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Ecclesiastes 12

"Is That Your Final Answer?"

June 9, 2013

All right, let's open our Bibles this morning - Ecclesiastes 12, as we come to the end of this book. It is our intention, in three weeks, to begin the gospel of John on Sunday mornings.

You ever seen that show "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" It's not on so much anymore. It was popular for a while, I guess. But one of the questions was, "Is that your final answer?" Right? "Is that your final answer?" And then you either won or you lost by whether you were right or whether you were wrong. Well, one day each of you, and I, are going to be asked for our final answer when it comes to God's plan for our life. But it'll be more than the million bucks at stake. It'll be eternity hanging in the balances, and you won't be able to call a friend or poll the audience or eliminate two wrong answers. You'll just have one shot at it.

Jesus, one time, said to His disciples, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). I don't think we oftentimes think in terms of finality when it comes to our life, but with increasing age, we approach it with a more serious understanding. The older you get, the closer it gets, the more likely you are to think about it. What we call, in the world, the golden years, Solomon describes far differently. It seems that the golden years run by pretty fast, and most lives end in whimpers rather than in crashing cymbals. Many folks are afraid of growing old. That's what keeps the plastic surgeons in business, and the Clairol people. Some folks just deny it. But you're only foolish yourself, really.

And Solomon at least, now at the end of his life as he's gone for many years away from the Lord, looks honestly at the way he's lived his life. It's a rude awakening the first time someone refers to you as being "old." I remember when I went with my wife to the movies a few years ago, the lady said, "Is that one adult and one senior?" (Laughing) And I went, "Wait a minute!" And then she said, "Well, it's \$1 cheaper." And I said, "Yes, please." (Laughing) Seemed to work in my favor all of a sudden. You know that you're getting older when you get tired playing chess. Or you look forward to a dull evening. When your knees buckle and your belt won't. (Laughing) That's pretty much.....Go to iron your socks, and you realize you aren't wearing any. (Laughing) Old, old. When that woman you help - that little old

lady that you help across the street - that's your wife. (Laughing) You remember when a Motel 6 actually cost \$6. Now Solomon, here in this last chapter, turns back to the Lord from whom he had gone away for so many years. He was the God of his youth. He had served the Lord for a good long time. He had done well with it. Read Proverbs. He writes wonderful things from the Lord to his own son, to us. We don't know how long this quest - that is in this book - took, but you can rest assured it took years. And now Solomon is back where he began. He is back in fellowship with God, and he is older, and he is wiser. But this detour that he has taken, that's recorded in his journal here, has taken years from his life - wasted years, wandering years - ones that he would rather you and I avoid. So he writes it down to be sure that you and I read it and go, "Oh, I'm not doing that! Been there, done that." Solomon is back. He has been on an elaborate search - using his position and his money and his power to try everything that man says you should try that will satisfy your life. And he had looked for satisfaction in every corner of the globe, and he had come back to the same conclusion every time. This is "vanity." That's the word he uses. "This is emptiness. There is no satisfaction here, on the horizontal life under the sun," as he puts it. You can't find God horizontally. You have to look to Him first.

So this morning, we conclude our journey with Solomon as he returns back to the Lord - older and wiser, and realizing life is short, and he wants to make up for lost time, and he wants to make up for lost ground. Maybe, as an older man, he remembered that years earlier his father had written in Psalm 103:15-16, "As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more." Maybe grandpa - maybe dad's words resonated in his heart. And so Solomon, as an old timer now, sits down to finish the book that he had started - to say, "This is not the way to live." And he really gives us a minimal outline so that you can't miss it. Here's the three words you need to remember - aging, dying and preparing. Because Solomon writes about the inevitability of growing older, and the sureness of dying, that there's a sobering process but that, knowing those things, we should prepare to one day stand before God to give an account for our lives. There's a meeting coming. And whether you like it or not, your name's in the book, and you won't be able to miss your appointment. God has a time.

But first aging - a sobering process. Verse 1, "Remember now," Solomon says, "your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" I want you to notice that

Solomon says, "Aging brings difficult days," and so he encourages us to be sure our relationship with the Lord is established early on. Better that you do it when life is good and life is easy and things are easy, than later on when you have all of these difficulties that just come with growing old. I heard a guy once say, "Growing old's not for sissies." And he's right. Those young years - when you're in high school and college - life is good. Hey, just wait. And in those middle years - when you're successful and doing well - you just wait. You're gonna get older, and things are not going to always be so easy. These are preparations for what's coming. Solomon knows. He's an old guy. He's been through all of the stages. He's not guessing. He's just writing it down. Think of some of the difficulties that are associated as you grow older. A lot of people find tremendous guilt when they get older. You will hear them say things like, "If I knew then what I know now," because they want to change something. Or, "If I had it to do all over again," and then the lament and the sorrow and the frustration of things that they'd chosen to do that they wish they had never done; or wish they had done things they'd never followed. Great fear is found amongst those that are older. Fear of being by themselves. Fear of not having the capacity that they once had - to take care of themselves. Loneliness sets in. "Will I have enough money to retire? I'm much more vulnerable now. I can't defend myself, and now I have fewer friends." And there's a tremendous amount of loneliness that awaits those who live long enough. There's oftentimes, amongst folks who are getting towards their dying days, a sense of uselessness.

Now unfortunately we have, in our society, solidified that with these "over the hill" parties. "You're over the hill, man! We don't need you anymore." But only western culture does that. If you go to the Mideast, if you go to Africa, if you go to Asia, there is tremendous respect for the elderly - those who have lived that life and paid those dues and are respected by others who look up to them for the years that they've lived. When Naghmeh's sister-in-law was with us last week - whose husband is there in the Iranian prison - her name is **Zebonde** - she was staying in York in England at the Bible school - and she was telling me the other day that she had tremendous difficulty walking into class before the teacher. I said, "Well, why is that?" She said, "Well, he's an older man, and I told him I couldn't go in until he went in. It's just the way we grow up, and we learn." But that's not what we do in our culture. We put people aside. We tell them they're no longer valuable to us. But if you think about it for a minute, most of the time great accomplishments are found in folks who have lived seasoned lives - not younger ones. How old was Moses when he brought the children of Israel out of Egypt? Was he 20? He wasn't 20 or

40 or 60 for that matter. He was 80. Isn't 80 a time you put your feet up and look for the golden years? Caleb was 85 when he and his boys took the hill that had been promised to him 45 years earlier. William Gladstone was 83 when he was elected, as a believer in Christ, to his fourth term as the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Michelangelo was 89 when he got on a ladder and painted the Last Judgment at the Vatican. You can go see it if you're ever there. At 90, he was flat on his back. Oh, he wasn't in traction - he was painting the Sistine Chapel. At 90! By the time he was 88, John Wesley had ridden 250,000 miles on horseback and preached some 4,000 sermons to over 10,000 people at the time in backfields and in mortuaries and cemeteries because the church wouldn't have him, and he was still going strong. There's an old English proverb that says, "The older the fiddle, the sweeter the tune." But Solomon says the years can be difficult. It's not easy growing old. It's not easy having things shut down. I remember reading an Agatha Christie comment years ago that said, "The best kind of husband to have, for a woman, is an archaeologist because the older you get, the more he'll appreciate you." (Laughing) And I liked that. I thought that was pretty good.

So, hey, his point is this, and he'll mention it again in verse 6, get your act together early on because there is going to be an increasing amount of pressure and difficulty as you grow older - to be able to make those decisions about the Lord, be available to serve the Lord, or be available to Him in any regard. You're just going to have to get through it sometimes when you get older. Now, he uses some very elaborate Hebrew kind of poetic language to very colorfully describe what the aging process is like. He says in verse 2, get your act together "while the sun and the light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain." In other words, "While you can see clearly, while things aren't dark in your life, while things are good, and you can remember well - get on it. Get right with God. Make those decisions early on."

You know, Americans are getting older. In 1900, a grandfather's average age - 47 - before he died. In 1950, it went to 68. It's about 80 today, or around there. As of last month, there were 3 million people alive on the planet that were over 100 years old. Now, that used to be almost impossible. So, we're living longer, but yet are we living better? Notice that, as he begins to speak about youth - and remember the encouragement of verse 1 is what he's interested in driving home - he says, "The youthful times are bright times, when the sun and the moon and the light and the stars are not darkened." In other words, when you can see well and remember well. One of the difficult things about getting old is people's memory

starts to fade. That can start early on. I read a book from a guy about memory, and he said, "You know, the hardest thing for me about losing my memory," he said, "was I would go halfway up the stairs and then stop and say, 'Why am I going up here?' " And then he said, "Then I had another decision to make. Do I go back stairs and sit down until I remember? Or do I go upstairs and look around to see if I can remember why I was headed there?" He said, "If I sit down on the stair, though, and start to think about what to do, it won't be long before I'll say to myself, 'Did I start upstairs or downstairs?' " (Laughing) " 'Now I don't remember.' " Two old gals talking in church about aging, and the one said, "You know, my memory's getting so bad. I know we've known each other for years, and I've loved being your friend, but I can't remember what your name is. What is it?" And the other older woman said, "Do you have to know it right now?" (Laughing) It's bad when you lose your memory. Want to hear another one? Let me see. (Laughing) So there're these two guys. They and their wives have gone out to dinner for 40 years. Every Friday, they go out to dinner. And the women, then, usually go in and make dessert in the kitchen when they get home, and the guys sit in the den. And the one fellow said to the other fellow, while the wives were out in the kitchen, "Hey, last Friday - where we went to dinner - that was a great place. What was the name of that place again?" He said, "What's that flower that smells so good, the red ones, you know? You can grow 'em in your yard?" He says, "Roses?" He goes, "Yes!" He goes, "Hey, Rose. What was the name of that place last week - that we ate?" (Laughing)

Look, Solomon's point is a valid one. You've got to get your act together while you can. You know? You've got to make decisions about the Lord when you're young, when the light's on - because things are gonna grow dim, and life is gonna become more difficult. And Solomon kind of uses the metaphor of a house that's falling apart to speak about bodies that are. Notice what he says in verse 3 - get it together before these days come, "when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow down." In other words, when your knees begin to buckle, when your back is not what it once was, when your strength goes. Now, there are exceptions to the rule, but it's the general way of aging. He says, "When the grinders cease because they are few," your teeth start to go. You're not able to chew as well. They're less effective. "And those that look through the windows grow dim." Your eyesight begins to go as well. It's amazing. You can always tell how old people are. You don't even have to see their face - by just seeing where they hold stuff when they read them. You know? I had surgery on my eyes, like ten years ago or twelve years ago. I had terrible nearsightedness, and that's

pretty well fixed, but they can't fix both unless you get one eye, and that creeps me out. So.....the light is really bright right here for a reason. I can see my notes. But you get older, your eyesight goes. There's really no way to strengthen those muscles forever, you know? And so you got the bifocals and the trifocals, and that glisten that was once in your eye is now light shining off that bifocal lens right in the front. And then there's surgery and cataracts and lens replacement and, "I can't drive at night." It's not easy growing old, and you're not going to avoid it unless you want to die young.

We read in verse 4 that "the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low." In other words, your hearing starts to go. You don't hear like you used to. Now it sounds like the muffled sound of street noise through a closed door, and yet, verse 4 says, "One rises up at the sound of a bird. And all the daughters of music are brought low." You don't hear well, but man, what you hear bothers you. You know? A little bird outside can upset your sleep. The loss of melatonin to your brain makes sleeping a thing of the past. "Do you still sleep like a baby?" "Not since I was a baby!" And it's not gonna get any better. The sensitivity of your ears is diminished. You become harder of hearing. Those three little bones in your ear that send vibrations to the brain are wearing out. And oftentimes, you'll find older people wondering why everyone's speaking so softly. They're not! "Your hearing's just going, man." "No it's not!" "Oh, yes it is." A fact of life.

He says in verse 5, "Also they are afraid of height." Isn't that interesting - when you get older, you don't want to fall down. They sell little devices to let people know you've fallen, and you can't get up. "I don't want a flight of stairs. I don't want to go up the stairs." What you used to not think about, now you constantly think about. "Is it uphill? Is it downhill? I need a one-story house. I can't climb up stairs." Afraid of falling. And then we read it happens at a time "when the almond tree blossoms," which is really interesting because an almond tree, when it blossoms, turns white on top. Thanks a lot for that, Solomon! I knew I hated poetry for a reason. (Laughing) Well, that was before you had hair stuff. But notice also that he says here in verse 5 that, when that time comes - when you're afraid of heights and things aren't clear as they were and you're afraid of lots of terrors in the way, everything's frightening to you, when your hair turns gray - and then he says, but then at that time, "The grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails." It's interesting, isn't it, that the older you get, the more things that bother you. Little things. My grandmother, when she was older, she would complain about

everything. Wonderful woman, but the older she got, the less she was happy with. "Close that door. Open that door. Turn that light off. Turn that light on." It didn't matter. (Laughing) Keep grandma happy. Even a grasshopper's a big burden, isn't it? "Oh, I don't want to do that." So settled into your ways, aren't you? And then your desire fails. And most commentators believe it is a commentary on the eventual loss of sexual desire. That might comfort you to know it's at the end of the list, but let me just remind you it's on the list. (Laughing) Now, do you know how hard it would be to convince a teenager this is all coming their way? Or someone in their twenties? "Dude, get your act together with the Lord now, man. This is not going to be forever. Things are going to get tough for you. They're going to be harder as you get older." They're in perpetual denial, aren't they? And yet, if you walk with God, old age is a blessing. We read there in Proverbs 16:31 that "The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness."

So, remember. Commit your life early to the Lord so that you can use your youth to serve Him, for the days of aging are coming when the will cannot overcome the body, and the decisions made early in life can keep you during those very difficult days. In fact, Solomon will say it again in verse 6. Remember. Aging - sobering process.

Well, then he turns to dying at the end of verse 5. "For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets." So, you're going to go somewhere when you die, and it's going to be eternal. You'll have an eternal home. And while everyone weeps and misses you, you'll arrive at your eternal destiny. But you will die, though death will not be the end of your life. There's an eternal home waiting somewhere. He says in verse 6, so again, "Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well. Then the dust" - you and I - "will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." All of us have eternal life in the strictest sense. We will live forever, but where we live is the issue, isn't it? Because of Jesus Christ, God has given to us the opportunity to live with Him forever. If you remember your Creator in the days of your youth, He will remember you in the days of your death. If you refuse, so will He. If you choose not to walk with Him, then this life will be it for you, and then judgment will follow. There is a hell; there is a place of judgment. Jesus said in Matthew 25:23, "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord'"

which He has prepared for you before the foundations of the earth. Don't you want to hear that? I know I do. The very next verse tells us so - there in Matthew. If you choose not to remember your Creator now, then God will not remember you then. Jesus said there towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:21-23), "There will be many in that day that say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we?' " and then make a whole list of spiritual accomplishments - to which Jesus will respond, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you workers of iniquity," and then He spoke about hell. You will live forever - but where? And the choice - you have to make it now. So consider Him before the dark and evil day comes. Make your choice early on. Walk with God. Serve God.

Solomon had wasted years running around doing nothing. He so regrets that now. He ends his book by saying, "Don't waste your years. Get together with the Lord early on." In fact, in that Matthew 7 passage where the Lord talked about those saying, "Lord, Lord," to Him, in verse 24 it says, "Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock." You will live forever. But where? So verse 1 and verse 6 say the same thing - get it together as soon as possible because if you read here, verse 6, everything eventually breaks. The silver cord, the golden bowl, the fountain pitcher, the wheel - nothing lasts forever. They are irretrievable in their loss. It's a sorry thing to lose them, but lose them you will. And he uses the word "loosed" and "broken" twice - shattered. We will weep, but it is inevitable - we will die. An undertaker can sign every letter, "Eventually yours" - because that's where we're headed.

I heard a story a few years ago of a fellow that had lost control of his car and crashed into a Shell station. And he had been knocked unconscious, and the paramedics had gotten him out of his car, and he was laying on the cement. And when he awoke, he looked up, and the "S" had fallen off of the Shell, and it said, "Hell - open 24 hours a day." (Laughing) And he about died. Well, hell is open 24 hours a day. The devil doesn't take vacations. But heaven is open as well. God gives us opportunity to know Him. His invitation is, "Whosoever will, let him come and drink freely of the waters of life" (Revelation 22:17).

So Solomon says in verse 8, " 'Vanity of vanities,' " says the kohalet, the gatherer, "the Preacher, 'All is vanity.' " He takes up his familiar refrain one last time to say what a tragedy it would be to have lived your whole life and not know the meaning of it. And even worse, to live and grow old and not know Christ.

So aging, sobering. Death, sure. One thing left. If you know those are true, get ready to stand before God. Prepare.

Verse 9, "And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright - words of truth." "This is an honest and a thorough record of my journey," says Solomon. "I have spent a lot of time with every word. I wanted to be sure that it was diligently communicated to you, that the results can be relied on as authentic and the conclusions as dependable. These are the things that I have learned from God - that I am now seeking to teach you."

"The words of the wise" - verse 11 - "are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh." Words from the wise are words from believers - that's the way Solomon has used the word "wise" since he started writing. There's much weariness in taking the world's wisdom and seeking to grow by it because it's never-ending, and it's never right, and it's never sure. But God's Word is good now, and it'll be good then. When you stand before the Lord one day, it'll be this book that's brought forth. His Word. So Solomon, in his journey, sought to pick the right words now to use. He wanted to be like goads. Goads are those cattle prods that move the cattle along. It hurts you just enough to get you going in the right direction. It just gets your attention. God's Word is like a well-placed nail. You can hang your hat on it. It'll hold up. The Shepherd has given it to us. You can hang your life on it by faith.

And so after all the experimentation and partying and indulgence and possessions and purchases, and searching high and low, and his success and his failures, and his ups and his downs, and his passions and his questions, Solomon finally gets to this. Verse 13, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." If you want to age right and die well, then live a good life. God's Word to you is that this is how you do it. This is what it will take. This is the only thing that is required of you. This is the bottom line of life. This is the foundation for your happiness. This is the adjustment for any inharmonious circumstance that happens to you. You can just

wrap everything in these few simple words - three of them - fear God, keep His Word, no judgment is coming. Those three - fear, obey and prepare.

Life is a gift from the Lord, and one day you're going to have to give an account to Him of what you've done with it. And here's an old man, Solomon, who says to you - "After all that I have done and tried - from sex to power to riches - the meaning of life is much simpler than that. I have to fear the One and serve the One that I will have to one day stand before to give an account of the stewardship of my life." Most people don't like the term, "fear of the Lord." It brings to mind the Wizard of Oz - the guy behind the curtain and the cowardly lion who can barely look up. But that's really not a biblical fear. That's some superstitious dread. The fear of the Lord in the Bible is the response of people who, coming to know God and seeing who He is and who they are, are immediately driven to their knees because they realize God is good; we're not. And if He didn't want to be found, I wouldn't find Him. And if He didn't want to forgive me, I would not be forgiven. It's an attitude of respect and awe for who God is and how He has loved me. And as a response, I then obey Him with a willing heart. That's what I do because I fear God. An unholy person will always run from God. Terrified. Fearful. Always. But if you know the Lord, you'll always run to Him because with Him is mercy and grace and help.

I think Oswald Chambers once wrote, "If you fear God, you need fear nothing else. If you will not fear God, you should fear everything else." But if you have a relationship where you know God and fear God, then the response - as Solomon writes - is that you will obey God. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). That's His desire. You know, sometimes we want to convince the Lord we love Him by experience. "Oh, man, Lord - when I was in there today, hair stood up on the back of my head!" That's not love. It's a bad burrito. (Laughing) Jesus didn't say, "If you love Me, cry and feel goose bumps." He said, "If you love Me, just do what I ask of you." Pretty simple. "If you love Me, do what I say. Value My Word. Honor My will. Agree with My decisions. Follow after My counsel." That's it. Basic, isn't it? But that's hard because enthusiasm and feelings are far easier than actions of obedience. It's much easier to get worked up and enjoy the experience than forgive a wicked person's actions towards me and say, "Lord, it's because I love You." It's far easier to keep the slate clean, far easier to do the right thing than the wrong thing - if you love the Lord; but far easier to do the wrong thing - if you don't. Obedience is difficult. But you don't

want to come in here worshipping because you have to. You want to come in here worshipping because you want to.

Fear God. He's right. You want to stand before Him - love Him by obedience. And Solomon says, "This is all that you need. This is man's all. There's nothing else that you need to add to the formula. This is the best we can do. And if you fear God, and if you'll obey Him, then when you die, you'll be prepared to meet Him. And it won't matter if He brings to light all the secret and hidden things because you've got nothin' to hide. We're good. Lay it out there, Lord. It's under Your grace."

Look, if you're struggling today, as a believer, and trials are overwhelming your life, or maybe you're just getting older and life is just more difficult, you should know this - if you know Jesus, and you walk with Him, this is the worst your life will ever be. This is as close to hell as you will ever get. It's only going to get better from here. But if you don't know Him, then enjoy it now - because it isn't getting any better. The older you get, the longer you live - it's gonna get worse, and eventually you'll find judgment before God. And then it'll be terrifying for eternity. Your youthful days are all you will ever taste of the good things - because soon judgment will await.

Billy Graham, a few years ago, was asked by a reporter - what was the most amazing thing of the life that he had lived. And he said, without stopping to think about it, "It's so short." Life is so short. As a teenager, the future looks endless. If you're 60 years old, the day seems endless. Tell a 6-year old, "Next year, we're going to Disneyland," you might as well not tell them at all. It's an eternity away. Tell somebody who's 65 years old, "We're gonna do it next year," and they'll get out a calendar so they won't forget. They'll write it down.

One day judgment for stewardship will come. If we have the Son, we can have life. And Solomon is right. Life under the sun can only be found by first finding life in the Son.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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