

Ecclesiastes 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 12 The grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound 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 fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.

Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. 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. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

[1 : 30] 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. The end of the matter.

All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Ecclesiastes chapter 12 concludes the book, returning to the theme of death that the preacher has explored throughout it. In the previous chapter, in verse 8, he had written, The counsel given here is given to the youth, to the person who still has many years ahead of them.

This clearly continues the thread of the immediately preceding two verses. Days of darkness of the closing shadows of old age are about to come, and before that time, the young man should rejoice as he can.

These verses, however, present the present duty of the young man against the backdrop of those days of darkness that await. These richly poetic verses begin with a charge to remember your creator, and end with a reminder that the spirit will return to God who gave it.

[3 : 05] The young man ought to enjoy his youth, but as a gift of God, in light of the fact that it is temporary and fleeting, it is still vapour. Indeed, the proper enjoyment of his youth can be a way in which he remembers his creator, a conscious appreciation of the goodness of the creator in his gifts.

The pleasure and the delights of life won't last forever. The time will come when he may not have the ability to enjoy any more. The verses that follow have traditionally generally been taken as a reference to the body closing down.

The grinders, for instance, are a reference to the teeth that are falling out. The darkening of the sun and moon and stars may be a darkening of the consciousness, or perhaps of the eyes.

The keepers of the house may be the arms. Those who look through the windows may be the eyes. The doors leading out to the street that are shut have been taken by some to refer to constipation, by others to the closing down of the mouth and the ears, as the old person's hearing and his voice weaken.

However, many commentators have seen other things going on here. Some see a lot more of a literal description here. The description of the death of a lord, the mourning for him, and then the collapse of his estate over time.

[4 : 15] Beyond this, we could also see a lot of eschatological imagery here. The imagery, particularly that of the darkening of the sun, moon and stars, has much in common with the sort of language that we find in the prophets concerning the day of the lord.

For instance, in Joel chapter 2, verses 1-2 and 6-10, Jesus, of course, uses similar language in the Olivet Discourse.

Michael Fox goes through the passage, exploring each one of these sorts of readings one by one, the allegorical, the literal and the eschatological for each particular verse.

Craig Bartholomew, rightly I believe, challenges this particular approach. He maintains that it is unhelpful to draw such a sharp line and division between metaphorical and literal language.

All language is metaphorical. Rather, he argues that the preacher is working from the death of the individual to the end of history, thereby invoking the prophetic vision of God's cosmic judgment.

[5 : 34] That is why it is so important to remember your creator in your youth. Like Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, Kohelet does not work with the notion of the isolated individual subject here, but conceives of humankind as an integral part of God's creation.

The connection between the individual and the whole cosmos could also be seen, for instance, in Job's curse upon the day of his birth, in Job chapter 3. Themes of God's creation of the whole cosmos and of his particular birth are drawn together, rather more helpfully than his threefold reading of the passage.

Fox writes, In Kohelet's telling, The two events, the end of a world and the end of a person, resonate in each other. The poem is intended to be mysterious and ambiguous, and the process of interpreting it may be as important as the particular solution one arrives at.

Kohelet sets us in a dark and broken landscape, through which we must find our way with few guideposts. In a fundamental sense, however, the obscurity of the details does not prevent us from understanding the poem.

In fact, it is hard to fail. The gist of the poem is clear. Enjoy life before you grow old and die. Clear too is the poetic power of the passage. The scene is weird and unsettling, evocative of diminution, quaking, darkening, silence and fear.

[6 : 53] The poem depicts the inevitable aging and death of the youth who is addressed in chapter 11 verse 9, and who merges with the you of the reader in chapter 12 verses 1 to 7. We can never fully penetrate the fog of the scene.

But when we peer through the murk of the images, metaphors and symbols, we realise with a shudder that we are destroying our own obliteration. In the interwoven images of a person, maybe a world, or perhaps a whole cosmos that's collapsing, we are reminded once again of the vaporous character of life.

All levels of our reality have a transitory and vaporous character to them. A man will ultimately die. A culture or civilisation will finally collapse. And the whole cosmos will ultimately come to its end. In images of the life of a house and a street closing down, of smashed pottery, broken vessels, and snapped cords, we have a multifaceted image of a world failing.

This is all summed up in the preacher's great motto, Vapor of vapors, says the preacher. All is vapor. The words of the preacher end where they began. But returning to this same point, those now familiar words are far more evocative and powerful.

[8 : 05] The words of the preacher are now over, and we return to the framing words of some other figure in the concluding verses of the book. Given the fact that the words of the introduction and the epilogue frame the entire book, and the words of the preacher, the vantage point taken by the writer at this point is a matter of some concern.

Some have argued, for instance, that the writer of the epilogue takes a rather ambivalent approach to the words of the preacher. Michael Fox writes, for instance, While showing respect for Koheleth, the apologist keeps a certain distance from his teaching, and from other recorded wisdom as well, The words of the wise are fine and good, but they also must be handled gingerly.

The apologist by no means repudiates Koheleth, yet he cautions that wisdom holds certain dangers. The postscript in chapter 12 verses 13 to 14 reminds us that wisdom, originating in human intellect and tradition, takes second rank to piety and obedience to God's law.

The words of the wise are not always comfortable, pious and traditional, as the books of Ecclesiastes and Job prove. They can sting, and they must be approached with care. However, I agree with Craig Bartholomew that Fox's position is unpersuasive.

The preacher is described in verse 9 as being wise. He is described in terms that are reminiscent of Solomon. We might think of the description of 1 Kings chapter 4, verses 29 to 34.

[9 : 29] And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of

the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, Calcal, and Dada, the sons of Mahal, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. Whether or not the preacher himself is Solomon, the description of him here certainly evokes the character of Solomon. He is praised as a teacher of the people, as someone who studies and gathers together various anthologies of proverbs.

He gives thought to the best forms of expression, wanting to communicate truth in a way that is beautiful. We might think of Proverbs chapter 25, verse 11. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

[10 : 39] The words that he writes are also described as words of truth, taking all these details together. While we might be able to render them in part in a more ambivalent sense, in their cumulative force, they do seem to give a far more positive vision of the preacher than Fox allows for.

The writer of the epilogue, Addressing a Son, describes the words of the wise, collections of which we find in the book of Proverbs, for instance, or see in the book of Job, as like goads, or nails firmly fixed.

Nails and goads might both be images of things that prick and prompt people to action, the words of the wise correct and direct. They're not comfortable, but they are good for us.

Alternatively, the image of the nails firmly fixed might stand in contrast to all the things that we've seen about the vapour to this point. The vapour and everything else swirls around and it's unpredictable.

But if you want something that's secure and lasting and that can be depended upon, look to the words of the wise. Their words can be depended upon because ultimately they come from one shepherd, from God himself.

[11 : 43] However, although it is very good to learn from the wise, there is a danger of going beyond their words. The writer of the epilogue is probably not forbidding this. Rather, he's cautioning the son that if he moves beyond the tutelage of the wise and tries to understand these things for himself, he has set for himself a daunting and a difficult task with a great many associated dangers.

The person who leaves behind the clear sight of the shore provided by the straightforward teaching of the wise and ventures forth upon the sea of wisdom for himself is in great danger of becoming shipwrecked.

The preacher who sought out these things for himself undertook such a journey, but such a quest is not for everyone to try at home. We must all recognise our limitations and few of us should undertake to think things through from first principles for ourselves.

The writer of the epilogue concludes the book by summing up the message that he wants the son to take away. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a message that we hear in the book of Psalms, in Job, and also on several occasions in Proverbs.

Here, as in those other places, the fear of the Lord and the keeping of the Lord's commandments are put at the forefront of the task of wisdom. Indeed, the writer of the epilogue describes these as the whole duty of man.

[12 : 59] In considering death, mortality, temporality, and the vaporous character of life, we are excited into a new awareness of our end as human beings, both the terminus of our lives and the telos of our lives.

This chapter began by charging the young man to remember his creator in the days of his youth, and it ends with the writer of the epilogue reminding the son that every deed will be brought into judgment.

He should enjoy his life, he should eat, he should drink, and he should rejoice before the Lord, but he must also recognize that he will give an account for everything that he does. We live in the shadow and the vapor under the sun, but that does not mean that our deeds are of no consequence.

Where the realm of sight is transitory, inscrutable, and insubstantial, we must learn to live by faith in the God who is above the vapor. A question to consider, on what basis do you believe that the writer of the epilogue writes that fearing God and keeping his commandments is the appropriate response to all that the preacher has raised within the book?