

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 12

12.1. In one of the strikingly memorable passages of scripture, memorable because haunting, Solomon encourages the young to serve the Lord from their youth up, while they are young and can give their best strength to His service. It is a characteristic of youth that they cannot really envisage what it is like to be old or that they will ever be old themselves.

The whole passage, however, still reveals the backsliding state of the preacher. He can only urge the young to be God-fearers, not saved young men and women. His whole conclusion is, "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (verse 13) whereas the gospel message which is to be directed to the young, as to all, is to repent and believe the gospel (Matthew 3.2; 4.17; Mark 1.15).

Now we know that the Lord loved Solomon in the sense that he was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (2 Samuel 12.24; Nehemiah 13.26). We also know from 1 Chronicles 28.9 that the Lord declared to him, "if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever." The next book of Scripture, the Song of Solomon, is a profound description of the mutual love of the Lord Jesus Christ for His people, and they for Him, and Solomon could only have written it as a believer restored from backsliding. We must conclude that Solomon repented and returned fully to the Lord and that the Lord who loved him from the beginning pursued him until he was restored. This is delicately described, among other revelations of the heavenly relationship, in the Song (SS 2.8-13).

12.2. A most poignant description of old age follows, in highly poetic picture language. Of course, elderly believers may serve the Lord; the meaning is that it is not the best time to commence the Lord's service, though if the Lord calls in old age, He will give strength and make up for lost years. What is being urged is that the young are not to put off being the Lord's and serving Him until they are old.

Solomon would have been aware of Psalm 90 seeing that it was written by Moses. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly

away...O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psalm 90.10,14).

Verse 2 is a summary description; from verse 3 onwards we have a list of the drawbacks of old age, as one by one the various parts of the body are listed in their failing state. Sight is likely to be undimmed and the body untroubled by constantly recurring disability and sickness in our prime.

12.3. Interpreters differ from one another when it comes to allotting which part of the body conforms to which description. The following is my suggestion only.

Different parts of the body may tremble as age takes hold. Of those that tremble, we must ask ourselves what part can be described as keeping us? It cannot mean the head, for it is the plural “keepers;” unless the head which directs the other parts be meant as well as, say, the arms and hands. The hands work for our keep and they may certainly shake with disease and/or age. So I suggest it makes sense to regard hands as the prime part of the body indicated here.

All our lives long our legs have supported us well. These are the strong men that bow themselves. The grinders are the teeth, and those that look out of the windows the eyes.

12.4. All the doors of the houses in a street are shut when the dwellers are either out or otherwise engaged indoors. They are not about. It is listening, speaking and sleeping that are “not about” so much as we age. Conversation is limited now that hearing is impaired and eating more difficult, for mealtimes were a ready source of eating, speaking and listening. Deafness may make a person start at a sudden small sound. Or it may refer to sleeplessness when a person is wakeful and rises up as soon as the dawn chorus commences. The ability to appreciate, and certainly to join in, music and dancing is greatly reduced. Barzillai’s description of his failing capacities is worth reading at this point, 2 Samuel 19.35.

12.5. We may be afraid of heights from a very young age, but heights which are no heights at all may now trouble the older person. Looking from head height down two stairs may seem a long way and the risk of falling may prey on the mind. Perhaps fears “in the way” refer to fears of tripping or being bumped into while walking. Most think that the blossom of the almond tree is a picture for a mop of white hair. “The grasshopper shall be a burden” – what a wonderful expression this is! His weight (though light), his jerky movement, his repetitive noise – it is all too much. Even such little inconveniences are a burden, and cause strain and annoyance. Desire to do anything fails; it is difficult to muster the effort to do even the smallest, most straightforward mundane thing.

Again, “his long home” is a most evocative expression. The leaving of this world is for a long, long time; it is permanent. And, though distance is not the way to measure heaven or hell, death is a far cry from our presence in this world. The family must needs carry on, but they go about their business in their mourning attire.

12.6. Again, these most moving, poignant, haunting expressions for death are so evocative. All the things mentioned beforehand concerning the failing senses are precursors of that final dissolution, the separation of our souls from our bodies, which is death. “Or ever,” which means “before the time ever comes,” these things will have certainly occurred.

The silver cord is very likely the tongue. “The tongue of the just is as choice silver” (Proverbs 10.20). We speak of “stringing words together.” The loosing of the tongue is used of the restoration of speech (Mark 7.35) but its final loosing is that it may speak no more. The golden bowl probably means the head, and especially the brain with all its priceless functions. Inasmuch as a fountain is a natural springing of water and a cistern requires pumping, it is as good an interpretation as any to think of the pitcher broken as the final acts of breathing and the wheel broken to be the final pumping actions of the heart.

12.7. Then the dust returns to the earth as it was. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3.19). “And the LORD God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2.7). The two elements of our being are here despatched to their abode – the body to the earth and the spirit or soul to the presence of God for final judgment.

12.8. So is this all there is? Absolute and thorough emptiness and meaninglessness? Nihilism – the attitude that because it is all meaningless, nothing matters and everything goes. According to this thinking there are no standards and no accounts to give. There is no God - so destroy the Bible which says God is and persecute the believers who affirm God is. Commit murder, for human life is as nothing, and suicide (self-murder) because it is all too much and the sooner it is over the better.

The Holy Spirit, the author of the scriptures, gives us this book at this level, authored by Solomon, that we may see where the mixing of sin with our faith, dross with the gold, leads us. Simply to fear God but not to know Him or be walking with Him any more is to have no greater hope than to expect our day of judgment. With what longing we should return to the Lord if we have backslidden lest our thoughts become hopeless like these.

12.9. “He still taught the people knowledge.” In season and out of season we are to keep at our tasks, the maintaining of law and order, the earning of our living, the teaching of our children. Even the godless must keep busy at life. It still has to be done.

12.10. Words govern actions; acceptable words persuade the mind; powerful imagery causes the emotions to flow and thus colour the mind and its actions. It is a gift of God to be able to seek out and find such words calculated to have the maximum influence. But more than any oratory, the preaching of the word of God is the supreme use of words. To bring men and women, boys and girls to the supreme and only Saviour, to the highest life of all, which is in Him, and to assist them to sustain that life is the ultimate end to which words can be put.

12.11. Words of wisdom encourage, inspire. They give heart to the weary to continue; to the lost that they are to be found; to men of vision in the prime of life not to betray their faith. Words may pierce the conscience and be painful as the real goad inflicts pain. But the effect is to keep us moving forward resolutely at our tasks, according to that which the Lord lays before us. Again, the picture language alters to that of a master builder expertly fixing crucial nails which are to bear much weight in the buildings he is constructing (assembling). Such words are to be more than instant helps at any given stage of life. They are the expression of fundamental principles; of the doctrines on which our lives hang.

The individual scripture writers, the individual preachers bring words of experience and, indeed, in the case of the scripture writers, perfection. But all these words are from God Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the Shepherd. The Holy Scriptures are His word. The Gospel is the word of life in the Lord Jesus Christ. Sermons and commentaries all expound the Bible. They are all “given from one shepherd.”

12.12. Every generation requires its own books and this will be so, in whatever form, until the end of time. Study for the one whose full-time work it is to shepherd the flock is as much a weariness as other work for it comes in the sweat of the face (Genesis 3.19). Of Paul Festus said dramatically (with a loud voice), “much learning doth make thee mad” (Acts 26.24). Believers are to be people of the Book, the Bible, but not bookish. While temperaments differ, broadly speaking believers are to be people-orientated not book-orientated. We must not grow weary in well doing (Galatians 6.9; 2 Thessalonians 3.13) or of being admonished, that we may grow in grace.

12.13. Micah 6.8 says, “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” It is the walking humbly with God, the close and intimate fellowship, that is

missing here in Ecclesiastes. It portrays the God-fearing, but unsaved or backsliding, relationship. Whereas the summary in Micah speaks from a saved perspective. Justice and mercy are to be shown by all, believers and unbelievers alike. But only those who are walking with God in Christ, who have peace with God through His blood, may exercise these graces effectively and with God's approval.

12.14. Again, it is true that after death there is judgment (Hebrews 9.27). It is a fitting place to end a book of wisdom. There is a resurrection of the just and of the unjust (John 5.29; Daniel 12.2). But whereas God as Creator may suffice the unsaved God-fearer, and be all that the backslider dare admit in his backslidden state; Christ the Saviour, the Redeemer, is the theme of the restored saint in the fullness of his walk with God in Christ.