

Chapter 14: Fear God and Keep His Commandments

Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:14

As the Preacher concludes his book of wisdom, he gives his final words to the consideration of youth and old age. Throughout his book, he has reminded us that death approaches faster than any of us imagine. It is fitting, then, to give advice to the young and the old alike, to frame their respective (and brief) seasons of life in the light of eternity. There is a season for everything under heaven (Eccl. 3:1), and the season of youth is brief and, ultimately, passing away like a mist. Whether young or old, the Preacher urges us to live with a consideration of the final judgment, when God will bring every secret to light, and bring every deed into judgment, whether good or evil. In this concluding passage, the Preacher summarizes the whole message of his book: *fear God and keep his commandments*.

Fear God in Youth (Eccl. 11:7–10)

The Preacher begins his discussion of youthfulness with an acknowledgement of its goodness: “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun” (11:7). In Ecclesiastes 12, he will speak of old age as a time when eyesight dims, so here he acknowledges how sweet and pleasant it is to see light, and, specifically, the sun. The dimming of eyesight is one of the primary descriptions of old age throughout the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 27:1; 48:10; 1 Sam. 3:2; 1 Kgs. 14:4). Light, then, is an image of great joy in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 1:3ff; Job 10:22; 18:5ff),¹ while darkness often depicts death (cf. Ps. 49:19; 58:8; Job 3:16; 10:21–22; 17:13; 18:18; Prov. 20:20).² Dimness of sight is also an image of great sorrow and anguish (cf. Job 17:7; Ps. 69:3; 88:9; Lam. 5:17).

Because of the goodness of clear-eyed light—and the sorrow of darkness—the Preacher draws the conclusion that we should rejoice in the years we are given: “So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity” (11:8). For as many years as we have to see the sun, let us rejoice in them, knowing that darkness is fast approaching. By the “many” “days of darkness,” the Preacher certainly has in mind old age, and even the darkness of death itself.³ That is, someone who lives a long and full life will live a great number of his or her final years in dim eyesight that cannot as easily enjoy the sweetness of light as in youth. Also, after the brevity of life as a whole stands many years in the shadows of the grave. Beyond the life and death of the individual in view, there may also be a reminder of the end of the world itself.⁴ As the prophet Amos puts it, “Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is

¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

² Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 188.

³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 116.

⁴ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 188.

darkness, and not light...Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:18, 20). All that comes, the Preacher insists, “is vanity.”

The Preacher then doubles down on his conclusion: “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes” (11:9a). As the Preacher has so often commended joy in the midst of the endless vanity of this world (e.g., Eccl. 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 9:7–10), so now the Preacher encourages the young to rejoice in their youth, and to embrace cheerfulness of heart in the days of their youth. Furthermore, the Preacher encourages youth to walk in the ways of their heart and the sight of their eyes. This is a surprising verse, given how often we are told *not* to walk in the ways of the heart, or according to sight (e.g., Deut. 29:19; Jer. 9:14; 10:23; Rom. 8:4; 2 Cor. 5:7). In context, however, Preacher is not contradicting those warnings found elsewhere. Instead, the Preacher is commending a joy that embraces the sweetness and goodness of life during the days of one’s youth.⁵ To clarify this point, the Preacher adds a warning: “But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9b). The Preacher is not commending unbridled hedonism, but rather the enjoyment of life’s pleasures during the season when they are pleasurable, within the guardrails of an awareness of God’s impending judgment.⁶

The Preacher closes this section with a statement that makes his ultimate point even clearer: “Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity” (11:10). Again, this is not a justification for pursuing foolish and sinful, pleasure. Instead, as Douglas Miller writes, the Preacher “urges the young person to make the most of it while possible. Life is transient vapor and gone all too soon.”⁷ There is a time for youth and living, and a time for old age and death. Enjoy the former while you can.

Fear God in Old Age (Eccl. 12:1–8)

Next, the Preacher moves to consider the declining season of old age and death. He transitions into this subject with a contrast: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (12:1). In part, the Preacher here clarifies what he said earlier: “know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9b). We keep this warning in mind by *remembering* our Creator in the days of our youth. As Kidner writes, “For our part, to *remember* Him is no perfunctory or purely mental act; it is to drop our pretence of self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to Him.”⁸ This is an urgent appeal to the young not to put off seeking the Lord until they are older. The pleasures of youth are not an excuse for despising the better pleasures of God. Charles Bridges writes, “Many have remembered too late—none too soon.”⁹

The transition in 12:1 comes at the end, when the Preacher reminds youthful people that evil days are coming—years, that are drawing near—when they will no longer have the same pleasure.

⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 116–17.

⁶ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 99.

⁷ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 190–91.

⁸ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 100.

⁹ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 294.

Then, in 12:2–7, the Preacher offers an extended poetic image that represents the declining nature of old age. Some commentators have gone to great lengths to try to interpret each image in this passage as an allegorical detail with a clear referent to some faculty or condition that declines in old age, while others, like Kidner, caution us that it is best to take the image “in its entirety, not laboriously broken down into the constituent metaphors for human arms, legs, teeth, and so on.”¹⁰ I will attempt to take a balanced approach, offering suggestions of what the images may be, while attempting to let the imagery (especially the imagery of a broken-down house) to stand on its own.

The section begins with a general statement about darkening light, to contrast against the sweet light, and the pleasant sunlight, of 11:7: “...before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain...” (12:2). Again, the darkening of light here describes the fading away of the joy of youth.¹¹ The gloomy clouds could be a general reference to the increasing troubles of life in old age,¹² or, more likely, to the dimming of the eyes.¹³ Where youthfulness is characterized by light, old age is characterized by darkness—a darkness that stretches over “many” days (11:8).

In many ways, 12:2 is something of an introduction to the section. The main part of the section begins in v. 3, when the Preacher begins to describe a declining, old house: “...in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed...” (12:3). The first two images of trembling keepers and bent “strong men,” seem to have something to do with the decreased mobility and agility of old age.¹⁴ Some have gone to see these two images as referring to the weakened arms/hands and the legs, respectively, the ceased, diminished grinders sound like lost and brittle teeth, and the dimmed sight of those looking out the windows sounds like the dimmed eyesight the Preacher has already described by the darkened sun, moon, stars, and clouds.¹⁵

The imagery continues in v. 4: “...and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low...” (12:4). Some see this verse as a description of diminished hearing, beginning with “shut” doors, which seem to block out the sound from the outside world.¹⁶ Alternately, this may refer to the voice of the older person, so that one’s own noise “weakens with age.”¹⁷ The phrase about how “one rises up at the sound of a bird,” seems to describe responsiveness to a soft sound (a bird’s chirping); however, Duane Garrett offers a plausible suggestion: “rising up at the sound of birds alludes to a

¹⁰ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 102.

¹¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 168.

¹² “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.” (Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 102.)

¹³ “The eyes begin to fail. The cloudiness of vision sounds like glaucoma.” (Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 341.)

¹⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 289–90.

¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

¹⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 342.

¹⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 118–19.

cruel paradox of old age: one cannot hear well, but one sleeps so lightly that the slightest disturbance is sufficient to take away sleep.”¹⁸ Again, it is best to take in the images as general and evocative of old age, without trying too hard to force one particular interpretation of the imagery.

The imagery of the fifth verse becomes somewhat less obscure: “...they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets...” (12:5). The first part of the verse is easiest to understand “as the uncertainties of an elderly person who is unsteady of gait and keeps to his room.”¹⁹ The almond tree blossoms are probably not intended to convey the new life of spring, but rather in the white color they represent: “the white hair of age is vividly suggested by the *almond tree* which has exchanged the dark colours of winter for its head of pale blossom.”²⁰ The grasshopper that “drags itself along” is perhaps the most difficult image to interpret. Many suggestions have been offered, and the best is probably to see this as some kind of swollen limb or ankle,²¹ or in very general terms, as Kidner suggests: “The unnaturalness of the old man’s slow, stiff walk, a parody of the suppleness and spring of youth, is brought out by the incongruous sight of a *grasshopper*—that embodiment of lightness and agility—slowed down to a laborious crawl by damage or by the cold.”²² The expression “desire fails” probably refers to sexual desire, especially since the literal sense of this verse “the caperberry fails” (NASB) refers to an aphrodisiac.²³

Abruptly, then, verse 5 ends in the funeral, where the “man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets...” To add to this, the Preacher describes the fragility of life: “... before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern...” (12:6). As Roland Murphy comments, “It is unnecessary and even inappropriate to pursue allegory here, as if parts of the human body were meant by ‘cord,’ ‘bowl,’ etc. The metaphors speak for themselves, and they are images for death.”²⁴ As if this were not clear enough, this extended metaphor concludes with a reminder of the fate of body and soul after death: “and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). The body returns to dust (cf. Gen. 3:19), and the spirit returns to God who lent it for its season. Ultimately, the Preacher concludes the main part of this book with the same words that he began it: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (12:8).²⁵ This theme forms what literary critics call an “inclusio” for the book, marking out the beginning and end, and giving a sense of completeness and comprehensiveness to everything that has come in between.²⁶

¹⁸ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 342.

¹⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

²⁰ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 103.

²¹ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 195.

²² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 103.

²³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 195; Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 103.

²⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

²⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

²⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

Fear God in View of Eternity (Eccl. 12:9–14)

With the inclusion in 12:8 marking the end of the main part of the book, 12:9–14 forms something of a “conclusion”²⁷ or an “epilogue”²⁸ to Ecclesiastes. First, we see the emphasis of the life and ministry of the Preacher: “Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (12:9–10). Now, it is true that we should not conflate the proverbs mentioned with the book of the Bible called *Proverbs*, even though Solomon was the author/editor of *Proverbs*.²⁹ Nevertheless, the book of *Proverbs* certainly offers a select portion of the total proverbs that Solomon collected throughout his life. Indeed, we are told elsewhere that Solomon “spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005” (1 Kgs. 4:32). Here in Ecclesiastes, we see the diligence with which the Preacher studied and organized his wisdom, to offer delightful and upright words of truth. Duane Garrett writes, “The role of Solomon as teacher is reaffirmed. Following his example, teachers must go ahead of pupils to seek out the truth and so convey it to their pupils. In addition, a teacher seeks to make his or her words as palatable as possible and teaches in a way that communicates well.”³⁰

The fact that these proverbs are delightful, however, does not mean that they are toothless. The Preacher continues: “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd” (12:11). As the kind of *goads* to prod livestock, “the wisdom sayings are conceived as stimulating and directing those who would hear them.”³¹ That is, these proverbs helped stimulate people to *move* in the right direction. Additionally, they would help people *remain fixed* where they needed steadfastness, “like nails firmly fixed.” The Shepherd’s use of the goad is obvious, but Charles Bridges also notes that a nomadic shepherd would have a use for nails in fastening his tent.³² As for the identity of the “one Shepherd,” commentators have suggested Moses or Solomon/the Preacher, but it is probably best to understand the one Shepherd as God (Ps. 23:1; Isa. 40:11; John 10:11).³³

The chief value of wisdom, then, is in helping us to discern where we should move, and where we should stand firm. The Preacher is very aware that discerning the difference is difficult, especially the more information we attempt to weigh in making decisions. Thus, he writes, “My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12:12). This is not a warning against studying so much as a warning against the kind of studying that endlessly delays decision-making. As the Preacher warned earlier, “He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap” (Eccl. 11:4).

The Preacher gives a final, concluding summary to Ecclesiastes: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will

²⁷ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 343.

²⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

³⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 344.

³¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

³² Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 306–07.

³³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:13–14). The Preacher has urged the fear of God at several points (Eccl. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13). We have earlier defined the fear of God as having two components: (1) fearfully acknowledging your helpless, hopeless guilt before God, because you are a sinner; and (2) throwing yourself at his mercy anyway, on the basis of his promises to you. The fruit of this fear of the Lord, then, is that we should “keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” We do not keep God’s commandments in any way to attempt to atone for our guilt before God, for we are saved by grace alone, and through faith alone, and not by any works done by us (Eph. 2:8–9). We keep his commandments, then, only as a loving response of gratitude to what he has done, knowing that even in this we are entirely dependent upon his power to give us the desire and the ability to obey him (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13).

Life in this world apart from God is indeed vanity. Life in this world, lived according to the fear of the Lord, however, is full of meaning—meaning that transcends the temporal vanity of this world. As Duane Garrett comments, “For us the ‘meaninglessness’ of life which the Teacher so ruthlessly exposes would seem to lead to despair or nihilism; for him it is incitement to true piety. The insignificance of all that is done under the sun leaves him awestruck and silent before God.”³⁴ God will surely judge all, and bring every secret to light, whether good or evil. A life lived for the fleeting pleasures will be its own reward in full—and then will come the judgment. A life lived for the glory of God—especially when such a life requires us to deny ourselves of the pleasures of this world—will not be in vain. Its reward will spread into the everlasting future, when we will enjoy a resurrected heaven and earth, in resurrected bodies, where the broken, vain, futility of this world will be but a dim shadow. In that world, our eyes will no longer grow dim: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:4–5).

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is light and clear sight associated with youthfulness (11:7)? What does the Preacher mean when he says that “the days of darkness will be many” (11:8)? In what way should young people “walk in the ways of [their] heart and the sight of [their] eyes” (11:9)? In what way should they not walk after their hearts, and according to their sight? On the whole, what is the Preacher’s message to young people? How does this relate to the message our culture has for young people?
- 2) What does the Preacher say about old age in 12:1–7? Why is old age characterized by darkness and dim sight (12:2–3)? What is the condition of the “house” that the Preacher describes in 12:3–4? How further characterizations of old age does the Preacher give in 12:5–6? What does the Preacher communicate by closing out his book just as he began it: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (12:8; cf. 1:2)? What does he intend us to learn from the survey he has offered?
- 3) What does the Preacher tell us about his careful cultivation of wisdom over the course of his life (12:9–10)? How has the Preacher sought to pass that wisdom on to others? How is wisdom like a

³⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 345.

goad (12:11a)? How is wisdom like a nail (12:11b)? From whom does all wisdom come (12:11c)? Why does the Preacher warn us of too much study? How can information overload (especially in our day) keep us from discerning and delighting in true wisdom?

4) Is the Preacher's concluding exhortation, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man," an accurate summary of Ecclesiastes? Why or why not? How does this book challenge us to live in a vain world with an eye toward eternity? What have been your key takeaways from the book of Ecclesiastes? What is one error that the Preacher has corrected in your thinking? What is one exhortation from this book that has convicted you?