

“Remember Also Your Creator”

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:7 (text); 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ: A few years ago, there was a movie that was as strange as it was sad. “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” is the story of a man who was born physically old, but dies as an infant. In short, his life is the reverse of all our normal lives. He aged backwards.

When he was born as an infant, he had all the physical afflictions of a man in his eighties. So he was not given much chance to survive. But Benjamin survived his “old infancy” and slowly grew younger as he physically matured. His relationships in life were fleeting, because he was on his way down getting physically younger, when others were on the way up getting older. Even his relationship with a woman lasted only a few years, since he aged down while the woman aged up.

But the movie looked at life in a circular way. He was born a helpless old man in his 80s, needing the care of others. Then as time passed, he became younger and younger, until he was a helpless infant at his death. But even in this backwards life story, we see that our normal life stories are also somewhat circular. We are all born as helpless babies, without much knowledge in this world. Then we grow to be young and strong. But in our old age, we become weak and completely dependent on others, often losing even our memories.

As I came away from the movie, I had a better appreciation of life—how it is so short, and how we must enjoy and cherish every moment of it, especially with our loved ones.

Our text today paints a perspective view of our lives in this world. We are to enjoy life in our youth, because time is so fleeting, things are so impermanent, that our older years come without warning. Time flies! How are we as Christians to live our fleeting lives in this world? Are we to say with the Preacher, “All is vanity!” since none of us will ever escape the grave? No, not all is meaningless when we remember our Creator (verse 1).

So our theme today is, “**Remember Also Your Creator**” under three headings: first, “**In the Days of Your Youth**”; second, “**Before the Evil Days Come**”; and third, “**And the Spirit Returns to God.**”

“In the Days of Your Youth”

Because of the seemingly pessimistic tone of Ecclesiastes' perspective on the vanity of life, it is somewhat of a surprise whenever God is mentioned. In the last four verses of Chapter 11, the Preacher encourages us to enjoy life while we are young, when our lives are as sweet and bright as the sunshine. If we live many years till we're old and near our “dark” age, we are to rejoice. But in the enjoyment of life, we sometimes “*walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes,*” without any regard for God's law. So the Preacher warns, “*But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment*” (Eccl 11:9). Only when we enjoy life within the bounds of God's law is the pleasure lasting and not fleeting. Because without God in the picture, all pleasure is vanity.

When we're young, the “vexations” of our hearts are few. We're carefree, without much worry, and not many responsibilities. We don't think about the future; we don't make many plans. We live for the moment, the great moments of our youth. We jump off bridges, cliffs, and even planes. If we're not jumping off high places, we're climbing high mountains. We experiment with dangerous things – alcohol, drugs and bad company. We spend hours doing nothing but while away time. So we can do all these adventures, we strive as much as we can to keep our bodies in shape, to “put away pain.”

What pleasures do the youth enjoy that are acceptable and pleasing to God? Is it only the pleasures of eating bread, drinking wine, making the body strong and pain-free, and all things that the eyes and heart desire? No, most importantly, we are to keep ourselves – body and soul – holy and pure before God, “*cleans[ing] ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God*” (2 Cor 7:1). Again, Paul exhorts the youth: “*So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*” (2 Tim 2:22). Instead of pursuing the ungodly desires and tendencies of youth, we are to pursue righteousness: faith, love and peace together with other believing family and friends, especially in the church. This is the only path to persevering in a life of holiness.

As Chapter 11 ends with a warning of God's judgment, so Chapter 12 begins with an exhortation, “*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.*” What is it to “remember” God our Creator? To remember our Creator is to meditate on his name (Psa 63:6), his deeds and wonders of old (Psa 77:11), and the work of his hands (Psa 143:5). To remember God is to keep his law (Psa 119:55), his covenant, and his commandments (Psa 103:18). To remember God is also to turn to the LORD and worship him (Psa 22:27).

When must we remember our Creator? Only when we're prosperous? Only when we're in trouble? No, we are to remember him at all times, morning and evening:

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night (Psalm 92:1-2).*

We are to meditate on all that the LORD has done for us in saving us and making us mature in our worship, in understanding his Word, and in our daily lives. We are to remember all the good gifts that he has given us so undeservedly, and enjoy them while we have them and while we have time.

Because our days of youth pass quickly, and our older days come to us quietly and unnoticed.

“Before the Evil Days Come”

Already in 11:8, the Preacher warns of many “days of darkness” ahead for all of us. Then he begins Chapter 12 with an exhortation to remember God “*before the evil days come,*” days of no pleasure to us.

Are these “evil days” days of our wickedness and lawlessness? No, for when we look at the whole passage of verses 1-7, we see that these “evil days” are days when people in their old age suffer afflictions. All of their capacities – physical, mental and emotional – weaken and deteriorate.

So in verses 2-7, the Preacher writes a figurative description of the aging process. Hebrew scholars see in these verses the most beautiful poem about aging in the Bible. Philip Ryken says, "this passage contains some of the most beautiful words ever breathed" by the Holy Spirit.¹ God honors and dignifies his people with this eloquent poem even in their old age and death, because "*precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints*" (Psalm 116:15). Although it is a somber poem, it makes us reflect on the inevitability of aging. Many of the metaphors are clear, but a few are difficult to interpret.

In verse 2, the failure of the sun, moon and stars to give light is a picture of the life of an old person getting dimmer and dimmer until the light is fully extinguished. Also, the afflictions of old age seem to have no end, like a storm with its rain and clouds that keep coming back after each short lull.

From verse 3, we are reminded of the TV show called "This Old House," that features repairing and renovating old houses that are falling apart. In these verses however, the wearing out is not repairable or reversible. The "*keepers of the house [that] tremble*" refer to hands that tremble, much like those who have Parkinson's disease. The "*strong men are bent*" points to the bones of the body that are weakened and bent with age, especially the legs and the back. Such is what we see in the elderly who have osteoporosis. The "*grinders [that] cease*" are teeth that decay. Today, there are dentures, but even these fall out of use by old people. "*Those who look through the windows are dimmed*" refer to failing eyesight, with its floaters, cataract and glaucoma.

In verse 4, the Preacher sees "*the doors on the street [that] are shut*" as ears that are hard of hearing, so that the "*sound of the grinding is low.*" The ears are closed to the hustle and bustle outside the house. Hearing aids are needed to hear the pastor preach the Word of God. Conversely, the aged person "*rises up at the sound of a bird*" because he doesn't sleep soundly anymore. "*The daughters of song are brought low*" symbolize vocal cords that are also failing. In the choir, old people's voices shake, and they can't sing the high notes any longer.

In verse 5, the Preacher illustrates physical changes among the aged. One is "*the almond tree [that] blossoms.*" In the springtime, almond trees are pale, so this could be the graying of old folks. Many men and women today try to hide this by coloring their hair. Another is the twilight of physical strength, like "*the grasshopper [that] drags itself along,*" not able to jump from place to place as it used to. Athletes age very quickly, retiring from sports only in their early- to mid-30s. When they reach their 60s, most people cease from all vigorous activities because of physical infirmities. Then there is the waning of youthful passions. "Desire fails," which may include the loss of appetite for both intimate physical activities and good food. Most old people eat less and less, as their taste buds are not as sharp as they used to be, and their digestive system is less efficient.

Most of these afflictions of aged people are mentioned in 2 Samuel 19:31-36, where King David once invited his friend Barzillai to a royal feast in his palace in Jerusalem. Barzillai was honored because he helped David when he was fleeing from his son Absalom. But Barzillai declined,

¹ Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 269.

because he was very old and couldn't travel to Jerusalem anymore, saying, *"I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women?"* (2 Sam 19:35)

Six years ago, I attended our high school's 40th Anniversary reunion. It was a great time of seeing friends and reminiscing our wild youthful misdeeds for the first time since graduation. But I noticed that most of our conversations eventually turned to our medicines and herbal supplements. It's because we were all in our mid-50s.

Finally, the Preacher describes some of the emotions of old people. Older people not only deteriorate physically, but also mentally and emotionally. The elderly have many fears. *"They are afraid also of what is high."* No more bungee-jumping or skydiving. No more pleasure in the wild rides of amusement parks. *"Terrors are in the way,"* is a way of saying that they're also afraid of going outside the house because of evildoers. They're easy prey to pickpockets, swindlers, and robbers.

They fear of being a bother, of having nothing to offer to others. They fear that they don't have enough retirement money that they would live in poverty. Their siblings are mostly gone, and their own children have their own families, and they're alone. They fear the onset of Alzheimer's disease, that they would lose their memory. Faithful believers are afraid that they would lose their faith and doctrine in their old age if they lose their mind. They have seen too many sound pastors and theologians go into errors in their older years. Feelings of insecurity are very common.

In the 60s, the Beatles wrote this song about the worries and insecurity of being 64:

*When I get older losing my hair,
Many years from now,
Will you still be sending me a valentine
Birthday greetings bottle of wine?
Send me a postcard, drop me a line ...
Yours sincerely, Wasting Away.
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,
When I'm sixty-four?*

Often, they also harbor feelings of guilt and regret. David prays in his later years, *"Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions"* (Psa 25:7). Have you ever noticed that older people often remember and lament their past sins against their own family and friends? Sometimes, they also have bitterness towards others and the way things have turned out for them, often dwelling on thoughts, *"If only I had done this or that ..."*

The picture of old age is bleak. Is life worth living after age 80, 70 or even 60, with all its pain and afflictions? No wonder, the Preacher says at the end of Chapter 11 that all is vanity because *"the days of darkness will be many"* (verse 8).

This is why the Preacher exhorts us, *"Remember also your Creator."* Life is futile and meaningless if there is no fear of God and remembrance of the Creator. We have hope only if we have something to look forward to beyond our afflictions in this life, and beyond death itself.

“And the Spirit Returns to God”

In the middle of his poem, the Preacher starts talking about death, “because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets” (verse 5e).

All the afflictions of old age finally come to an end in death, which the Preacher also paints so vividly with symbols in verse 6. Death is like a golden bowl, probably a lamp suspended by a silver chain, that breaks when the “silver cord is snapped.” It is also like a “pitcher [that] is shattered at the fountain,” or a “wheel broken at the cistern.” These three paintings depict containers that cannot hold oil or water because they are broken. They can't give light or water that are so precious to life. Light and water of course often symbolize life itself: “We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again” (2 Sam 14:14; see also John 4:13-14; Rev. 21:6).

These pictures brought back a scene I once saw at the funeral of my aunt in Laguna. As the casket was brought out of the house, I saw a woman break a pot of water just outside the door. Maybe this practice came from the pictures in verse 6. Then, at the cemetery, I saw the little children being passed over the casket before it was lowered to the grave. Both of these superstitions came from the fear of the soul of the dead visiting the relatives. Another custom is walking visitors to the gate of the house, so they would not follow the dead in death. All of these superstitions are because of fear: *the fear of the dead, and the fear of death.*

These verses are not encouraging and hopeful. The tone of the poem seems to be one of resignation, even hopelessness. But wait! The Preacher says in verse 7 that in death, “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” There is something beyond all the afflictions and the certainty of the death of man.

Earlier, the Preacher was not even sure where the human spirit goes after death, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward?” (Eccl 3:21) Here, he is certain that the human spirit returns to God at death. So even the Old Testament writers affirm that God created man with two elements: a physical element, the body; and a non-physical element, the spirit. Sometimes the “spirit” is called the “soul.” For example, in Revelation 6:9, we read of the element of man that returns to God in heaven as a “soul”: “I saw under the altar the **souls** of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Rev 6:9; see also Rev 20:4).

Ever since Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God cursed man with death, in which all humanity will surely return to dust from where they came. So the Bible often talks about a twofold division that happens at death, not only from this poem of the Preacher, but also in many other places, e.g., “the body apart from the spirit is dead” (Jas 2:26; see also Matt 10:28; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59).²

But the day will come when both body and soul of all believers will be reunited into one person. On the day of resurrection, our bodies will be raised from the grave and reunited with our souls in heaven. This is the hope that Paul speaks of when he says that when Christ returns, all believers will be clothed with imperishable and immortal bodies (1 Cor 15:51-53).

² See my article, “Dichotomy, Trichotomy or Polychotomy?” for a fuller discussion of the elements of man. <http://www.twoagespilgrims.com/doctrine/?p=7225>

The Preacher speaks of our aging body as a house that is falling apart and eventually crumbling. Paul also speaks of our body similarly as only a temporary, earthly tent:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling ... (2 Cor 5:1-3).

He says that not only human beings, but the whole creation also *“groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”* (Rom 8:23).

Abraham lived in man-made tents because he knew he was only a pilgrim in this world. He instead looked forward to *“the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God”* (Heb 11:10). Tents are temporary dwelling-places. We use them for camping or one or two or three days, as we did when we had our retreat in Tagaytay. Those whose houses are destroyed by floods or earthquake are given temporary tents until they can rebuild their homes.

But Christians have a permanent dwelling-place, as we sang, *“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations”* (Psa 90:1). God himself is our permanent address in eternity.

Beloved friends, while our text today seems somber, there is encouragement and hope! There is encouragement for the young, and hope even for those who are afflicted and dying.

To those who are young and strong and are feeling invincible, the best time in life to “remember your Creator” is now when you have a whole lifetime ahead of you. Today is the day of salvation and service to God, because youth is so fleeting that old age will overtake you very quickly. If you don't remember and serve God now, you will regret that you waited so long and you wasted your most fruitful years.

To those of you who are growing old with all your pain and afflictions, be hopeful, because the new tent that God has prepared for you is incorruptible and immortal. Your upraised hands in worship will not tremble. Your legs will be strong and straight as you stand before God to receive your crown of life. You will enjoy food and drink in that great banquet with a perfect new set of teeth and taste buds.

You will wonder at the sight of the glory and splendor of the new heaven and earth. You will sing with your beautiful voice and hear multitudes of saints singing majestic songs of thanksgiving and praise to God. You will soar above the heights of heaven and earth, because the whole universe will be your dwelling-place. You will never fear the wicked, because all the wicked are imprisoned in hell outside the heavenly city forever and ever.

Most importantly, you will drink of Christ, the Living Water, forever and ever.

In short, there will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, and no more pain from all your earthly afflictions (Rev 21:4).