receipts are found on pottery and short little notes are found on pottery, business communications, and so on. Broken pieces of pottery litter the ANE world down many, many feet in any tell or archaeological remains and once broken, of course, it couldn't be repaired; it had to be either thrown away or used for another purpose. Obviously there is no point going to the well to fetch water if the pitcher to carry it in has been shattered or the wooden wheel that lowers the bucket into the well has been broken.

Others have likened it to the four ways death comes to a human being: the silver cord being broken a severing of the spinal cord, the golden bowl broken the brain ceasing to function, the pitcher is the heart and the wheel the organs of digestion. [Henry, 61; Wright, 1194] There are linguistic reasons for likening them to those things and it is definitely not as much a stretch as it may sound to you.

- v.7 “Dust to dust...” as we mentioned two weeks ago recalls the curse pronounced on man for his sin in Genesis 3.

“The spirit returns to God who gave it...” is a thought this author artlessly drops into his argument but does not develop, but it certainly indicates continued existence after death. It has, as well, long been cited as an important proof-text for “creationism;” not the “creationism” of biology and Christian objections to evolution but “creationism” as over against “traducianism.” Creationism and traducianism are the two theological explanations of the origin of the soul. Is the soul inherited from one’s parents as is the body? “Yes,” say the advocates of traducianism. Most Lutheran theologians favor this position. But there are problems with traducianism. The soul is not a material entity that can be divided, some coming from the father and some from the mother and the contribution of each being joined together to make a new thing. Creationism, on the other hand, holds that the soul of every human being is the immediate creation of God. That is, something like what happened to Adam – when God breathed life into his already created body – happens to everyone. Most Reformed theologians are creationists. And Ecclesiastes 12:7 is one of the biblical arguments.

- v.8 The recurring statement of the book’s theme is used to close a paragraph. Life is beyond understanding and is a vapor, here today, gone tomorrow. So live accordingly if you would be wise. The phenomenon of death is the supreme example of the nature of life “under the sun,” so this paragraph makes a fitting conclusion to his argument. There remains nothing but a concluding summary which you have in the final verses of the book.

The point that the wise man is making is obvious, or ought to be. The same point is made often enough by others who have no particular religious and certainly no Christian ax to grind. In *As You Like It* Shakespeare concludes his seven ages of man this way: (the word “sans,” you remember, is French for “without”)

“His big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (2.7)

Or think of Charles Kingsley poem in *The Water Babies* (chapter 2).

When all the world is young, lad,
 And all the trees are green;
 And every goose a swan, lad,
 And every lass a queen:
 Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
 And round the world away;
 Young blood must have its course, lad,
 And every dog its day.

When all the world is old, lad,
 And the all the trees are brown;
 And all the sport is stale, lad,
 And all the wheels run down;
 Creep home, and take your place there,
 The spent and maimed among:
 God grant you find one face there,
 You loved when all was young.
 [Cited by Wright, 1195]

Now, we have learned in our reading of the Bible to accept the fact that it often trades in generalities and does not take time to add to any point all the qualifications that might be made because if it did the point would be lost. It would be drowned in a sea of those qualifications. Abraham, Moses, and Joshua lived very long lives and were in possession of their powers to the end; David was only somewhat so. The apostle Paul did not live into very old age, nor did Peter. John did and suffered the ravages of old age, had to be carried into church as an old man, but was still mentally acute, so far as the evidence goes. Calvin died when he was 54 and was already suffering the ravages of age, Spurgeon died at the age of 57 and he likewise was much older in physical condition than the number of his years would ordinarily suggest. Robert Haldane, on the other hand, published the first volume of his epoch making commentary on *Romans* when he was seventy and David Brown published his commentary on *Revelation* when he was eighty-eight! Geoffrey Williams was still running the Evangelical Library in London when he was eighty-five. His secretary retired that year, after many years of working six days a week for the library. She was eighty-one. Everyone doesn't age the same way. We know that. Evelyn Waugh wrote:

“Old age is a curious thing. It leaves a man crawling like a beetle while his mind is a strong and young as ever.” [Cited in Buckley, *Happy Days* ..., 405]

But, of course, sometimes it isn't so, either the beetle or the strong mind.

There have been a great host of Christians who have never contemplated a comfortable retirement. Perhaps you remember John Collins' poem *Tomorrow*. It begins:

In the downhill of life, when I find I'm declining,
May my fate no less fortunate be
Than a snug elbow-chair will afford for reclining,
And a cot that o'erlooks the wide sea.

Not so for a great many Christians who planned to burn out, not rust out, and serve the Lord with intelligence and vigor to the very end, whether or not they were still making their living from working at a job. What is more, there are some, though the number is very small, who *begin* their Christian life very late in life. Consider our own Ruth Gursh, whose life came to its end just a few weeks ago. Her epitaph could be like the one in a Cambridge cemetery: "Here lies an old man who lived for seven years." So take the point. We have a generality here.

But take the author's point as well, which is true no matter how old age affects us. Particularly for a young person who is born and raised *in the church*, it is never too soon to heed the Lord's call to full surrender and to passionate service but it is often too late to do so. Bishop Ryle put it this way:

"Tomorrow is the devil's day, but today is God's. Satan cares not how spiritual your intentions may be, and how holy your resolutions, if only they are fixed for tomorrow. Oh, give not place to the devil in this matter! Answer him, 'No; Satan! It shall be today; today.'" [Ryle, *Upper Room*, 369]

And C.S. Lewis made the same point in a slightly different way.

"'Now' is the only time that touching eternity. The enemy [here he is speaking of the devil] would have our attention fixed on past or future." [*The Screwtape Letters*, No. 15]

Don't wait young people to heed the Lord's call, to begin to practice your faith, to learn the Word of God, to love the Lord, his church, his people, to make a daily practice of real and earnest talking with God, of sharing your faith, of keeping God's commandments – all of them, of beginning to fight the good fight and beginning to run the race and keep the faith. **It will** make your life so much more interesting than it is now. But even more important, it will get you where you need to be by the time you need to be there. Don't ever assume that you have more time. You don't know that you have tomorrow, much less the next fifty years in which to do what you should have done already but have not yet done!

And, for the rest of us who are no longer young, don't wait to do what you still have the wits and the energy to do. The day will come, sooner than you think, when you have neither left in sufficient quantity to do much of anything important. Generally, one ought to get wiser as he or she gets older – especially a Christian – but we are being reminded here that there comes a point at which very often wisdom not only does not increase, what one has begins to leak out of your

life. Your powers can no longer hold it in; can no longer make use of what you have learned and what you now know. Long before that day we need to have become all that we can become for the Lord Jesus Christ. And, take this to heart: no one has ever regretted, not one single human being has ever regretted following the Lord as hard and as soon as possible, but vast multitudes will regret in eternity waiting until it was too late.

So Moses prayed and he was a very wise man: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” [Ps. 90:12] It takes many days to get really wise!

Art is long, and time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

There is nothing you can do about that. Wisdom knows that and lives accordingly!