

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to assure you that the title of this message, "Before It's Too Late," has nothing to do with last-minute Christmas shopping! If you are like me, you have seen to it that your wife has taken care of that already. The title refers to the yearning hope of every one of us here this morning, young and old alike, that we might fulfill our dreams, that we might realize the possibilities of our lives and be wholly and truly what we were made to be. This is an especially appropriate theme to consider at Christmastime, when everyone is singing of that silent night, when joy broke through to an anguished world, when angels announced to the shepherds, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior," a Redeemer, a Recoverer, a way back from a life already gone astray.

That is what the Searcher of Israel is concerned with in the book of Ecclesiastes, that we might find our way out of the tragedies, the troubles, the difficulties and the infirmities of life before it is too late; that we would find the secret of living. So he begins this last chapter of the book with a word to youth:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; {Ecc 12:1 RSV}

It is clear that this is an appeal to young people to think carefully about their Creator, not merely to remember that he is there. The thought is: recall God's presence daily; live in a relationship with him; seek to discover the greatness and glories of God while you are still young, before it is too late. We will come back to that thought, but first I would like to read the verses that follow, because these define what the Searcher has already suggested is the reason for thinking about and relating to God while one is still young. That is, "evil days are coming."

Those evil days are described in Verses 2-8, in a vivid and beautiful imagery which describes the aging process, the approach and decrepitude of old age.

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, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that 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 voice of a bird, and all 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 falls; before man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about in the streets; before the silver cord is already snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken 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. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. {Ecc 12:2-8 RSV}

With that marvelous poetry the Searcher describes the awful weaknesses of old age and the actual experience of death. In view of the fact that this is where life is headed for all of us, he admonishes us "remember your Creator in the days of your youth."

I would like to go through these verses again and show you exactly what is being described. Most of the commentators agree that the words, "before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain," refer to the fading of the mental powers of an individual as he grows older. How true this is! When you are young, life seems to stretch endlessly before you; it seems that you will never approach old age. But as you live day by day, life seems to speed by rapidly; it is very brief. You suddenly find yourself exhibiting the appearances and experiences of age. As someone has well said, "Just about the time your face clears up, your mind begins to go!" This is how brief life seems to be.

These mental faculties are described in terms of light. The mind, with its powers of reasoning, of memory and of imagination begins to fade, like the fading of the light of the sun. The reasoning power of the brain, perhaps the greatest gift that God has given to us, begins to lose its ability, and the memory fades. That is one of the first marks of old age. There are three things that indicate the onset of old age: the first is losing the memory, and I can't remember the other two! That is what this verse describes, the fading of the memory, the fading of the imagination, like the stars which fade at the approaching dawn.

"The clouds returning after the rain," is a reference to a kind of second childhood, of senility, which comes on in old age. As a child, one's life revolves around three simple things: eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom. When one gets old that same cycle returns again.

Then *Qoheleth* speaks of "the day when the keepers of the house tremble." That refers to the arms and the hands, by which we defend ourselves if we are attacked; "the keepers of the house," which are so useful in maintaining the body, which begin to shake and tremble when old age comes on.

"The strong men are bent," is a reference to the legs, the strongest parts of the body, which start to shake and tremble in old age. Old people take very short steps; they can hardly walk. It has been well said that a sign of the onset of old age is when your knees buckle but your belt won't! Some of us are beginning to recognize those signs.

Then he speaks of "the grinders ceasing because they are few." That needs no interpreting for those who have lost many of their grinders through tooth decay. Mealtimes are prolonged because it takes so long to get particles of food lined up with the few remaining grinders!

"Those that look through the windows are dimmed" is clearly referring to the fading of the eyesight as old age approaches. Cataracts form; various eye problems develop. Almost all of us certainly lose the ability to read close-up. We have to hold things increasingly at arm's length to see what they are.

"The doors on the street are shut," is a vivid picture of what happens when the teeth fall. The doors of the face, the lips, fall in, one begins to mouth everything. When that happens "the doors to the street" are obviously shut.

"When the sound of the grinding is low" is thought by some of the commentators to refer to the digestive system. In view of the fact that the grinders have earlier been identified as the teeth, however, it seems to me that this is probably a reference to the fact that when people lose their teeth -- this, of course, was written before the day of dentures -- the old have to resort to gumming their food. That does not result in a lot of noise. It is hard to chew Grape Nuts when you do not have any teeth!

Then, "one rises up at the voice of a bird." I have noticed that in the mornings any sound will waken me. This is characteristic of the aged, who are easily awakened in the morning. Even the sound of chirping of birds outside the window awakens them.

Yet, at the same time, "all the daughters of song are brought low." There is a reference to the increasing deafness of old age. "The daughters of song," those parts of our body by which we hear the song, are brought low; they lose their powers. One of the signs of old age is that everybody seems to talk in a much lower tone of voice than they used to; people mumble all the time, as "the daughters of song are brought low."

Then there is a word on the increasing fears brought on by old age: "They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way." Older people fear almost every step. They are afraid of the cracks in the sidewalk; they are afraid to mount stairs; they are afraid of "what is high." Terrors increase as they go about the streets. Older people tend to stay in. They do not even want to drive at night because they are afraid of things "in the way."

"The almond tree blossoms" is clearly a reference to the hair, which turns white as old age approaches. That is one of the first signs of old age. Like the white blossoms of the almond tree, one begins to take on a quite different look as age comes on.

I never understood until recent days what was meant by "the grasshopper drags itself along." When I wake up in the morning I find myself stiff, and having difficulty walking at times. This increases as one grows old. It results in the infirm and feeble steps of the very aged. "The grasshopper drags itself along."

And finally "desire fails." That is a reference to sexual desire. It may be a great comfort to many of you to see that that is last on the list; it is the last thing to go, according to this.

I want to acknowledge the fact that modern technology has helped solve many of these problems. Wigs can be bought when the hair falls out, or dentures when the teeth fall out. Glasses, contact lenses, even glass eyes, help with eye problems. Artificial legs, arms and hands, etc., can be fitted, and these are great devices. With all the help that modern technology avails, what a sight it must be when some people get ready for bed! It must be like watching the demolition of a house! We have not moved very far in reality from the days of the Searcher, even though we have devised many ways to disguise aging. Yet even with all these helps in this modern age, what a revelation this is of the up-to-dateness of Scripture.

The Searcher goes on to describe the ways death can occur. The end of life is death. In frankness and openness the Scripture faces the fact that "Man goes to his eternal home." Despite the many passages in this book in which the writer seems to be preoccupied with the grave -- he sees it as the end of all the good things made available to us "under the sun," i.e., in this life -- nevertheless there are several references in the book to the fact that life does not end with death; that human existence goes on beyond death. Here is one of them: "Man goes to his eternal home." The grave is not the end; there is life, there is existence, beyond; this verse recognizes that.

Meanwhile, "the mourners go about the streets." This, the Searcher says, is a result of various forms which death can take. First,

"the silver cord is snapped." That seems clearly to be a reference to the spinal cord, that great nerve that runs up and down our backs, protected by our spines. If it is damaged, broken, or diseased, life can suddenly end, as we well know today.

Then, "the golden bowl is broken." That is a reference to the cranium, the skull. A blow to the head, damage to the brain, whatever, may destroy that very essential part of our physical existence and suddenly terminate life.

"The pitcher is broken at the fountain" is a reference to the heart. Heart disease, cardiac arrest, is the most frequent cause of death in the United States today. The heart can suddenly stop; the fountain which continually pours blood through our bodies is broken and ceases its function.

"The wheel broken at the cistern" is a reference to the circulation of the blood. The continual wheel of life which keeps us alive can stop, through degeneration of the veins, through hardening of the arteries; or a blood clot can arrest it and suddenly death occurs.

The result is that the body crumbles: "Dust returns to the earth as it was, but the spirit" -- the part of our humanity which differentiates us from the animals, that part which seeks after eternity, which longs after something beyond life, that part which is restless and empty within us when we have not found the key to life -- "the spirit returns to God who gave it." What a vivid description this is of the ending of life!

The Searcher's conclusion, then, as we have been seeing all through the book, is that life "under the sun," life lived without having discovered the reason for living, is vanity, emptiness, futility. The greatest futility of all is a life that has not found the reason for living. What a waste to live your life and never discover why you are here! What a waste, to die without learning the secret of true existence! That is the Searcher's conclusion. He began the book with it, in Verse 2, and ends here with the same words, in Verse 8 of Chapter 12. He has searched through all of life and reached the same conclusion.

It is clear from this suggestion (to return to Verse 1 of this chapter) that it is hard to find the answer to life when you're old. Not many people do. There are stories (thank God for every one of them) of people turning to God in their last moments of life. Many of us, perhaps, know someone who did that in a real and genuine way. Yet relatively speaking, that is not a frequent occurrence.

Statistics indicate that most people who come to Christ come to him while they are relatively young, under 50 years of age. Ninety-five per cent of all believers come to Christ before they are 50 years old, and most of those before they are 30. Youth is the time to find God. That is what the *Qoheleth* tells us: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth."

Remembering God does not mean merely thinking about him once in awhile. It means to relate to him, walk with him, discover him, learn to know God while you are young. There are two excellent reasons given for this. First, because "evil days are coming." Old age is setting in, and one of the characteristics of old age is that we lose our ability to change and to learn new things; we are subjected to greater pressures. Those days become "evil days."

I know that there probably has never been a time when youth has been subjected to more temptations and pressures to wrong living than today. Temptation is all around us, it is subtle, it is powerful. The appeal of the world and the flesh is constantly with us, turning thousands of young people away from the truth of God. But I want to tell you this, young people: it will get worse the older you grow. The pressures to conform are greater as you move out into life and business; when you become parents when you become breadwinners and have to establish homes, the pressures to conform, to fit in with all the ways of the world, will be far more intense than they are when you are still in high school or college, or even younger. Evil pressures increase; that is one good reason to remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

Then, secondly, your motivations are highest now. The Searcher says there are coming days "when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" That is, when you will say, "I'm not motivated at all." One of the signs of age is its unwillingness to change, its resistance to new ideas. I have oftentimes observed the tragedy of people who have acknowledged the fact that they had missed the secret of life but they were unwilling to change simply because it was so hard to do so when they were old. This is why the Searcher exhorts young people, "Learn about God now; open your heart to God; seek the wisdom of God now. Learn the Scriptures now, when you are young, while motivation is high and evil pressures are less, and you can discover the secret of living while you are still young."

We have a wonderful example of this in our Lord Jesus. He grew up in a godly home, exposed to the truth of the Scripture, involved with the work of his father in the carpenter's shop. The only thing that is recorded of him in those days is given in the words, "He grew in favor with God and with man." He put God first in his life. He understood that there is the key to life: the secret of learning how to handle all the problems and pressures of life is that you are in relationship and in touch with the Living God who is at work in the affairs of men. Jesus saturated himself with the Scriptures. He could quote them from memory at any time in his ministry because his mind was so filled with what God had said. And he understood these marvelous words. He had such wisdom that when he was only twelve years old he astonished the doctors in the temple by the wisdom which he manifested, asking them penetrating questions they could not answer. Then he went back with his mother and father to finish his boyhood in

that home in Nazareth, having "remembered his Creator in the days of his youth."

The last five verses of this book are an epilogue. The Searcher takes us back over the entire book and reminds us of the careful search he made to come to his conclusion. Verses 9-10:

Besides being wise, the Preacher [the Searcher] also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging proverbs with great care. The Searcher sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. {Eccl 12:9-10 RSV}

In this rather revealing verse he reminds us how carefully he has recorded what is in the pages of this book. First, he himself learned to be wise. The only source of that wisdom, he tells us, was the Word of God, so he sought through the Scriptures, learned them and then taught the people.

This knowledge of the Scriptures enabled the Searcher to teach with great power and influence, but only after careful preparation. Notice what he did: "He arranged these proverbs with great care." We have noted throughout this book the many proverbs he uses to illustrate the truth he was setting forth. They were not lightly chosen. We must take them seriously. They are not mere one-liners, meant to amuse. They are carefully chosen and carefully arranged to illustrate what he had to say.

More than that he sought for arresting, accurate words by which he could express this wisdom. I am going to preach on this verse to preachers. This is a great way to help them understand that what is necessary in preparation for public ministry is not only an understanding of the subject, but a thinking through of how to say it in such a way that people will listen. That is what the Searcher did.

In Verses 11-12 he underscores the value of this Scripture:

The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings which 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. {Eccl 12:11-12 RSV}

All you college students home for Christmas can say "Amen!" to that. "Much study is a weariness of the flesh." But notice how he describes the value of Scripture: it is like a "goad." It prods you and pokes you; you cannot get it out of your mind. It makes you go where you would not ordinarily go; it delivers you by prodding you along.

I suspect many of you have discovered that Scripture is like that. I remember one instance of a man who was in the grip of a terrible depression for more than a year. It had destroyed his family and his marriage; he had lost his job and could not function. But he was delivered out of that by daily meditating on a simple statement he found in Scripture, the only Scripture he could believe at the time, the words of Jesus, "Not my will but thine be done," {Luke 22:42}. Meditating on that day-after-day prodded him, goaded him and urged him to think about his life in those terms. He was brought out of his depression within a relatively short time and never returned to it again. That is how Scripture delivers.

Scripture is also a "nail (an anchor) firmly fixed." You can hang on to it and hold fast by it in times of danger and temptation. Once in my own life when I was severely troubled of heart and deeply disturbed so that I could not even eat, one phrase from the lips of Jesus came into my mind again and again. It was the phrase in the 14th chapter of John, where Jesus said to his troubled disciples, "Let not your heart be troubled," {John 14:1a}. I was especially gripped by those two words, "Let not." They said to me that a troubled heart in the believer is subject to the will of that believer. He can let his heart be troubled or he can let it not be troubled. The ground for letting it not be troubled is in the words that immediately follow: Jesus said, "You believe in God, believe also in me," {John 14:1b}. Again and again he said, "Let not your heart be troubled, for I am with you." When the realization struck me that my Living Lord was there, with wisdom and power to handle the situation, I felt the lifting of my heart's load. I was free to let not my heart be troubled. That is the power of Scripture.

Why does it have this unique power? More than any other book it has this ability. The reason, according to Verse 11, is because, "the collected sayings are given by one Shepherd." These are inspired, God-breathed words. The heart of God is the heart of a shepherd; he sees us as wandering sheep in need of a shepherd's care. The fact that the Lord is our shepherd is probably the reason why the shepherds of Bethlehem were chosen to be the first men to hear the wonderful words of the angels. "This day is born to you in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord," {Luke 2:11 RSV}. They would understand that, as Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way," {Isa 53:6a}. But in the hope that was awakened on that Christmas morning there was the realization that the One who was born in the manger was the One of whom it was said, "the Lord shall lay upon him the iniquities of us all," {cf, Isa 53:6b}. That is where hope comes in life.

"Do not go beyond that," the Searcher says. This is the word of wisdom to scholars and searchers for knowledge: "Of making many books there is no end." You can read yourself to death; you can study yourself to death. As I have pointed out many times,

Scripture is not saying that that is wrong; it is right to read and search and know and learn. But beware of letting this take you beyond the simple fact that this book so clearly declares, that God is the secret of life, that he is the answer to the reason for existence. Until we discover him, study and books will never be of any continuing value to us.

This is clearly and finally stated in the two closing verses of the book:

The end of the matter [the sum of it all]: all has been heard. [Here it is] Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. {Ecc 12:13 RSV}

I hope you will remove the word "duty" from your version. It is not in the Hebrew, although, unfortunately, every version seems to translate it that way. It is really this statement:

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the *wholeness* of man.

That is the secret of wholeness. To "Fear God, and keep his commandments" is to learn to be and to discover the secret of being a whole person. Who does not want that? We all want to be whole persons. Not broken, fragmented, easily upset, erratic, going off in all directions at once, but stable, controlled, balanced. Whole people. Here is the secret of it. This is what we are to learn when we are young: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," before all the pressures come upon you. This is the secret of wholeness: "Fear God, and keep his commandments."

Everything hangs upon that word, "Fear God." I know that this is a difficult word 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 never the biblical meaning of the word. I have tried to put it in the form of an acrostic to make it easier for us to remember what the elements of fearing God include.

First, "F" stands for faith in his existence. You cannot come to God unless you know he is 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. All the inner responses of our heart are confirming it. The Word of God declares it. History confirms it. There is a world of evidence that God is there. Francis Schaeffer says that this is the great and first truth of the gospel -- *The God Who Is There*.

Then "E": experience of his grace. You never can properly fear God until you have learned what kind of a God he is. He is a God of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness. Until you have stood before him and felt your guilt, acknowledged it, known you were wrong and corrupt, and heard him say in your inner heart, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" {John 8:11 KJV}, you will never be able to properly fear God. One element of fear is the experience of the wonder of forgiveness, that God forgives and sends you out again with a whole new purpose and a new resource available.

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 and hold them continually before him, 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 comprehensiveness, 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 Searcher puts it here. There are only two commandments; Jesus himself said that. All the law and the writings can be reduced to two simple things: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind," {Matt 22:37 RSV}. That is in response to his love already shown to you; love him because he first loved you. And two, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's it. As Micah put it, "What does God require of man, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before his God," {cf, Mic 6:8}. There it is: to obey him, to follow him, to keep the commandments. So this is what it means to fear God:

Faith
Experience
Awe
Resolve

One help to that is to remember, as the Searcher concludes, that nothing can be hid from his eyes:

**God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
{Ecc 12:14 RSV}**

We can't hide from God. He is evident in all our life. He knows everything that goes on; he knows every thought of the heart, every word of the mouth. He knows the motives that we seek to hide from others. He sees the duplicity, the deception, the lovelessness. He has made provision for it all; nothing can be hid. Everything is going to come out in the open at last. All the illusions by which we seek to convince ourselves that things are not the way the Bible says they are, will be stripped away and

we will see ourselves as he sees us; and there will not be a voice lifted to challenge the righteousness of his judgment.

Because of that the *Qoheleth* exhorts us and sets before us the wonder and the glory of our God and says, "Fear God." Have faith in his existence; experience his grace; stand in awe of his Person; and resolve to obey him. That is what fearing God means. That is the secret to life; that is the secret of the wholeness of man.

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