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# The End of Wisdom

## Ecclesiastes 12

### Introduction

Have you ever planned something out meticulously only for it to go wrong at the last minute? We had everything arranged for our first foreign holiday as a family of three. A relative had a villa in Turkey which we hired for the week; we had booked up the plane flights; we had arranged transport to and from airports; we had changed some pounds into Turkish Lira; the passports were all ready and the suitcases were packed. Then on the morning of the holidays our daughter had spots on her face. “Oh oh!”. A quick visit to the doctor confirmed it was chicken pox and there was no way she was going on a plane. Holiday cancelled!

Life is uncertain, no matter how carefully we plan ahead. And some of the most dangerous words are “I’ll do it when...”. “I’ll fix that dripping tap when I get a free weekend”. “I’ll sort out the garden when it gets to summer”. “I’ll start saving when I’ve got enough spare to save”. “I’ll be able to help when the kids get a bit older”. Now some of these can be valid reasons to wait, but the teacher in our passage wants to emphasise that when it comes to obedience to God, the time for action is now.

### Background

We’ve worked our way through the book of Ecclesiastes in our house group recently, so I thought this would be a good passage to look at.

The whole book is fascinating, and surprising. If you study the likes of the book of Joshua you find that obedience to God brings blessing, and even victory. Well Ecclesiastes tells us that this isn’t always as straightforward as it seems.

The book centres around a character called the teacher or the preacher, who wants to share his wisdom with the people. He decides to carry out a great experiment to find out the purpose of life, and basically create the first self-help book. He tries all sorts of things to seek satisfaction, from food and drink, to pleasure, to hard work. He examines the ways that people live to work out what is wise and what is foolish. And he thinks a lot about death and legacy.

And what is the answer he comes up with, for the meaning of life under the Sun? Well, it’s not 42, but he does sum it up with a single word: “hevel”. Now this Hebrew word is translated in different ways in different versions of the Bible. It is sometimes rendered “vanity”. In the NIV we read today it is “meaningless”. It’s also sometimes “useless” or “futility”. The original meaning is vapour or smoke. Something which is temporary, which can’t be held on to.

The teacher says it is good to make plans, but we can’t rely on the outcomes, because we can’t predict the future.

He says that it is good to work, but the reward is uncertain.

He says that it is good to be wise, but death comes to both the wise and the foolish alike.

He urges us to enjoy the good things that God has given us, because death is always near.

And so we get to our passage.

### **Nearing the End**

Chapter 12 is the end of the teaching and it looks at the end of life, or at least the downhill slope that leads to the end. In verses 3 to 5 he uses a series of illustrations of a household or a community to depict the ageing process:

*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;  
when the doors to the street are closed  
and the sound of grinding fades;  
when people rise up at the sound of birds,  
but all their songs grow faint;  
when people are afraid of heights  
and of dangers in the streets;  
when the almond tree blossoms  
and the grasshopper drags itself along  
and desire no longer is stirred.  
Then people go to their eternal home  
and mourners go about the streets.  
[Ecclesiastes 12 v 3-5]*

It's an amazing picture of the body and the struggles we face as we get older:

- The hands start to tremble
- The legs no longer hold us up straight
- Our teeth fall out and we can no longer chew as well
- Our eyes grow dim
- Our hearing starts to fade
- Our sleep becomes shallow and we rise early
- We become fearful
- Hair turns white like blossom
- We struggle just to get around

- Our spark seems to fade
- And then we die

The next few verse continue the theme, but this time picturing our lives as hanging by a thread or a chord. Eventually that chord will break and life will end:

*Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,  
and the golden bowl is broken;  
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel broken at the well,  
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

[Ecclesiastes 12 v 6-7]

It's a mournful picture, isn't it? So what is the teacher's answer to what to do about it? We find it in verse 1:

*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”—  
before the sun and the light  
and the moon and the stars grow dark,  
and the clouds return after the rain;*

[Ecclesiastes 12 v 1-2]

It's a message of urgency. He's saying that we're all on the downhill slope physically, so let's enjoy what God has given us now. Let's do that thing we've been putting off now. We can't afford to say "I'll do it when...". Instead we should be saying "I'd better get started now".

What does he mean by "Remember your creator"? Well, what happens when we forget our creator? If we forget God, we fail to appreciate his creation. If we forget God, we think we are the most important thing in this world. If we forget God we become judgemental of others instead of loving them. By remembering him we flip these round and we realise we're in a beautiful world, full of good things, that we're here for a purpose - to serve the living God - and that there are people all around us that need our love.

You see it's an active thing. We do something in church regularly that we often call the remembrance. We remember Jesus's death. Doesn't that seem a bit strange, though? Jesus' death is the centre of Christianity, it's not like we're going to forget about it. And yet we regularly spend time remembering him. That deliberate bringing to mind stimulates our minds into humility, awe and thankfulness as we ponder what he means to us.

And so here. Remembering our creator is a deliberate act of bringing to mind who he is, what he means to us and our responsibility to him.

## Hevel

The final words of the teacher before the narrator sums it all up, are what he's been saying all the way through Ecclesiastes: "Hevel, all is hevel". What are we supposed to do with that?

One of the best things we can do is change our perspective. All that the teacher has been trying out and observing has been "under the Sun". What if we look at life from a different point of view?

Have you ever seen those pavement drawings that look like there's a big hole in the ground? They can be really convincing, but only when viewed from one particular location. From any other angle it looks like what it is: a stretched out drawing on a flat canvas.

What do the teacher's words tell us if we look from a different angle?

- Life is a vapour, it's here and then it's gone. But eternity is a long time, and if we know Jesus as saviour then we're spending eternity with him.
- Gaining wealth is pointless as we don't know what our children will do with it. But remember that Jesus told us to lay up treasures in heaven.
- Life doesn't seem fair, the wise and the foolish end up the same way, and the wicked prospers while the righteous suffer. But we know that God's judgement is sure. And we would all be condemned if Christ had not already taken the punishment himself.
- Our bodies are wearing out and breaking down, getting weaker every day. And yet God says he is sanctifying us, building us up spiritually day by day. And one day we will be made perfect, and given new bodies which never wear out.

So you see, perspective is so important.

## Summary

The rest of the chapter is the narrator's summing up of the whole of the teaching in the book. Let's have a look at what he says:

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

*The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.*

*Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.*

*[Ecclesiastes 12 v 9-12]*

Have you ever been jabbed with a pointy stick? It doesn't sound pleasant, but it would certainly get us heading in the right direction. That's what words of wisdom should do. They might not be as pleasant and comfortable as we would want. In fact they can sting. But they should point us in the right direction.

*Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind.  
For God will bring every deed into judgment,  
including every hidden thing,  
whether it is good or evil.  
[Ecclesiastes 12 v 13-14]*

Fear God and keep his commandments. Is that what we're doing? If it's not then we need a change.

When is the time for action? Now. Remember your creator in the days of your youth.

What is the reason for action? The fear of God and the knowledge of judgement. Everything we do should be to please him.

What are the steps of action? Obedience to his commands.

What did Jesus tell his disciples to do when they first met him? **Follow me**.

**Follow him into salvation** - perhaps you've been coming to church regularly and you feel that God's been speaking to you. He's telling you the you need to be saved but you've been putting it off. Today is the day of salvation, and there's no guarantee of tomorrow.

**Follow him into baptism** - maybe you're saved but have held off on making a public declaration of it. This is not the natural state for the Christian. Look at the new testament: they were saved and baptised, saved and baptised. The first thing the shepherds did after meeting the newborn saviour was go and tell others. So the first thing we should want to do on meeting the saviour is to tell everyone about it. Declaring our faith by baptism is the first step.

**Follow him into service** - Christians, especially in a church context, are saved to serve. A church with one person doing all the work is not Biblical. Jesus said *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* [John 15 v 35] How do outsiders see this love? In the way that we serve one another. If you've been putting off serving in the church because of time, or family, or maybe you're not sure what you could do to help, consider the teacher's message:

- Life is a vapour, it's here and then it's gone
- Remember your creator in the days of your youth
- Fear God and keep his commandments
- God will bring every deed into judgement

## **Conclusion**

When we couldn't go to Turkey, we could have become hesitant. "We'll do something when she gets better." "We can have a holiday next year." "We need to plan it all out again." But instead we said let's find places we can go on day trips, where we won't be too close to other people. Let's just get out there and enjoy the time we have together. And we had a great week. Seize the day. Take the opportunity to serve God now. And enjoy the blessings he gives you now.