



Sunday School Lesson for February 8, 2004.
Released on February 7, 2004.

Study Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8. A Time to Remember
Questions and answers below.

TIME: about 950 B.C.
PLACE: Jerusalem

Ecclesiastes 11:7-10

7 Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:
8 But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.
9 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.
10 Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

1 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;
2 While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:
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,
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 music shall be brought low;
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:
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.
7 Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.
8 Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.

Lesson Background

Solomon's search for meaning to life was very thorough. He examined wisdom, pleasure: human accomplishments, hard labor, normal events of life, oppression, popularity, human religions, wealth, folly, the practice of moderation, human authority, and the need for justice. In his research he arrived at the conclusion that the things pertinent to this life are basically futile. Keep in mind that he endeavored to carry on his research while purposely leaving God out of the equation.

Once he reintroduced God into his search, he found that what was previously futile became meaningful. A great deal of reward and satisfaction come from diligent and faithful labor, but if a person is going to receive the fullest measure of enjoyment from all his efforts on earth, God must be central to his life.

Advice to Youth (Ecclesiastes 11:7-10)

1. In what way did Solomon use the analogy of "light" and "darkness" in verse 7 and 8?

In this passage Solomon contrasted the joy and advantages of youth with the uncertainty and disadvantages of old age. These first two verses use the analogy of light and darkness to refer to the time of life and the time of death. Life is portrayed as light, which is to be enjoyed ("behold the sun"). It is a time when a person has opportunities for enjoyment, contrary to death, when no more opportunities will ever arise. Life's activities will cease.

We recognize that not everyone has the same opportunities in life. Circumstances vary a great deal from person to person. Even when one must live with unpleasant circumstances, however, it is possible that there will be opportunities for enjoyment and service for God. When we are trusting God, even the worst of situations have hidden blessings. Solomon said we should enjoy life to the fullest extent possible, for one day there will no longer be life.

2. What will be the ultimate result for all of us no matter how much or how little we enjoy life?

Death eventually will come, no matter how much we enjoy life. Solomon referred to this as "the days of darkness" (Eccles. 11:8), when there will no longer be light and the ability to enjoy life. He said that this will be a time of "vanity," meaning emptiness or meaninglessness. Anything not accomplished in this life will remain unaccomplished: there will no longer be opportunity to achieve the things that are now possible. The dark days will be many, for life as we know it now will never return.

These words appear to be rather negative and discouraging. What Solomon has done is prepare us to put life on earth into an eternal perspective. There is much good to do and enjoy in this life, and he did not want his readers to waste the opportunity to experience it. After all, there will be no second chance.

3. How are young people to approach life, and what is the guiding principle they must keep in mind (v. 9)?

"The Preacher" (Solomon) continues to stress the importance of enjoying life, especially in one's youth. His suggestion that young people walk in the ways of their hearts sounds quite contemporary on the surface—"whatever works for you." How frightening! Certainly Christian parents would not give this advice to their children. To give such advice to a teenager who is trying to cope with raging hormones and a desire to fit in with other teenagers is likely to be disastrous. Teen pregnancies, alcoholism, and drug addiction have exacted a terrible toll on young people who have followed their own impulses.

But Solomon is quick to establish boundaries for his advice in noting that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. This is a solemn warning that those who follow their own desires to the point of ignoring God's standards must face God's judgment, either here or hereafter. (See Ecclesiastes 3:17).

4. Truly we live in the shadow of God's judgment. Why is it difficult to communicate this message to our society?

This passage, as well as others in the Scriptures, points to judgment but does not put a timetable on it. God delays His ultimate judgment so that more people can be saved (2 Peter 3:9). Unfortunately, many interpret this delay to mean that there will be no judgment at all (2 Peter 3:3,4). Some believe that God is "all love and no wrath" and will save everyone, or simply that there is no God, period. Once we understand these various viewpoints, we realize that a somewhat different approach is needed to confront each one.

Above all, we must make sure that we ourselves do not fall into any of these false viewpoints. We protect ourselves by remembering the many New Testament passages that speak of the wrath and judgment to come (e.g., Revelation 6:15-17). Solomon also helps us here by advising us to remember the Creator (Ecclesiastes 12:1). Such thoughts will help us push away those temptations to sin which offend our Maker.

5. How can we avoid the adverse effects of "sorrow" (v. 10)?

The Hebrew word for sorrow also occurs in Ecclesiastes 1:18 and 2:23 where it is translated "grief." Sorrow and grief over the results of our actions can create anxiety. In our own times anxiety has become an epidemic, and people spend millions on counseling and medications to escape its debilitating effects.

This verse points the way to avoiding this sorrow: put away evil from thy flesh. When we do that we treat the actual cause of many sorrows, and not just the symptoms (1 Peter 2:11).

Years spent in childhood and youth can seem to be meaningless (vanity) because they are "fleeting," which is another way to translate this word. For teenagers eager to attain adult status, these years seem to drag. But to those who have reached maturity or beyond, those youthful years were all too brief.

6. What reminder is in the command "Remember now thy Creator" (Eccles. 12.1)?

The previous two verses told young people what they should do. This verse, however, tells them where they are going.

"The command Remember your Creator means to revere God, to keep His laws faithfully, to serve Him responsibly, remembering that because He created people, everyone owes Him his life" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Victor).

Deathbed confessions may, in some cases, be legitimate. But how much better it is when one makes a commitment to the Creator in his or her youth! There are at least two good reasons why this is so. First, children and adolescents are less "set in their ways"; it is much easier for them to make that decision than for an adult whose life patterns have become increasingly rigid. Second, the younger that one is when joining the Lord's army, the more time he or she has to be involved in Christian ministry and enjoy all the blessings that result from a lifetime of service.

"While the evil days come not" gives the reason for remembering God in our youth. Those evil days are the later years in life with their infirmities and pain. They seem especially evil to young people who rarely suffer such disabilities.

The writer himself has "no pleasure" in those closing years of life, although this sentiment is not universally shared by older people. Many have learned to cope with the problems of aging, and, freed from the pressures of jobs and rearing a family, they find a peace that earlier they could not enjoy.

Frustration of Aging (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)

7. How did Solomon describe the change that takes place in the aging process (vs. 2,3)?

Verse 2 points out the progression of failure that accompanies the aging process. Just as the clouds block out the brightness of the sun, moon, and stars, so an elderly person's prospects of enjoying life become increasingly dim-and there is no return from old age. The statements in verses 3 through 7 are highly figurative, making it difficult to know for certain what Solomon was thinking. A variety of interpretations can be found among Bible scholars, but it seems preferable to understand Solomon as referring to the declining physical and psychological abilities that accompany old age.

If so, the trembling "keepers of the house" (v. 3) are probably the arms and hands. The strength that once enabled a person to work hard is replaced by weak muscles and trembling hands. The "strong men [that] bow" are probably the legs, which are no longer able to carry the weight of the body so easily. The "grinders" that become "few" are the teeth. How many elderly people have false teeth that they must put in a glass when they go to bed at night?

Along with these changes, the eyes become dim and no longer see clearly: "Those that look out of the windows be darkened." Here is one of the causes of what was described in verse 2 as a darkening of life.

8. What are some of the physical changes Solomon described (v. 4)?

Solomon continued by saying that the doors shall be shut." "The door is a symbol of interchange with the outside world. The doors that are shut represent the deafness

that cuts the elderly person off from the sounds of the city. The sound of the grinding of grain, which was heard daily about the Oriental home, is scarcely discernible to the old man" (KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, Nelson).

Lighter sleeping habits also accompany aging, and this seems to be what Solomon was referring to in the phrase "rise up at the voice of the bird" (Eccles. 12:4). It might be a description of an older person rising early in the morning because of an inability to sleep any longer. At the same time, the ability to hear and enjoy music has been diminished, something that naturally accompanies the loss of hearing. The ability to sing also changes with a loss of vocal strength.

9. What are some of the psychological changes he referred to (v. 5)?

Certain fears also develop along with the losses experienced (v. 5). Mention of the fear of height and of terrors in the way probably indicates the fear that often causes older people not to want to venture out into the world as much as they once did. Older people have a much greater fear of stumbling and falling. It is also the time when hair normally turns gray or white, like the white blossom of the "almond tree"

Like the grasshopper mentioned here, those who were once lively and quick are now slow and dragging instead. The failure of desire refers to diminished appetites. All these declining traits point to the fact that the older person is moving toward the day of his death, when his funeral will be held and the mourners will grieve over him.

10. How did Solomon describe the ending of life (vs. 6,7)?

The figures used in this verse all describe death. The silver cord suspends a lamp, the golden bowl. When the cord breaks, the lamp drops to the floor and the light is extinguished. Water is drawn from wells using clay vessels. Occasionally a pitcher would be dropped, shattering it and ending its useful existence.

"The wheel" refers to a device used to draw water from a deep well or cistern . When the wheel breaks, no more water can be drawn.

God formed humanity from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7; 3:19). In death the physical body returns to the earth from whence it came, a quite dismal prospect. But happily the verse does not end there because the spirit shall return to God who gave it. Here is one of the rare references to life after death in the Old Testament. The approach of death does not have to be a source of depression for the believer. We know that when we are absent from this body, we will be present with the Lord (II Cor. 5:8).

11. According to Solomon, what does life amount to without God (v. 8)?

The only conclusion Solomon could reach in his search for meaning to life without God is that everything amounts to emptiness. For that reason he concluded his treatise by saying, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccles.12:13). He then brought in once again the warning that everything we do will be brought into judgment. including every secret thing. whether it is good or bad.

We are supposed to enjoy life. but godliness must be our guide.

CONCLUSION

In the Days of Thy Youth

It may be more appropriate to speak of the daze of youth. Children and young people today are subjected to such a wide variety of threats and temptations that there is little wonder that many of them have distorted views of what life is really all about.

This puts a heavy responsibility on parents to provide guidance. Unfortunately, many parents cannot or will not provide this guidance. Thus a growing responsibility falls upon churches to fill this void.

This lesson ought to motivate your church to take a careful look at what is being done for its young people. Many churches today have youth ministers whose efforts are aimed at providing good teaching for teens. A few visionary churches have hired children's ministers for pre-teens. That's good!

But just hiring extra church staff can give church members the false sense of security that "we've got those bases covered." That's bad! Reaching our preadults for Christ takes more—it takes you. There is no higher calling than to help a young person develop a walk of Christian faith. What role will you play?

PRAYER

Gracious Father, may this lesson remind us that this life is fleeting, that from a worldly point of view it is vanity. Give us the wisdom to look beyond the emptiness of life to see the opportunities for service You have for us and the hope we have for eternal life through Jesus Christ, through whom we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"For thou art my hope, O Lord God: thou art my trust from my youth" (Psalm 71:5).

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week we will see how God has ordained love to be an important part of our lives. Study background Scripture: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; 7:10-12; 8:6, 7.

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