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Ecclesiastes 12: 2-7

Leaving behind

Text: Ecclesiastes 12: 2-7.
Reading: Ecclesiastes 11: 7- 12: 8.
Hymn 42: 1, 2, 4, 5.
Psalm 139: 13.
Psalm 90: 1, 5, 8.
Hymn 51: 6, 7, 8.
Hymn 56: 1, 2, 3, 4.

Theme and points:

In his loving wisdom the LORD prepares us to leave behind this earthly life under the sun. We see God's love in the way:

- 1) the breakdown of the body is movingly described*
- 2) the value of this earthly life is strongly asserted*

Ecclesiastes 12: 2-7

Leaving behind

...before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble. And the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking thought the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of the grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of the heights and of the dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire is no longer stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him –before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The Preacher refers to “the days of trouble” in 12: 1. These days are the years of which we say, “I have no pleasure in them.” Now follows in the present passage a description of those days or years, whatever you want to call them. Perhaps this passage is among the most beautiful in Scripture with very intricate poetry and deeply moving images.

We must understand that this general description does not necessarily apply equally in all its parts to everyone. Everyone’s life is unique, and we do not all grow old in the same way. Some retain their health and faculties into a very ripe old age, and experience very little of what is described here, while others are faced with serious illnesses and handicaps already before or very early into these “days of trouble”.

Some live to be seventy or eighty, and some live longer if they receive the strength (as we noted in Psalm 90), but certainly when we are past seventy we begin to experience more or less the effects of advanced age. The body and the mind start to break down, cease to function as before, and we

enter into a final phase of our lives under the sun. It is an inevitable conclusion for every living being, also every human being.

The earthly tent

The New Testament also mentions this process in a most moving manner. I had to think of 2 Corinthians 5 where we read about the destruction of our “earthly tent”. There has been some debate about the exact meaning of this passage, but again the best explanation is usually the simplest.

It is clear that when Paul speaks about a “tent” in this context he does mean our *bodies*. A tent is a good dwelling, but it is temporary and easily ruined by the harsh elements, and that is precisely what the body is: an earthly tent. The apostle Peter also writes about the “tent of this body” and says, “I know that I will soon put it aside.” He then writes about his pending “departure.” (2 Pet 1:12-15).

This Biblical way of speaking about death is quite instructive. Death is not a complete shutdown, but a *point of disembarkation*, a departure from this earthly body and from earthly relationships to the realm of heaven where different realities exist than those under the sun.

You may perhaps remember that I explained in the start of this series how the Preacher qualifies this life here as one “under the sun”, and the contrast by implication is that of life *beyond* the sun. In the life which awaits us, this earthly body is no longer required and therefore we need to leave it behind.

No depreciation of all things physical

This does not mean a depreciation of all things earthly or physical. We make no dichotomy between nature and grace, which simply means that we do not say earthly material things have no value compared to or opposed to heavenly spiritual things.

We do not divide life into two categories, one which is profane and another which is sacred. It does mean that we do not nurture the physical or material above the spiritual, but see each in its proper relation to the other.

From a tent to a house

It is important to take good and proper care of our bodies. But it is equally important that when our bodies break down, we know that we have a heavenly dwelling, not a collapsible tent but a *house* with foundations that cannot be destroyed. As much as we love life here under the sun and appreciate also the physical aspects of this life, we must be prepared to let them go completely.

This is not easy, I understand. But part of the whole process of aging is that we are *prepared* by God's grace to let go of that which is so important to us in this life, and to leave behind those whom we have loved in this life, knowing that for us and them our homeland and our citizenship are in heaven. This is also the direction the Preacher takes us in this text.

In his loving wisdom the LORD prepares us to leave behind this earthly life under the sun. We see God's love in the way:

- 1) *the breakdown of the body is movingly described*
- 2) *the value of this earthly life is strongly asserted*

When we speak about death and dying, we must remember that God does not want the death of the sinner, but that he repents and lives. I know that the context of the verse I just quoted gives it a different sense, but it is also true that God did not create us *to die*. He did not and does not seek our death. God does not want us to perish.

We know the passage also: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"(John 3: 16). God created us to live, even to live eternally.

When death, as curse of sin, did enter into the world, the LORD purposed to remove it in his Son Jesus Christ. Always keep that in mind, also when thinking about this passage.

Process of aging and dying

What the Preacher does in this passage is describe the process of aging and ultimately dying. In 12: 7 we read about returning to the dust from where we came. What I want to do now is ask your attention for the *manner* in which the Preacher describes the process of aging and dying. It is here presented in a form of *poetry*.

I don't know if you like poetry. I do, but I was always considered a bit of a nerd in my school years. When you deal with poetry as a form of communication, you must allow for some poetic freedom and not press everything into a certain scheme. That is what I mean here.

Not every part of the text fits as clearly as other parts, but on the whole we get a pretty good picture of what is happening. I said that this process is *movingly* described. By that word "movingly" I want to convey to you this sense: the LORD does not stand aside as a casual observer, just watching us die, waiting to pull the plug, so to speak. God does not look on from a distance, but He describes our aging and dying in expressive terms that show how *close* He is to us.

The LORD is never far away

The LORD is never far away, especially not when our earthly life is drawing to a close. As the Creator of life, He knows what it means when that life begins to fail. Who can describe this process more clearly than the LORD himself?

Some explainers call these verses an *allegory* but then you have to apply also each aspect, and hence I would rather just speak of *poetry*. It is with great love and tenderness that the Lord describes our demise.

The winter of my life

12: 2 speaks about the sun, moon, and stars growing dark, and the clouds returning after the rain. Most explainers see here a reference to the winters of Palestine, to the dark and dreary days when a lot of rain falls and there is little bright sunshine. Normally, in the summer, after a good shower, the sun returns, but in winter the clouds just hang there.

Old age is more often compared to winter. So this verse may give a general introduction to the entire period of our old age, when all systems shut down one by one, nothing grows, and everything fades.

Failure of limbs

In 12: 4 we find a more particular description of the various limbs of the body. The body is compared here to a “house”, or a dwelling of sorts. And again, you have to think here in general terms and not press everything into a system. The “keepers of the house” may be the arms. They tremble. Trembling is a sign of weakness, and occurs most often in old age.

“The strong men stoop” means that the back becomes bent and bowed. Men who once could lift many pounds for hours cannot even straighten up anymore.

The “grinders” are most often seen as teeth, which people, especially in that time lost because of poor dental care and of which they had only a few pieces left. The “windows” may refer to the eyesight, which begins to weaken as we get older.

Lack of mobility

12: 4 gives many explainers some problems, and I take that verse with the beginning of 12: 5 also, for this passage describes the lack of mobility which the elderly experience. “The doors to the street are closed.” We do not go out anymore, because we cannot manoeuvre as we once could.

12: 4 also speaks about “men rising up at the sound of birds but all

their songs grow faint...” and some see this as indicating that the pitch of our voices becomes higher as we age. I take it to mean also that we are more easily startled, and cannot speak out as forcefully as we once could.

We become afraid of heights. I understand that one of the main fears of the elderly is that they might fall and break something important, like a hip. You are no longer steady on your feet. You cannot avoid sudden dangers as before. You would just rather stay home, and hence the reference to the doors of the street being closed. The older we become, the more we tend to stay indoors, at home where we feel safe.

Fatigue

The next part of 12: 5 is particularly poignant: the “blossoming almond tree” is seen as an indication of the greying of the hair. The “dragging grasshopper” describes the utter fatigue often felt when older, and the “lack of desire” means precisely that many of life’s earlier important, delectable pursuits, along with sexuality, are just not attractive or possible anymore. Desire is no longer “stirred”, it says. Physical reactions are not the same anymore or as strong as when you were young.

I do not think we ever lose the need for love and even intimacy, but it does not always translate to sexuality anymore. That may be hard for some to accept, but that is how it goes in life. We need not foster a Viagra Christianity.

And the outcome is inevitable: “Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets”. I cannot now discuss the expression “eternal home” and what it may mean, but note that when we have died, the mourners do their official work, the obituaries are written, the funeral is held, and life continues with the living. Soon we are forgotten. Just give it one or two generations, if that much, and nobody even remembers your name.

But we do have an eternal home. One day we will never have to move again.

A moving description

It is a moving description, don’t you think? You can picture it, because poetry is painting pictures with words. The Preacher does not give us a cold technical description of biological shutdown, as if he does not care, but we stand together here. You and I will all experience exactly this. This is *our* life the Bible is speaking about. God is talking to you and me about the ultimate reality we face.

“Remember him” (12: 6) And we know: remember your Creator in the days of your youth because the time may come when you remember nothing, not the day or year, and perhaps not even your name.

The LORD God is reaching out to us here. He knows where all the living wind up and He says, “Remember me before it is too late. Count me in, before you are counted out because your life is *precious* to me. I do care about you, also when you have become old. You are not disposable items. I did not create you to fall apart and die. I do cherish the lives of my children.”

Life has served its purpose

You see this in all the Scriptures, but also in the text itself. I want to ask your attention for one more aspect of the text in 12: 6-7. The text speaks of the “cord being severed”, “the bowl being broken,” “the pitcher being shattered” and “the wheel broken.”

Death is described in these terms: something that was functional no longer works. But it has served its purpose. We may one day have to lay down this life, but this does not mean it was not functional and purposeful.

The items described from cord to wheel are important items. Notice especially that the Preacher speaks about a *silver* cord and a *golden* bowl. Some explainers, who follow the allegory idea, also see in these items parts of the body (brain, veins, lungs and heart), but it is hard to say exactly which parts are then meant. I see silver and gold rather as being indicative of something that is *precious*. Remember that we are dealing here with poetic, not allegorical, literature.

The same notion is found in the fact that the pitcher is shattered *at the spring* and the wheel is broken *at the well*. This means that they fulfill a function until the last moment. In the Preacher’s day, a pitcher and a wheel were precious items because without them you could not pump or collect water. They were essential items that functioned until the last moment.

The value of this life

I see here this line: the value of earthly life is strongly asserted. Life is precious like gold and silver. Life is important like a pitcher and a wheel. God gives us a place and a task under the sun, and both are important to the end.

I know that in the next verse, the Preacher again exclaims that everything is meaningless. Even the most precious and functional things fail. Our lives do end, no matter how important and functional. If that was all there is to say, it would end in futility. But there is more.

Death terminates life under the sun but it cannot *diminish* the value of life under the sun. You may not say, “Well, we’re going to die anyway, so who cares about life?” Life must be appreciated and valued until the last day.

Life itself continues

What happens next? 12: 7: "...and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." We see here two lines: the one of the physical and the other of the spiritual. The physical line ends: the body returns to dust. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (cf. I Corinthians 15: 50). But the spiritual line continues: the spirit returns to God who gave it! Life does not end. Only *this* life under the sun ends. Life itself continues.

Yes, there is the breakdown of this earthly life. It is passing, becomes frail, and finally ceases. But the value of life is strongly asserted. Life is precious and functional, and should be regarded in this manner. Live life, enjoy it while you can, for you may, and prepare yourself in your youth for the inevitable days of darkness.

Eternal value

We know even more than what the Preacher tells us at this point. Think of the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15. We will show forth the image of the heavenly man. Christ has risen, and we shall rise with him.

Our work in the LORD is therefore not in vain. Our lives and our work have eternal value. We will be held responsible for all that we do in the body, therefore we should not put the Lord to the test with our sins.

Let us live responsible and functional lives, and so prepare to face the final phase of this life, which leads us to the glory of the new life. And in the LORD's house, I shall dwell forever (Psalm 23). We do have an eternal home.

AMEN.