

# ***Ecclesiastes***

## **Chapter 12**

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”—<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;<sup>3</sup> 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;<sup>4</sup> when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint;<sup>5</sup> when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.<sup>6</sup> Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well,<sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.<sup>8</sup> “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”

**12:2–5** A graphic description of man’s progressive deterioration; an allegory of aging. (CSB)

This section continues the thought of the previous chapter. (PBC)

**12:1** REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR – He means more than just, “Think about God.” Rather, he uses the word remember as the Prophet Malachi does when he declares, “Remember the law” (Malachi 4:4). God is not satisfied that we simply remember Him as we might some fact of history or a bit of trivia. To remember Him means to keep Him and His word constantly in mind and heart, to trust in Him and live each day with Him and for Him. It means to be thankful for all His gifts and promises and to call on Him in time of need. (PBC)

They who devote to God’s service the vigorous and joyful days of youth will not be forsaken by Him when they are old and grey-headed; but they who forget God in their youthful prime, and give themselves up to sinful pleasures, must, if cut off prematurely in their transgressions, come to a comfortless old age, and continuing as they have lived, must die under God’s wrath and curse. (CB)

DAYS OF YOUR YOUTH – Young people shouldn’t get the idea that they can forget about God until they are older. That day may never come. People who have lived their lives without God do not easily find Him at the eleventh hour. For every thief on the cross who is saved at the end of his life (Luke 23:39-43), there are countless others who pass through death’s dark door in the same way they lived their lives – unprepared to meet their Maker. Now is the time for God.

Now is the time for Bible study, prayer and church attendance. Then, as life's troubles mount, we can meet them with God at our side. (PBC)

**DAYS OF TROUBLE** – Of this we can be sure, they will come. Should we live long enough, the years will come when we will say, “I find no pleasure in them.” Having asserted this, Solomon proceeds to paint a very poetic picture of the arrival of old age. He depicts a village scene on an overcast, cloudy day. Each aspect of the picture represents a feature of old age. (PBC)

Days of distress. (TLSB)

**NO PLEASURE** – It may be more difficult to have joy as one grows older and nearer to death. (TLSB)

**12:2-7** The Preacher gives us powerful and vivid images of old age and approaching death to rouse us from complacency or resignation due to troubles. We are to address the matter early in life, while we are able, so that failure does not sneak up on us. (TLSB)

**12:2 GROW DARK** – This points to the sadness of growing old. Friends and loved ones die. Loneliness and sickness set in. The days of productivity are past. Many an old person longs for the day he or she will leave the dark valley of life on earth. (PBC)

Describing death. (TLSB)

**CLOUDS RETURN AFTER THE RAIN** – When we are young sunshine follows the rain. But as life's sicknesses, heartaches and problems pile up, recovery doesn't come so quickly. An old person often gets through one sickness or trouble only to have another follow on its heels. Hengstenberg correctly notes that this piling up of troubles serves two purposes – one for believers, the other for unbelievers. “The power to suffer is exhausted in old age; the heart is already broken: that is however not the only consideration here. God's will is to melt down his own people completely before the end of life, and to give to the wicked a foretaste of hell. (PBC)

Old age is represented as a season of clouds and rain, in which the light of the heavenly bodies is darkened. (CB)

In youth they are quick and strong in protecting the body. In old age they “tremble” with weakness. “The strong men” are the legs with the strongest muscles in the body. Here, too, youthful strength gives way to old age and legs begin to “stoop.” (PBC)

**12:3 keepers of the house.** This and the other metaphors may refer to parts of the body (hands, legs, etc.). But the imagery should not be pressed to the extent that it destroys the poetry, which moves freely between figures such as darkness,

storm, a house in decline and a deserted well, and such literal descriptions as in v. 5a. (CSB)

The human body is compared to a mansion, of which the limbs are the keepers. (CB)

GRINDERS – These are the women who grind flour and prepare the food. In the body the grinders are the teeth. They stop doing their work “because they are few.” (PBC)

Poetic language. Teeth of an older person are compared with stones for grinding grain. (TLSB)

WINDOWS – This refers to eyes. Again, the application is obvious. Eyesight weakens with age. (PBC)

Figuratively, the eyes, which in older age function less effectively. (TLSB)

**12:4 DOORS TO THE STREET** – These represent ears. When they are “closed,” they cut off common sounds from the outside. (PBC)

Describing the mouth and ability to speak or the ears and ability to hear. (TLSB)

As the sound of the grinding sinks into silence, the doors also that the lead into the street are shut; that is, old age is inactive and keeps at home. (CB)

AT THE SOUND OF BIRDS – They get up early but it’s not because they hear the birds. Rather, it’s because they simply can’t sleep. Even though the elderly might wake up with the early birds, they can’t appreciate it. For the songs of the birds are too faint. (PBC)

Though the hearing of enjoyable sounds is reduced in the elderly, their sleep is still easily disturbed, such as early in the morning when the songs of birds begin. (TLSB)

**12:5 AFRAID OF HEIGHTS** – they are afraid of falling or fearful of tripping over unseen obstacles. (PBC)

DANGERS IN THE STREETS – Lacking the strength for self-defense, many elderly people do not like to venture out into the city streets. (PBC)

*almond tree*. Its pale blossom possibly suggests the white hair of age. (CSB)

One of the first to blossom and lose its petals in the spring. (TLSB)

The blossoms of this tree are pink, but white when they are ready to fall. White hair is another sign that the end is near. (PBC)

*grasshopper*. Normally agile, its slow movements on a cold morning (cf. Na 3:17) recall the stiffness of old age. (CSB)

Formerly nimble gait is replaced with overall difficulty in movement. (TLSB)

This refers to the smallest weight. Lev 11:22) (CB)

DESIRE NO LONGER – This phrase literally says, “The caperberry fails.” Solomon could be referring to this food as a fruit for stimulating sexual desire, or as a spice for food as a fruit for stimulating the desire to eat. Whatever the berry was used for, it no longer works on the old person. It fails to arouse desire. We might add other desires of the will and age: the urge to learn, the many desires of the will and emotions. All desires, including even the will to live, cease. (PBC)

Loss of appetite and impending death make it difficult to be enthusiastic about enjoying any earthly pleasure. (TLSB)

*eternal home*. In context, probably points simply to the grave, not beyond it. (CSB)

Man leaves his time-worn house of flesh and bones and moves to his “eternal home.” Perhaps the Apostle Paul had Ecclesiastes in mind when he wrote about leaving behind our “earthly tent” and moving on to our permanent “eternal house in heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:1-10). (PBC)

MOURNERS GO ABOUT THE STREETS – Meanwhile back in the village life goes on. There is a bitterness in this remark. Even while a person is departing this life, the professional mourners come around and dicker for the job of mourning. Jeremiah mentions this practice, “Call for the wailing women to come; send now the most skillful of them” (Jeremiah 9:17). Jesus encountered “flute players” and “people crying and wailing loudly” in the case of the girl He raised back to life (Matthew 9:23; Mark 5:38). No doubt these were the kind of paid mourners Solomon speaks of. The people of the Middle East are openly emotional and give vent to their grief through loud wailing as they walk through the streets. In ancient times hired mourners helped create the desired mood. We have our own ways of expressing grief, including the use of hired professionals to help with the funeral. (PBC)

**12:6-7** Repeats theme of vv 1–2. *cord ... bowl ... pitcher ... wheel*. Placement of these four images suggests they represent life in some way. Their destruction implies the end of life. We are to remember our Creator before all this happens. *silver cord ... golden bowl*. Precious objects indicate how valuable life is. *pitcher ... wheel*. Practical objects are

needed daily. A clay pitcher was attached by a rope, which wrapped around a wheel, making it easier to draw life-giving water. (TLSB)

**12:6** *silver cord ... golden bowl.* A hanging lamp suspended by a silver chain. If only one link snaps, this light and beauty will perish, suggesting how fragile life is. (CSB)

**12:7†** *dust returns ... spirit returns.* At death man leaves behind what “is perishable” (1Co 15:42; Ge 3:19; Ps 103:14); on the other hand, what God breathed into a lump of clay to give it life (Ge 2:7) is not subject to decay but “returns to God who gave it.” (CSB)

The body (Gn 3:19; Ps 104:29). (TLSB)

SPIRIT RETURNS – Or “but the spirit returns.” The immaterial aspect of a person is separated from the body by death. Solomon’s expression anticipates everlasting life with God. (TLSB)

**12:8** *Meaningless!* Such is life “under the sun” (on earth, apart from God), ending in brokenness. But with a relationship to our Creator already demanded (v. 1), and with the fact of his judgment affirmed (11:9), meaninglessness is not the last word. (CSB)

With this we are taken back to the beginning of Ec. Instead of being the close of this section (vv 1–7), this verse could also be the opening of the final section (vv 9–14). (TLSB)

*Teacher.* See note on 1:1. (CSB)

**12:1–8** The aches of old age make it difficult to envision anything hopeful and positive. Such bodily changes may overwhelm any joy we still have in life. Yet, the same God who consigned us to the grave because of sin has also promised us that we will be rescued from the grave and His eternal judgment. Through hearing the Word in our youth, He will prepare us. His promises will stay with us. • Lord, we thank You for all the opportunities You give us to learn about our life: where it is going, and what You have prepared for us. Teach us Your Word early so that we may look forward to our end, not with fear or discouragement, but with hope and joy. Especially keep us ever mindful of what You have done for us in Your Son, Jesus Christ, who overcame death and the grave. Amen. (TLSB)

### *The Conclusion of the Matter*

<sup>9</sup> **Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.** <sup>10</sup> **The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was**

upright and true. <sup>11</sup> The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup> Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. <sup>13</sup> Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

**12:9-10** *the Preacher also taught.* Not necessarily an addition by a later editor of the Book; the author also writes in the third person elsewhere. *arranging many proverbs.* Another indication that the author of this work is Solomon. Later, rabbis regarded Solomon as comparable to Moses in wisdom (or philosophy). (TLSB)

**12:9** *pondered and searched.* The rigorous process on man's side, with no pains spared in seeking truth and comprehension. (CSB)

The Teacher shared his great wisdom. 1 Kings 4:32 informs us that Solomon “spoke three thousand proverbs.” God saw to it that several hundred of them come down through the ages in the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. (PBC)

**12:10** JUST THE RIGHT WORDS – Solomon wants us to be aware that his words should not be taken lightly. (PBC)

**12:11** WORDS – Advice from God may be like cattle prods, as we are sluggish and resistant to go the way God desires for us (Ac 2:37; 26:14). His Word is powerful to move us. (TLSB)

NAILS – God's words fasten the loose parts of our lives together and make them solid. (TLSB)

*given by one Shepherd.* The other side of the matter, recognizing that Scripture is in a class of its own, as v. 12 insists. (CSB)

God is the Shepherd of His people (Ps 23:1; 28:9; Is 40:11; Ez 34:15; Mi 7:14). These words of wisdom have come from God. (TLSB)

**12:12** MY SON – Possibly a personal note to the author's son (Rehoboam?), but also a general encouragement to any reader of this work. The relation between teacher and student should be like father and son. (TLSB)

ANYTHING IN ADDITION – this warning goes hand in hand with the Bible's caution against “false prophets” (Matthew 7:15) and against distorting the Scriptures to one's “own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). (PBC)

The sayings “given by one Shepherd” (v 11) should be our primary focus, for anything else would be the words of a fool. The author has strongly claimed divine assistance in

what he has written. He now urges the reader not to get worn down investigating all other writings that claim to be helpful, important, and wise. Luth: “One king, who is the shepherd, has appointed wise men to acknowledge and approve books. These men, I say, recognized the Holy Spirit in this book and approved it for the people. In this way the Gospels were taken up and approved by the fathers; that is, the fathers themselves recognized the Holy Spirit. But one must not infer from this: ‘Therefore the church or the fathers are above the Gospel,’ any more than it is valid to say: ‘I recognize the true and living God and His Word; therefore I am above God and His Word.’ Just as one is not superior to a prince whom one acknowledges or to a parent whom one acknowledges, so it is here. These men do not teach this shepherd, but they receive from one shepherd” (AE 15:185). (TLSB)

**BOOKS THERE IS NO END** – This was true in Martin Luther’s day. “For it happens that when one good book is published,” remarked Luther, “ten bad ones are also published.” It seems the ration is much higher in our day. (PBC)

We live in an age of tremendous advances in communication. Radio, movies, television, telephone, video, tape records and other products of modern technology have combined to make communication faster and easier than our ancestors ever dreamed possible. Along with this the book industry flourishes as never before. In the USA about 50,000 new books are published each year. (PBC)

**MUCH STUDY WEARIES THE BODY** – Solomon is not speaking of the study of Scripture. (PBC)

**12:13–14** The chief end of man. (CSB)

The glory belongs to the Lord and not to human instrument. (PBC)

**12:13** THE MATTER – Questions raised in ch 1. (TLSB)

*Fear God.* Loving reverence is the foundation of wisdom (Ps 111:10; Pr 1:7; 9:10), as well as its content (Job 28:28) and its goal and conclusion. (CSB)

Though these words include an element of being afraid, a recognition of having to stand before God’s judgment, they are also a Hbr idiom for faith and trust. (TLSB)

The way of happiness here and salvation hereafter is exceedingly plain and simple. It consists in fearing God and keeping His commandments, the chief of which is, that we believe on Jesus Christ His Son for our only way of salvation. (CB)

*the whole (duty) of man.* Here is our fulfillment, our all—a far cry from “meaninglessness.” (CSB)

Everything that he had explored, all his reflections, have brought the Preacher back to consider the Creator. Everything is not in vain when God enters the picture and we recognize our relationship to Him. (TLSB)

Not just a duty to learn about God, but that we are complete and have met the purpose for which God created us when we have a proper relationship with Him. This is not a rejection of the ethic of pleasure Solomon described earlier, but an affirmation that our pleasure is in God and His Word. (TLSB)

KEEP – Hbr *shamar*, “to guard or protect.” The Word is precious to a believer. (TLSB)

COMMANDMENTS – Hbr *mitswah*, God’s Law. (tlsb)

**12:14** *every deed into judgment.* Glimpses of this truth are given at intervals in the book: 3:17; 8:12–13; 11:9 and note; see Mt 12:36; 1Co 3:12–15; 2Co 5:9–10; Heb 4:12–13. (CSB)

For condemnation or acquittal by grace. (TLSB)

*every hidden thing.* See Ro 2:16. (CSB)

Since God shall bring every secret thing into judgment, vain are all attempts to hide our sins from ourselves, or from our fellow-men. Those who repent and believe in Christ, His blood will be a covering, and this covering we all need. (CB)

**12:9–14** The one searching for meaning in life should have come to the conclusion offered here. To avoid a meaningless life, one needs a right relationship with God, i.e., justification based on God’s favor toward us on account of Christ and received through faith. God has given His Word, and through it we have the ability to know His Commandments and promises. More important, we can know Him and how to avoid a meaningless life now and in eternity. • Heavenly Father, prepare me for Your judgment through Your Word and the marvelous news that You have already judged me as worthy of life through the death and resurrection of Your Son, our Savior. Amen. (TLSB)