

The Sum of it All (Ecclesiastes 12) 31 May'15

If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 12. We come to the very end of our series called "Life Under the Sun" and we have been learning and looking at what Solomon has been teaching us. I hope it has been a blessed journey for you as it has been for me.

There's a story told of two elderly ladies, who met up for the first time since their university days. It's been 40 years and one of the ladies said to the other, "You know you have always been very organised in school, I wonder if you go on, if you did go on to live a well-planned life". She said, "I did. I'm married four times." She said, "How is married four times a well-planned life?" Well, she said, "I'm married to a millionaire and then I'm married to an actor and then I'm married to a pastor and finally now I'm married to an undertaker." (Laughter in the congregation).

"All right, you are married four times to these different people, but how has it got anything to do with a well-planned life?" She said, "Well, you don't get it. It is like this: one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready and four to go." Well, she planned her life really well.

Timestamp 0:01:28.9

Now, I am not sure that could be said about Solomon. His life didn't turn out as he had planned. Now, Solomon's life had plenty of twists and turns. He started off really, really well. He started off asking for wisdom from God to rule the nation and he did well. But somewhere in the middle, he began to multiply to himself wives and concubines. He had a thousand women in his harem and because they worshipped other gods, his heart was also drawn to worship other gods. He lost his way, he lost his intimacy with God and he began to pursue the meaning of life in all the wrong places. He sought to have riches, he sought to have popularity, he sought to do or embark on great projects. He wanted women and wine and pleasures, he tried everything under the sun.

But when he got old, in the twilight of his life, he looked back and he said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. I've messed up." And so, with probably deep regret and with tears in his eyes, he writes for us Ecclesiastes so that we who are starting out in life or we who are mid-way in life may learn to repent and learn from Solomon. In effect, Solomon is saying, if you want to have a meaningful life under the sun, you've got to get above the sun, you've got to know God above the sun and that has been his consistent teaching throughout this book.

We come now to the last chapter, and in the last chapter he gives us a certain preamble, he gives us a certain, well, closing words. He says:

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.
(Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 ESV)

Solomon says to us that he has painstakingly crafted this letter with choice words and proverbs. I actually, after reading this verse, feel that I have not done Solomon justice. As I've said to you, Ecclesiastes has been a very challenging journey for myself. It's been enriching but it's been challenging. I'm not sure if I've delivered the full intent of what Solomon had in mind when he wrote Ecclesiastes. My encouragement is maybe after this series, you have gotten a better understanding, given you some frameworks and I would encourage you, somewhere in your journey of life, come back to this book, read it and let Solomon speak to you again. But that has been Solomon's intent. He says:

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

(Ecclesiastes 12:11-12 ESV)

"The words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings." He says the words given to us from God, from that one Shepherd, from God, they are good for us. He likens it to a goad. You say, what is a goad? A goad is a sharp stick that you use to poke and to pierce and to provoke a cattle if the cattle doesn't want to move. Instead of kicking it because you may hurt your leg, you take this goad, you poke it and maybe it will move a little.

He says the Word of God is like a goad to provoke us, to move... You see many of us, we are just too sloppy, lazy. We've lots of inertia to obey and to take steps. The words are given to provoke us to take positive steps towards God. At the very same time, the Word of God are like nails firmly fixed. If the first brings about movement, the second brings about stability. The Word of God urges us to move where we should move, and urges us to stand where we should stand. Solomon says these are for your benefit and...

Timestamp 0:05:29.0

"My son, beware of anything beyond this. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." (Ecc 12:12) This is the student's favourite verse. "Mum, did you hear Solomon? Much study is a weariness of the flesh." That's not what he meant, of course. Solomon is saying these are God's Word; study it beyond which human philosophies are always going to be aplenty. But if you study these things apart from God's Word, they will only wear you down.

So, at the end of it all, Solomon says, I've spoken to you much and I now come to the concluding chapter in Ecclesiastes 12, and there are some takeaways for you. In the first 11 chapters, he gives lots of pictures, proverbs. That's why it's so difficult to interpret. But in the very last chapter, he gives plain words; it's as clear as it comes. I suspect most of us would forget chapters 1 to 11, most of us. But if there's something that you need to remember, remember chapter 12, the three very simple conclusions or action points we can take. And I pray, as a young person, as someone who has gotten on in life, you would have come not just to gather knowledge but you'll make changes. So what is Solomon going to say in his last words? Number 1, he says:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth...
(Ecclesiastes 12:1 ESV)

At the end of it all, at the end of this journey that I've been on, pursuing pleasure and power and riches and... I've been there, done that and let me tell you something: at the end of it all, remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

Now I'm a tremendous artist so let me demonstrate to you my artistic skills. Of course I'm joking. God created all of us with a heart. At some point in your life, you will sense that this heart is empty and aching and longing. Now when you're young, you probably won't. If you're five, six, seven years' old, you probably think only about what's up for breakfast, am I going to play in the playground and that's all you care. Maybe for guys, even when you're 30 years' old, you'll still think about that. But there will be a time in your life where you really ask and you are questioning yourself what is life all about. Why am I longing, aching, dissatisfied within my soul? There will come a point of time when your heart longs and it is at that point of time that you start to pursue a satisfaction for your heart.

So, you start to look for money. A lot of us, we start life just wanting to earn a living. But soon after, you say maybe this is the answer to life. So, you pursue money. Maybe some of us, we will pursue power, influence, popularity or some of us, we may pursue relationships, people, wives, spouse. We think that that will satisfy us, or maybe

children or maybe knowledge, or what is very common today – pleasure. See, we all chase these things and these are what Solomon himself had been telling us he's been chasing. We chase these things. Why? So that somehow we may stuff them into our heart and we will, at last, feel at peace and satisfied.

Solomon says it never works. You say, "How do you know it never works?" "I have had all these," Solomon says, "but they are vanity of vanities. Somehow they just get lost in the black hole of my heart." And so Solomon says, there is a God out there who is your Creator, who made you and for whom you are made for. And God wants to fill your heart. You are cut off from God because of your sin, but God in His mercy wants to return, come back into your life. That's why He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, pay for your sins, to bring you back to Himself.

Timestamp 0:10:13.1

So He, above the sun, is reaching out to you under the sun. And when you repent of your sins, believe and receive God into your life, you obey the Gospel. When God fills your heart, then you begin to have proper relationships with money, with power, with relationships, children, knowledge, and so on and so forth. You see, things like this in and of itself, they are not wrong. When you have the right relationship with God, these things, in its right place, are good and proper. But it is destructive if you try to use these things to fill your heart that only God can fill.

So the summary of it all, Solomon says is: remember your Creator. Is this your life? Is He the centre of it all? Are you rich and successful but you do not know God? You've totally missed the point. So remember: Let Him be the centre of your life. And he says:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";
(Ecclesiastes 12:1 ESV)

Do this when you're young. Do this when you can, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them." There will come a point of time where even if you want to, you can't. And now, Solomon gives us a long description of that kind of a time. If you read it, it's very interesting; it's very poetic; it's very graphical. He says:

2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,

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,
4 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 all the daughters of song are brought low-
5 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-
6 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,
(Ecclesiastes 12:2-6 ESV)

You say, "What is Solomon saying?" It seems like he's describing a house that is falling, isn't it? A house that is decaying. But Solomon is really using the imagery of the household to talk about ageing in your life. It's a very beautiful picture.

He starts by saying, "The sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened." (Ecc 12:2) I suppose this is Solomon saying when you get old, you're not as sharp as you used to be. You are a bit slower. You think a little bit off pace than you were before. Your memory fails. You know, "Aiyah, lao liao, lao liao, lao liao. Aiyah, I forget..." You know how it is in Singapore, right? We all say, "Lao liao, lao liao." We all know that when we get older, we are less sharp, we are slower. ("Aiyah" is a colloquial exclamation to express consternation, despair or exasperation. "Lao liao" in the Hokkien dialect literally means "old already".)

I recall a story about three elderly ladies who were complaining about their memory loss. The first one says, "You know I am so forgetful nowadays. There was once, I was standing on the staircase and I forgot if I'm going up or coming down." Another lady says, "No, that's not as bad as mine. I was sitting on my bed one day and I can't remember whether I'm waking up or falling asleep. The third one says, "Ah, you guys, I'm the lucky one. I don't have a memory loss problem. Touch wood, touch wood." And she knocked on the table and then she suddenly looked startled and says, "Who knocked?" (laughter in congregation). Memory loss is a problem for the aged.

And Solomon says this is the kind of a picture, not only that, "in a day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent" (Ecc 12:3). Here, "the keepers of the house" probably refers to the arms, the hands and "the strong men" refers to the knees, the legs. You know how when you get old, your knees are bent?

And they say in old age, your knees buckle but your belt won't buckle (laughter in congregation). That's what happens in old age.

The grinders cease (Ecc 12:3). What is "grinders cease"? Hokkien, you call it...? "Boh gay" (literally means no teeth) – when your teeth are falling. Now, in those days, you probably don't have dentures – it's very obvious. But grinders cease.

And those who look through the windows are dimmed (Ecc 12:3). It refers probably to your eyesight. So when you're old, you can't see well, you have cataract, glaucoma, you have all kinds of problem. Today, we've surgery, LASIK, we have glasses; but people of those times, they suffer with dimming of their eyesight.

Timestamp 0:15:13.7

The sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird (Ecc 12:4). They become "chao hee lang" (means hard of hearing in Hokkien). When you're old, you're deaf, not deaf, your hearing is impaired. And not only that, the strange thing is even though your hearing is impaired, you're easily woken up. My son last night... my younger one was screaming but the older one was sleeping still like a pig. He has no clue that chaos is around him. But an elderly person, any little thing will (cause him to) wake up (and ask) "Eh, 'si mi dai zi'? What's wrong?" That's life. That's what aging does to you, and "all the daughters of song are brought low" (Ecc 12:4) – can't hear very well.

They are also afraid of what is high, and terrors are in the way (Ecc 12:5). They don't like to climb, they don't like to stay high floors, isn't it? If your mother or father or your grandparents stay with you, you realize they want to stay at level one, not level three. It's a chore and it's scary to go heights. And they don't like to go out; terrors are in the way. "Aiyoo, I scared knocked down." (This means afraid of being knocked down by a vehicle in colloquial speak.) Reflexes are just a little bit slower; they're less dexterous, they're more clumsy. We will all go through this.

The almond tree blossoms (Ecc 12:5) – this refers to your hair. Almond tree... white flowers (laughter in congregation). And so a lot of you may have almond flowers on your head. It's a blossoming time. Don't worry about it, all right? So your almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails (Ecc 12:5). Well, what is this all about? Somebody paraphrases it this way: You know you're old when daily routine becomes a... gives you sore and when sex becomes a chore. This is probably what Solomon is saying.

So all that happens because a man is dying, is ageing. He's going to his eternal home; the mourners go about the streets (Ecc 12:5) before the silver cord is snapped (Ecc 12:6). Fanny Crosby has a song that has the phrase "silver cord".

But the point of it all is: Solomon is saying, remember your Creator in the days of your youth before these things come. These are markers. So if you have any of these things, you better remember your Creator sooner than later. These are messengers from God to say, "Remember me," before the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7 ESV)

So what do you do? Remember your Creator. So this morning, very simple application: Is God the centre of your life? To remember is not just to think about; to remember means to regard him as central. Let him be God in your life. This is a practical application. Is God the centre of your life, or are you living for these dysfunctional idols (referring to pursuits such as money, power that pastor discussed earlier) that will never deliver you? Is God the centre of it all?

The second thing Solomon is going to say is something that he has repeated often throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. And it is in verse 13 when he says:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13 ESV)

"The end of the matter; all has been heard." You've heard me say this. You've heard me reason with you. What is the summary of it all? Number 1: Remember your Creator (Ecc 12:1). Number 2: Fear God (Ecc 12:13). This idea of fearing God, this teaching, this philosophy, this doctrine of fearing God is what Solomon has been labouring. Right in the beginning in chapter 3, he says:

God has done it, so that people fear before him. (Ecclesiastes 3:14 ESV)

Done what? If you recall, I'm going to bring... If you're new with us, you may want to find that out in our sermons online. But God, in essence, has created a kind of a mystery box. Remember the breakout, the escape game that we may have today? We're all trapped in this room, we're trapped in the seasons of time – a season for

weeping, a season for the joy, a season for planting, a season for taking out, a season to be born, a season to die (Ecc 3:1-9). And we're all trapped in these boundaries of time; we are uncertain; we are not in control of life.

So why does God put us in such a situation? So that here we would see that there's something that endures in our hearts forever, to see that there's something God is doing behind the scenes that will be beautiful, to see that we cannot really find out, to see that there is God, to see that there's a cry for justice, to see that we all long this eternity, so that in all these things, we are forced to look up and to say, "Surely, there is God," that we may then fear Him.

Timestamp 0:20:02.3

So right in the beginning in chapter 3, the fear of God. Chapter 5, there is again the teaching of the fear of God. In chapter 5, he says:

For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

(Ecclesiastes 5:7 ESV)

There is vanity, but God is the one you must fear. And Solomon is saying, when you go to the house of worship, you must have a God-fearing attitude and heart because a fool goes to worship with no fear. He does not prepare himself, he does not listen to God's Word and he will not go forth to do God's Word. Fear of God is crucial in public worship. And then in chapter 7, he tells us:

Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

... for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

(Ecclesiastes 7:16-18 ESV)

The way to approach God is to fear Him, not the way of self-righteousness, neither the way of open rebellion, but the only way a man can approach God is when we fear Him. And then in chapter 8, he tells us:

... I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.

But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

(Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 ESV)

So right here in chapter 8, Solomon says and talks about the importance of fearing God. So having looked at chapter 3, 5, 7, 8, right at the end, he says this is what I want to remind you of: Fear Him (Ecc 12:13). This fear of God is not just something you learn from Solomon in Ecclesiastes. You hear that also from Job and I will not labour that except to show you 28:28 Job.

And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'
(Job 28:28 ESV)

You also hear it from Solomon in Proverbs 1:7.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)

In fact, it is in many, many passages in the Old Testament. Now, some of you will say "Ah pastor, you see, the fear of God is very important in the Old Testament but New Testament, not so important ah. New Testament, we just need to love God, no need to fear God. After all, pastor, you never read ah? 1 John chapter 4: Perfect love casts out fear." Wah, very good ah, you can quote that verse. But the problem with that is: perfect love casts out fear, you must ask what kind of a fear.

The context of 1 John chapter 4 is perfect love casts out the fear of judgment. Why? Because God is now your God, you have received Jesus, you do not need to fear the judgment unto death. But nowhere in the Bible does it say we do not need to fear God anymore.

In fact, the fear of God is not just taught in the Old Testament, it's taught in the New Testament. It's prominent, again many places, but let me just show you some. The early church, (in) the book of Acts, they grew, they multiplied, they were blessed, they were use of the Lord. Why? Because they were walking in the fear of the Lord.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.
(Acts 9:31 ESV)

Hebrews, the book that we would enter, we'll study in the month of July onwards, tells us that we worship God with reverence and awe.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

(Heb 12:28-29 ESV)

Yes, I do not come to church fearing that if I sing wrongly, God will send me to hell. No, He won't. If I believe in Jesus, I'm not going to hell. But I do come to God with fear and reverence because He is holy and I do not want to displease Him with my sins. I'm not going to hell; I'm never going to lose my salvation if I'm truly in Jesus. But I got to recognise He is God, He is holy and I do not want to trifle with sin. So serve God with reverence and awe.

Let me ask you, when you go to heaven, what will heaven be like? What would you do? Do you know what you'd do in heaven? All of us will pick up a harp and... (pastor made sounds of one strumming a harp and said 六指琴魔 in the Cantonese dialect. She's a character in a Hong Kong kungfu novel and TV serial). Is that what we're going to do? Well, maybe, I do not know.

Some of us think that we may go to heaven and we will grow wings and we'll fly. That I don't think will happen. Or some of us may think that when we go to heaven, we will see God and we say, "Hi pal, how good to see you, man!" And we say, let's drink a beer, let's talk together. Wah... and we have peanuts and Tiger Beer together. Is that the way we would have a relationship with God? I strongly doubt so. Now, let me ask you, in heaven, will you fear God? In heaven, will you fear God? Let me tell you, Revelation 15 says:

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name...

(Revelation 15:3-4 ESV)

We even sing this as a song: "Who will not fear You?" I mean in heaven, there's no judgment, you're not going to hell, you're not going to be kicked out of the celestial kingdom anytime. But you will still fear the Lord. Why? Because He is God and you are not. Yes, we are cleansed, we are forgiven, we are graced, but He is God and I am not.

Timestamp 0:25:41.8

The fear of God is such a prominent teaching of Scripture we just somehow miss it. The love for God... the Bible tells us to love God how many times? According to someone's research, 88 times. Now, of course, I didn't research this. This will... very painful, go through the entire Bible just to look for "love God", "love God". Wah, it's not easy. But this scholar says the occurrence of "love God" is 88 times – fairly balanced in the OT and NT. Another important attribute that Christians should have is to trust God and that again, is aplenty: 91 times – 82 times in the OT, 9 times in the NT.

Let me ask you: for fear God, how many would it be? The Bible tells us to fear God 278 times – more than love and trust added together. Now I'm not saying, just like that means it's... necessarily means it's more important... or anything. But certainly, we must not neglect this: 235 times in the Old Testament but the New Testament is not exempt – 43 times, same number as "love God". And so, it is absolutely tragic when in today's church and Christians, we have this mind-set that we can be casual and flippant with God because all we need to know is He loves me and I love Him.

But the more basic relationship condition is that of the fear of the Lord. So you say, "Pastor, you've said so much about fear God, it's so important, you find it all over the Bible but I still don't understand what it means." Isn't it? I mean, I struggle with this; I actually have to embark on a deliberate study to find out what the fear of God is. It's easy to talk about it but what does it really, really mean? Why do you and I not fear God? Why? Why is it that in church today, generally we don't fear God? And I'm talking about the larger church.

Is the fear of God something scary like, if I do something wrong, He's going to whack my head? You know when you go to the amusement centre, time zone, the whack-a-mole? Is that the fear of God? Or maybe God is in a bad mood and He's going to take it out on me. What is this fear about and why should I fear? I think I can show you many, many, many verses, but I just want to share with you what I learned from Jerry Bridges. Important ah, not Jeff Bridges. Jeff Bridges, actor; this one, preacher. Okay?

Jerry Bridges, famous for several books he has written and I read an article... Just to make things easy, I read an article, which contains an interview that he has had about the fear of God. And for those who are on our email list, I'll send you the link so that you can read the full article if you'd like to. But in this article, when he explains and when he answers questions about the fear of God, I felt it helpful to give you some excerpts. It's going to be quite long, in a sense, because they are words

here, but if you're serious about God, if you're serious about Solomon's teaching, then you've got to know what the fear of God is. So allow me to read and I hope it would be helpful to you.

Timestamp 0:29:29.0

Number 1 question is: Why is it that we don't fear God? What's the basic problem in the church? What's the basic problem in your mind, in my mind that makes us not fear God as we should? He tells us: