

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, The Priority of Pursuits

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verses 1 to 8 and it's on page 623 of the White Church Bibles if you have those. That's Ecclesiastes 12 verses 1 to 8.

Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Amen. And the grinders cease because they are few.

And those who look through the windows are dimmed. 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 the daughters of song are brought low.

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.

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. And the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

[1 : 35] Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated. Well, the verses that you have heard read for you today, verses which close out the book of Ecclesiastes, present the reader with a most powerful poem on one of the most profound books in all the Bible.

I want you to see those eight verses in its setting, and so I hope you keep the text open before you.

The poet takes death as its subject in hopes that we would better spend our days.

Notice how it ends. Verse 8, by repeating the book's refrain.

In a way that serves the poem's beginning. Namely, what wisdom would have us remember.

[3 : 08] And on either side of our text, as one's eyes draw out to the literature immediately before, or the literature after, you'll find two sentinels standing.

Literary contextual bookends. Look at chapter 11, the end of verse 9, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Or chapter 12, and verse 14, the very ending of the book, for God will bring every deed into judgment.

So, they stand on either end of this powerful poem, hemming the reader in with that gravitas of final reckoning.

It's almost as though the poem wants you to feel quarantined. Unable to get out. Confined.

[4 : 40] It would have you think of your own death. And God.

and the pursuits that we give ourselves to in the years that, according to this book, all amount to a vapor.

From every angle then, even while we see this poem in its setting, we're astounded by its weightiness.

the theme is death. The aim is a remembrance of God. The tonal literary context is a final judgment.

Notice how it begins. remember also your creator. This is what wisdom would have you remember.

[5 : 59] It would have you pause for 30 minutes on a Sunday morning in March to be told that those who are wise remember their creator.

creator. That's the poem's aim. It's stated at the start. That's the outcome he wants. He puts it down at the very outset.

He would persuade you this morning to remember your creator in the context of a final judgment moment in which all of your deeds are seen manifest known understood this is not even a particularly Christian idea humanity has for centuries and from a variety of perspectives retained a belief in a final reckoning.

It's interesting to me Thomas Jefferson who in Christian circles is attacked for having taken his scissors to all things supernatural in the gospel.

but I have the Jefferson Bible and I've read what he left and it is intriguing to me to think that Jefferson himself who removed so much of that which is particularly Christian nevertheless left all references to the final judgment.

[8 : 02] The same can be said of Benjamin Franklin whose sister was an ardent Christian in the fullness of what one would believe about the death and resurrection of Christ and the forgiveness of sins.

Franklin himself rejecting those things but even as a deist he held forth a final reckoning.

this poem is situated within Israel's history given to us even as it says by the one who was king or shepherd over God's people even then within Judaism this strong movement of remembrance of a creator.

Now Christianity will take this and in all of its fullness not only enjoin you to remember your creator because one day you will stand before him and give an account but to remember him by way of repenting before his son to whom the creator gives all judgment and it does so in poetic form.

The very last book of the New Testament is intriguing to me as it calls forth from the voice of creatures who are around the throne in chapter four worthy are you our Lord and God verse 11 to receive glory and honor and power here's the reason for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created this poetic song from the throne calling upon all of humanity to remember God for he is their creator why why should you consider the existence of God or the deliverance that he brings through Christ you should be sober about life because

[10 : 31] God is your creator and therefore worthy of all things Revelation chapter 5 though will connect our remembrance of God as creator to the worthiness of the son who is our savior notice what it says there again a new song verse 9 of Revelation 5 worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals that is the son of man the one who was slain for by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and nation and people for you have made them a kingdom and priest to our God and they shall reign on the earth the new testament Christian teaching talks about not only remembering God as creator but God as savior and into the hands of his son he has given all judgment John chapter 5 and verse 22 for the father has given all judgment to the son

Matthew 25 verse 31 when the son of man comes in glory and his angels with him he will sit on his glorious throne and judge the living and the dead and so we're looking at a poem of such immense power that it would call us to consider for a moment that we will one day stand before an eternal judgment seat of which the son of man Jesus will execute righteousness down to the minutest aspect which has escaped our own ability on this earth and he will do it for every person for he said all authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth for all time over all people and so without trying to be dramatic

I'm simply trying to indicate the truths of the scriptures in the language of wisdom that would have us consider the moment in which we individually stand before that judge and render account and the literature of wisdom says remember your creator when when should one take up this remembrance verse one in the days of your youth before the evil days come and the days draw near of which you will say I have no pleasure in them when is it right for us to think about our death because believe me we put it off at every turn possible don't we it is good to do it not only today but in the days of your youth this is wisdom and it runs contrary to almost everything we think of in our own day we are told that there will be time for a consideration of the creator later but you and I may not get a later you are told to get after it now there will be time for

God in days to come you are told to explore every notion thought or pursuit for the consideration of an eternal will come later you are told carpe diem seize the day without any thought given to the creator or the day of your youth or the day of your death we instinctively mute all sounds morbid that we might turn up the music of life reveal to me what is on your playlist and I will hear the things which emerge concerning the pursuit here is a poem that would say while you are young remember your creator implied in these words then is that there is some advantage to remembering

God before you get old it was Jesus who said let the little children come unto me for such is the kingdom of heaven and it was the adults around him who said there will be plenty of time for them later if you're in second grade today or third fourth or fifth if you're in junior high or high school if you sit under the hearing of my voice week by week and hear nothing else over 20 years hear this wisdom would have you remember your creator while you are young at this very juncture why why remember him now when everything in you says

[16 : 35] I've got to be about other things well first because he's your creator you're not autonomous or free in the way in which everyone tells you you are you were created by God for his designs God has a purpose for your life God has intention for your pursuits God has desires concerning what you will give yourself to God has goals for his glory and your good and allowing you to draw breath God has an outcome that goes beyond your education remember him while you're young remember him because you'll one day give an account to him look how the poem proceeds three movements it's beautiful the movements all hang on this word before remember your creator when before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say

I have no pleasure in them in other words remember your creator before disagreeable days and years arrive notice it says in that little verse before the evil days come and the years draw near before something arrives before it shows up at your door well what is it that would be showing up at your door it comes as a surprise could there be a day that arrives when I open my front door and I have arrived at a moment when I have no pleasure in them certainly this can happen it can happen through the cares of life which drain you of joy it will happen through age earlier in the book of

Ecclesiastes we have been reminded that life is not always pleasurable look at chapter 11 and verse 8 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 the days of darkness will be many now this is something that when you're young you just avoid or you don't understand but you need to know that the country is filled with nursing homes and hospital rooms and memory care facilities where the aged who once were like you in fullness of mind and body and vigor now don't even know the names of the faces which arrived to visit them when when the days of disagreeableness disagreeableness are present why would you want to remember

God after the opportunity of walking out into the world with vigor and pleasure why wait for the moment in life when you are unable to give your creator your best this is what he would say remember your creator in the days of your youth before those days arrive it's very interesting to me many of you know that I like to read literature between two and six hundred in the common era and in particular the character of Augustine and what's going on in that period of the church and what you find is that a number of men waited to become baptized until they almost knew that their death was at hand and they waited to become baptized because they knew that to give

Christ their life early would require change and so they put it off leveraging only at the end of their life all their resources to the kingdom then and what the writer is saying here is you ought to give your life to a remembrance of God and I would go further through the repentance and gift of yourself to his son before you awaken to a life where you're not even pleasurably engaged but he moves on not only before disagreeable days and years arrive but look at verses 2 through 5 before the day of your own dissolution and decay these verses and I'm going to read them again are to me some of the most sublime verses in all the Bible they present a 12 fold literary chain of metaphor and analogy that are unsurpassed in describing what it's like at the time of your dissolution and your decay they're poetic as though death is so consequential that only the most descriptive of words will do it justice we need our best writers writing on death because death is so irreversible that only the command of our most elevated use of language can do it justice look at these verses before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain picking up on creation itself and its disillusion it's it's dissolved is dissolving nature verse 3 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 and the doors on the street are shut and the sound of the grinding is low and one rises up at the sound of a bird and the daughters of a song are brought low and they are afraid also of what is high and tears are in the way the almond tree blossoms the grasshopper drags itself along desire fails because man is going to his eternal home and then this unbelievably potent finish and the mourners go about the streets

[25 : 18] I mean that that is human language at its best and it's interesting to me that it's in service of death because death is so important so irretrievable so inevitable so consequential that word pictures must be thrown before us that we can envision ourself in its state of dissolution and decay in those four verses the poet's tongue has expressed death's inevitability with immense literary power the sound of the poet's lips have captured the devastation of impending death with a reverence and awe that death deserves these are words that are joined in metaphor to convey death's tragic wonder poetry that's why it's poetic that's why it's poetry poetry is superior to narrative or to discourse if one is to grab hold of the human affection that's why love songs are poetic poetry evokes something deep within us that other kinds of writing leave untouched and so you and

I will be helped if we pay attention to the literary artists who convey the seriousness of death through the painstaking work of placing just the right words in touch with one another to create the strongest mental impression by way of image before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain in the day when the keepers of the house tremble the phrase there for keepers of the house is the servants of the house you're actually presented here with a great house in disrepair and the persons who are servants and guardians of the house are themselves now too old to accomplish the work that's what he would have you see the moment when the keepers of the house are trembling almost as though they're wondering about the return of the master or the sense of the master on the condition of the home think of it those of you who are young you're to remember your creator as you look at strong men who are bent that the increasingly slow shuffle is an indication of where you are going and the need for remembrance now when the grinders cease because they are few think of the workers the workforce on a great home and plantation and well there are just not as many of us here as there once were it's of a dilapidated estate in regard to its ability to produce those who look through the windows are dimmed almost as though eyesight itself cataracts and other eventual realities of life enable one to not quite know who it is that's coming down the lane when the day comes when the doors of the street are shut this is what happens this is why you call them shut ins older people to do one thing a day becomes a big event okay grandma what did you do today

I went to CVS to get my prescriptions and that's the fullness in other words there comes a moment when you and I will keep the door closed because our days will be better spent in when one rises up at the sound of a bird oh for the days when I could sleep through the night when you're young some of you need to learn how to get up you could sleep all night and all day what drives us nuts is we can't sleep at all we wake up at 1130 before you've gone to bed we wake up at 2 we wake up at 330 and walk the hall we finally fall asleep around 5 we awaken at the sound of a bird while you don't awaken at the sound of a spring thunderstorm storm when the daughters of song are brought low and notice this also happens with age when you're afraid of what is high and that terrors are in the way the almond tree blossoms what a beautiful phrase the almond tree blossoms in the spring like early what is he conveying here well remember the

Lord before the early season I mean don't push him off to the end some have likened the almond tree turning white to the hair on the head of an elderly person some have likened the almond tree blossoming as already having come forward with its fruit therefore everything else is diminishing but the poet says you gotta remember God before that actually begins look at that the grasshopper drags itself along in an old age we too will need a walker or a wheelchair or an arm or a cane remember your creator before that why not remember your creator while you can still run why not remember your creator when you have strength to give him why not remember your creator when you're not afraid of anything that will stand in the way why not remember your creator where you can see right and far why not remember your creator when you can still get something done for him before you look him in the eye why not remember your creator while all the days are bright and long and warm why not why not do it when you're 13 or 8 why not do it when you're 17 or 18 why not do it as an undergrad when everyone else chases something else why why wait till you're an old man bent over before you stand before the community of faith and the assembly of the righteous and have regret why not remember him before there's such a wake in your own past that litters the lives of those who follow you why not remember him where if you were to die young you give every day to him why not why not remember your creator to repentance to the son before the difficult day arrives at your doorstep before your own dissolution and decay is inevitably felt within your bones or verse 7 before death itself and you return to dust and to

God wow look at those images before the silver cord is snapped I mean silver cord is it's picturing life as something valuable this is your life is valuable what why why are you in your youth walking around like some old little twine rope that can only fly a kite to your own pleasures your life is like a silver cord and it will one day be snapped that's an image of death of severing or the golden bowl is broken have you ever thought of your life as a golden bowl have you ever thought of it as that precious that valuable the fact that you are breathing is an indication of the eternal value

[36 : 12] God sets upon you and you would look at him as though you're a piece of iron or wood or you would reject him or repulse him or walk away from him or live in rebellion to him enough enough you're gold you're silver and you're going to die and you're going to break you're going to fall you're going to crash you're going to stand before him and he's going to say did you follow the voice of wisdom and did you get about it early he goes on the picture is shattered at the fountain!

the wheel is broken at the cistern I mean the wheel is what allows the bucket to go down to draw sustenance for life and when the wheel is broken water cannot be had life cannot be stained the pitcher at your table is no more because you are no longer at your table to drink indeed when dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it what a poem what a consideration this is what wisdom would have you remember you owe

God your life because God created you you owe Jesus your following because Jesus saved you enough with lesser things know this God will bring everything into judgment we would do well to be wise you will never regret giving your life to Jesus in grade school you will never regret turning on your heel as I did at age 18 and giving your life to Christ in high school you will never regret!

Standing with the saints during your university years when the pleasures of this life are pursued by those all around you look to those of us who are old we can teach you the way of wisdom by regret we can teach you the way of wisdom by what we've left in our wake remember repent before your own disagreeable day arrives before your own dissolution and decay sets in certainly before the cord is snapped the bow is broken the rope is frayed the picture is irreparable the waters of life cannot be had and we stand with your family in a cemetery over your grave because on that day wisdom will have nothing left to you to say our heavenly father the uniqueness of a sunday gathering to consider the greatest of themes for the most pleasurable of ends help us help us to give every day that's yet before us to you to the enjoyment of living with your end in mind in

Jesus name amen to do to do!