



What To Do Before It's Too Late

SERIES: *Searching for Satisfaction in an Unsatisfying World*

We've been studying the book of Ecclesiastes for several months now. We've observed that what we have here in this book are the personal reflections of a wise old man. He's reflecting on his own journey as he sought for some kind of coherent meaning and purpose in life. It's almost as if he was reading his own journal entries as he chronicles for us all the contradictions he saw in life under the sun.

It's important to realize that he's not just doing this for for his own catharsis. He has a purpose. He's an old man who is teaching his son or daughter from his own experience. He doesn't want them to make the same mistakes that he made. And one of the mistakes he made was that he wasted his youth. His knowledge of God, his wisdom, came too late, so that he couldn't really accomplish what he would have hoped for.

A man came rushing up to a ferry boat, breathless after running at a terrific pace, but he got there just as the gateman shut the door in his face. A bystander watching the whole thing said to the frustrated man, "I guess you didn't run fast enough." The man answered, "I ran fast enough, but I didn't start on time!"

This morning we come to the Teacher's final words; the conclusion of his search. He turns to his son and he says, "Whatever you do, start now. Start on time. When it comes to living your life the way it should be lived, don't put it off. Don't wait until it's too late!" His words aren't just for teens; his words apply to anyone young enough to care.

But what are things that we should start doing now so that we don't arrive at our destination after it's too late to make much of a difference? What does this really look like to start on time?

I. Rejoice (11:7-10)

"The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. Everything that is to come will be futility. Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. So, remove vexation from your heart and put away

pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting."

The operative verb here is to rejoice. Before it's too late, rejoice. When it comes to really enjoying life, start now! Don't put it off. Don't wait until retirement. Do it now. Over and over in this book the Teacher has told us to stop trying to figure life out; stop trying to fix it, and just enjoy all the good things that God gives you.

He says several things here to drive home his point. He says, "light is good and it's pleasant to the eyes to see the sun." The idea here is that "it's good to be alive!" Life is good, especially when you have the health and vitality of youth to enjoy it. When the days of darkness come, when old age and death enter the picture, it's too late.

Have you ever noticed that older people beat that drum a lot? "You're young," they say, "enjoy your life while you can. Take advantage of it now!" I don't consider myself that old, but I find myself thinking that way at times. I think back to my college years. I never think to myself, "Man, I wish I worked harder in college. I wish I took life a little more seriously." No! I think, "I wish I had enjoyed it more! I wish I had taken advantage of that time more." I have a daughter who is just about to finish college. I find myself kind of sad for her that it's over. I want to say to her, "You've only got a few more months. Enjoy it. Savor it."

I wonder why we wouldn't take that advice. Sometimes there is a lot of pressure that goes along with being young. There is the pressure to achieve, to perform. My son is a fifth grader who is trying to get into a private school for Junior High. You'd think he was trying to get into Stanford! Forms to fill out, personal references, a half day of testing, an interview. That's a lot of pressure! There is also pressure to perform in sports. I'm a Little League coach. As a coach I have to go to workshops just so I can remember to keep it fun.

It's not just kids. As young men and women enter into adulthood and begin their careers and perhaps get married and start having kids, life can become burdensome. We can think, "When I finally achieve the success I'm aiming for, when the kids are finally a little older, then I will enjoy life." But it rarely happens that way. Instead, we get old and we say, "I wish I had those years back. I'd enjoy them a lot more."

He also says to enjoy life now and remove vexation and pain because "childhood and the prime of life are fleeting." Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel, "Where did the time go?" And the older we get, the faster life seems to pass us by. A year used to seem like forever, now it goes by like one turn on a ferris wheel! So, he says, remove vexation, don't bother worrying about things you can't fix. Relax.

Look again at v. 9. He tells his son to “follow the impulses of your heart and the desire of your eyes.” You might be thinking that’s the last thing you would tell your son or daughter! I mean, that sounds like hedonism to me. But notice there is one qualification to this. He says, “Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.” Talk about spoiling my fun! But that’s not the point. The point is that true pleasure and enjoyment is found within the parameters of God’s will. The fact is, God is not out to spoil our fun, rather living within his parameters enhances our joy!

I remember when I discovered I was having more fun living as a Christian than I had as a pagan. I laughed more. I risked more. I smiled more. C.S. Lewis explains why this is: “A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. No, God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

So, he says to start now and rejoice. And as you rejoice, stay accountable to God. He’s the fuel of your happiness. This leads to the second thing he says.

II. Remember (12:1-7)

“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no delight in them;’” (12:1)

The second thing he says is to remember. Before it’s too late, remember your Creator. When it comes to your relationship with God, start now. Don’t put it off. Don’t wait until you’re old.

What does it mean to remember? Remembering God means more than just thinking about him every once in a while. Consider the story of Hannah. Hannah wanted more than anything else in the world to have a baby, but she was barren. She prayed and prayed, and finally the Scripture says, **“The Lord remembered her”** (1 Samuel 1:19). That doesn’t mean the Lord said, “Oh yeah...Hannah. I’d forgotten all about her. Now I remember. Yeah, Hannah.” No! What that means is that the Lord remembered her in the sense that he now acted on her behalf. To remember in the biblical sense is to pay attention with the intention of acting. To remember our Creator is to put him at the center of our life, to act on our faith, to trust him and follow him; to pay attention to him.

Notice we’re to do this “in the days of our youth.” This doesn’t mean we aren’t to do it later, but rather that we’re to start young; to start on time. In some ways, youth is the most challenging time to remember the Lord. Why is that? Maybe we’re too busy chasing our own dreams.

We’ve got too much to do than to make worship a regular part of our routine. Or maybe we’re too cool. Remembering God doesn’t fly too well at the party or in the board room. Or maybe we’re too proud. One of the most common flaws of the young is pride. We think we can do it all. We think we’re going to live forever. I think that’s why he says to remember *your Creator*. This is the only place in the whole book that he calls God our Creator. Why here? Because this is what the young need to remember. We’re not self-made. We’re created beings. We’re dependent beings. And not only that, we’re glorious beings, but our glory is found in relation to him.

Why is it so important to remember him now, when we’re young? Why not later? Because if we don’t start on time, we might never get there at all. It’s interesting, statistics show that 95 percent of all believers come to Christ before they’re 50 years old, and most of those before they’re 30. Do it now, or you might never do it at all. Or maybe we DO come to him in our old age, we have all those wasted years where we could have made a difference. When we’re old we just don’t have the energy and capacity to serve him like we want.

That’s the purpose of this very vivid description of old age that follows. Look what he says. Although there is some debate over what some of these images actually mean, for the most part it’s pretty clear. Verse 2 probably describes the psychological impact of old age. The darkening of the sun, moon and stars, and the clouds returning after rain describe discouragement and gloom. When we’re young, troubles and illnesses are setbacks, not disasters. You expect that the storm will end and the sky will clear. But in the final years of life, you know it’s not going to get any better. The clouds will gather again and time won’t heal, rather it will kill. A group of senior citizens were lounging on the patio of their retirement community. One of the men looked up and saw a large flock of birds overhead. He nudged his friend who had just dozed off, and said, “Frank, you’d better wake up and move around a little. Those buzzards are closing in a bit!”

Starting in v. 3 he likens the aging body to a decaying house:

The watchmen of the house tremble - The arms and hands that used to protect us begin to tremble in old age.

The mighty men stoop - The strong muscles of the legs that used to carry us weaken and sag at the knee. Someone said that you know you’re getting older when your knees buckle but your belt won’t!

The grinding ones stand idle, because they are few - our teeth fall out and we lose our ability to chew food.

Those who look through the windows grow dim - The eyes begin to lose their sight. We go around saying, “If only I could remember where I put those glasses.”

The doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low - The open doors of our ears begin to lose their hearing. The volume on the TV becomes so loud the neighbors complain!

One will arise at the sound of the bird - Even though you can't hear, the faintest chirping of a bird wakes you up in the morning. The older you get, the less you sleep.

All the daughters of song will sing softly - Though you wake early at the song of the bird, you doze off in the evening as the voice of the singers fade. The older I get, the less chance I have of getting through the 11:00 news!

Men are afraid of a high place and terror on the road - This describes the fear that many old people live with; the fear of heights and crowds. I've spoken with older folks in our church who are afraid to come to church because they might get knocked over in the crowded lobby.

The almond tree blossoms - You hair turns white! It's funny how many of these things we try to fix today. We dye our hair, fix our eyes with lasers, maybe a little cosmetic surgery. My wife warns me. She says, "As I get older, I'm going to cost more!"

The grasshopper drags himself along - In cold weather, grasshoppers literally drag themselves along. This is just a picture of how hard it is to get around. I used to run regularly, now I trot, and I get stiff.

The caperberry is ineffective - Back in those days the caperberry was commonly used as an aphrodisiac. The point is that your sexual desire fades. Thank God this one is just about last on the list!

Man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about on the street - This is a description of our funeral. The rest of the images all point to our death,

The silver cord is broken - The silver cord is the spinal column.

The golden bowl is crushed - The golden bowl may be a reference to the brain.

The pitcher by the well is shattered - The pitcher is our heart.

The wheel at the cistern is crushed - The wheel broken at the cistern may very well be the breaking down of the veins and arteries. Finally, our body returns to the dust and our spirit to God from whence they both came.

It's not a very nice picture of growing older. That's why he ends in v. 8, "**Vanity of vanities...all is vanity!**" I don't think very many people in their 80's or 90's would argue. I think of my wife's grandmother, living down in Southern California in a retirement home. She's 95 years old. She was married to the same man for 72 years, and she misses him. She can't see much, she can't hear much, she can't remember much, she can't get around much. When we talk to her she tells us that she prays each night that the Lord would just let her die in her sleep. Fortunately, she loves Christ, and has served him since she was young, but not every aged person can say that. And so, the writer is telling us, don't wait to get started until it's too late. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth!

But how do we do that? How do we ensure that we'll stay on track in our relationship with God? How do we keep from forgetting him? This leads to the third thing he tells us to do.

III. Revere (12:9-14)

"In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."

The third thing he tells us to do is to revere. That's what he means by fear God. Once again, this has been a repeated theme throughout this book. To fear God is to revere him. After everything is said and done, this is what we're to do. He says this "applies to every person." A better translation of that reads "this is the whole duty of man." The idea of fearing God is a difficult concept for us to comprehend. Most of us think of it in terms of abject terror, of running from God, of seeing him as a threat, but that is not the biblical meaning of the word.

Ray Stedman used an acrostic to make it easier for us to remember what fearing God means. First, "F" stands for faith in his existence. You cannot come to God unless you know he's there. Hebrews 11:6 says, "**He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him.**" There is where fear begins: faith that God exists. The whole of the created universe is shouting that at us. Our heart confirms it. The Word of God declares it. History confirms it. There is a world of evidence that God is there.

Then "E": experience of his grace. You never can properly fear God until you've learned that he is a God of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness. Until you've stood before him and felt your guilt, acknowledged it, and heard him say in your heart, "**There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,**" you'll never be able to fear God. One element of fear is the experience of the wonder of forgiveness.

That leads to the third element. "A": awe at the majesty, the wisdom and the wonder of God. What a Being he is! What a marvelous mind that can comprehend all the billions of pieces of information in this universe, that can hear every voice and relate to every person who has ever lived! What a marvelous God! Awe at the sense of his majesty, his unfailing wisdom and power, is part of fearing God.

The last letter, "R," stands for resolve. Resolve to do what he says, to obey his word, to **"keep his commandments,"** as the Teacher puts it here. Recognize that there is an accountability that you have to him; he will bring every act to judgment, even that which is hidden now.

This is where what the Teacher says in vv. 9-12 can help us. He's describing his own writing, contained here in the book of Ecclesiastes, but what he says really applies to the entirety of the Word of God. Notice he says in v. 11 these words are given by **"one Shepherd."** And who would that be? In Psalm 80:1 the psalmist prays, **"Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock..."** This is speaking of God, who shepherds us through his word.

It's in the Word of God that we find the commandments of God, the way our Shepherd wants us to live. Notice how the Teacher describes the purpose of these writings. They're designed to be like a goad; a goad was used to poke and prod an animal in the right direction. But it was also designed to be like well-driven nails, to be something firm and established, something that cannot be moved, something you could hold onto in times of trouble. That's how we need let God's word act in our lives, as both a goad that moves and corrects us, as well as well-driven nails that anchor us. What good is the Word of God unless we use it, and unless we allow it to change the way we live?

That's why he warns us in v. 12 about **"excessive devotion to books."** He's not against reading good books, but we can never let good books take the place of THE BOOK! There are so many Christian books out today, many of them outstanding, but they can take us away from the words of the Shepherd. We can get hooked on cheap Kool-Aid and never develop a taste for that which can really nourish us. I know this sounds very elementary, but let me encourage you to read the Bible. It's not always easy, is it? I struggle with it. But that's the only way to fear God AND keep his commandments.

CONCLUSION

How do we start on time in a spiritual sense? How can we keep from becoming old and having more regrets than rewards? Rejoice. Remember. Revere. When I get old, I want to say I did that!

Ben Patterson says that when life has whittled us down, when the joints have failed and the skin has wrinkled and the arteries have hardened, what's left of us is what we were all along, in our essence. I think of the true story of an old woman who was gradually losing her memory. Details began to blur. Throughout her life, though, she had cherished and depended on the Word of God, committing to memory many verses from her worn out King James Bible. Her favorite verse had always been 1 Timothy 1:12, **"For I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."** She was eventually confined to a bed in a nursing home. As her family visited her she would still quote verses of Scripture, especially 1 Timothy 1:12. But with the passing of time, even parts of this verse began to slip away.

"I know whom I have believed," she would say, "He is able...to keep...what I have committed to him."

Time passed. Her voice grew weaker, and the verse became even shorter. "What I have committed...to him," she would mutter.

As she was dying, her voice became so faint that even family members had to bend over to listen to the few whispered words on her lips. At the end there was only one word of her life verse left: "Him."

She whispered it again and again as she stood on the threshold of heaven. "Him...Him...Him..." It was all that was left. It was all that was needed. But if you want to end that way, you have to start now. You have to start on time.

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