

Stand in Awe, Walk in Faithfulness

Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

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*Prayer: O God, open our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit so that the words of Scripture may become your Word that empowers our lives in this time and place. Amen*

This morning, we come to the final sermon in our three-part series on Ecclesiastes—a fascinating and unusual book. As noted, Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, alongside Proverbs and Job. But unlike the others, it offers an unconventional kind of wisdom. Traditional wisdom often tries to make sense of life's contradictions. It teaches that if you live rightly, things will go well for you. Ecclesiastes challenges that. It reminds us that life doesn't always work that way. Injustice persists. The righteous suffer. The wicked don't always face consequences.

We also learned Ecclesiastes' central message. Captured in one Hebrew word—*hebel*, which literally means vapor, mist, or smoke. Something that evaporates and quickly fades away. The basic idea is fleeting. Ephemeral. Transient. Here for a moment and then gone. Ecclesiastes says, "Everything is *hebel*, a chasing after the wind—including all human striving."

And because life is so fleeting, his advice is simple: **Enjoy life!** Take advantage of the ordinary pleasures of each day because these are gifts from God—"from the hand of God," as he puts it. So seize the day. *Carpe diem*. Embrace the present moment while you can because death comes to us all.

And accepting *hebel*—recognizing that life is fleeting and ultimately beyond our control is the key—the key to a meaningful, fulfilled, and enjoyable life.

Ah acceptance. There is so much we can learn from acceptance. Therapists say healing begins with acceptance. It means recognizing that most of life is not in our hands, largely beyond our power to manage.

But acceptance also opens the door to trust—trust in God. And when we trust God, we are free. Free to enjoy life as it truly is. Not as we imagine it

should be. Because even our expectations of what life ought to be are, ultimately, *hebel*. Fleeting. Ephemeral.

Before we turn to our passage in chapter 12, a quick recap from last Sunday.

The book of Ecclesiastes gives us two voices. Two distinct characters: the **Author** and the **Teacher**. The Teacher's name in Hebrew is *Qohelet*. "One who gathers a group," likely a class of students studying wisdom. The Author introduces this Teacher and identifies him as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1)—that is, Solomon.

But most scholars believe Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes. His name was likely used to give the book authority, since Solomon was remembered as the wisest of Israel's kings. More likely, the "Teacher" was a later Israelite sage who took on a Solomon-like persona as a teaching tool. Either way, the key point is this: the Teacher is a character in the book—the main voice we hear. He is distinct from the actual author, who remains anonymous.

It's important to know this distinction because the Author, or some would say, an *editor*, seems to soften the blow and sanitize the Teacher's harsh teachings and seemingly pessimistic view of life.

After that brief review of the last two sermons, let's dive into chapter 12.

The Teacher starts by addressing the topic of aging and death. He begins with advice: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." This can be challenging for many young people. When you feel like you have your whole life ahead of you, and you're busy, restless, and full of dreams, it's easy to feel like there's no time for God or church.

But perhaps the Teacher is speaking to those of us who have already watched our own youthfulness fade away. He urges us to "remember God before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'" (12:1).

Then he describes the decline of the aging body in various allegories. The "trembling guards of the house" are the knees. The "women who stop

grinding” are the teeth. The doors that are shut are the feet or the lips. The silenced “daughters of song” mean deafness.<sup>1</sup> And other objects he mentions to describe the decline of the human body.

We’ve just heard the Teacher end his speech with a reflection on aging—so let’s take a closer look at that ourselves. In traditional cultures, elders were deeply honored. I can attest to this from my Filipino background. Older people were respected because they were closest to the past, nearest to the ancestors, and considered sacred. These cultures had little social mobility, no aggressive youth culture, and no sharp generational divide. The elderly were present daily, woven into the fabric of community life. Everyone had the chance to learn from their wisdom, witness their decline, and honor them.

Some of us who are senior—or “mature,” as we prefer to say—know the realities of aging all too well. Bones creaking. Knees trembling. Grip weakening. Vision dimming. Memory slipping. The list goes on.

Many of us try to fight aging. We resist the idea of getting old. We take steps to hide the signs of aging—botox, hair coloring, suddenly becoming obsessed with fitness, trendy clothes (guilty as charged, I admit). We grow overly competitive. We avoid talking about aging altogether, etc.

But the Teacher does not deny aging. Nor does he try to defy it. He acknowledges the slow descent toward decay and eventual return to dust. He doesn’t romanticize old age—he dignifies it, without sugarcoating it. In his view, having less energy for endless tasks and the busyness that keeps culture spinning is exactly how life is meant to be. The wasted time, the frivolous pursuits, the mistakes, the thrills, the tears, the folly—they fade or lose their hold in old age. In old age, there is no time to waste anymore.

He manages to speak of bitter experience without being bitter about it. He invites us to a perspective where reconciliation meets mortality, a moment of coming to peace with others or with God before death. And so he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gordis, *Koheleth the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 342-44.

Remember God in your youth, before the silver cord is snapped,  
before the golden bowl is broken, before the dust returns to the earth.  
For in our final breath, we return to God, who gave it (12:6–8).

And with that the Teacher's speech ends.

Then the Author speaks again. The epilogue. Here he refers to the Teacher in the third person (12:9-14). He says the Teacher's words are very important for us to hear. He likens them to a shepherd's staff with a goad. A pointy end, which might hurt when it pokes you. But he says the Teacher is trying to poke you to get you in the right direction, towards greater wisdom.

The author then warns us. We can take the Teacher's words too far. We could spend our whole life trying to answer life's existential puzzles. Don't try, he says, because you'll never get there.

As noted earlier, the Author tempers the Teacher's harsher, more pessimistic tone. In the end, he offers his own conclusion:

Fear God and keep his commandments. This, he says, is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment—every hidden thing, whether good or evil (12:13-14)

And with that, the Author rests his case.

But notice that the Author's conclusion—"Fear God and keep his commandments"—echoes the familiar wisdom of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). Scholars note that it is this conclusion—where the Author tempers the Teacher's often harsh words about wisdom—that likely helped Ecclesiastes earn its place in the Hebrew canon, the collection of authoritative writings in the Old Testament.

The author might disagree a bit with the Teacher. But he still thinks it's good to let the Teacher challenge our false hopes. The Teacher reminds us that time and death put most of our lives beyond our control. We must submit to these things because they are under God's control.

What gives life true meaning, the author argues, is the hope of God's judgment. It's the hope that one day God will clear away all the "hebel"—all of life's inconsistencies, the things that don't add up—and bring true justice to our world. This hope should motivate us to live with honesty and integrity before God, even when we remain puzzled by life's many mysteries.

And that, ultimately, is the wisdom of the book of Ecclesiastes: **standing in awe of the One who created us and walking faithfully in God's commandments.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.