

The Conclusion of *the Matter*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 12.*

Memory Text: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*).

A Russian writer, Andrei Bitov, explains a seminal moment in his life: “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the metro in Leningrad, I was overcome with a despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: Without God life makes no sense. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the metro and into God’s light and carried on living.”—Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1994), p. 59.

In its own way, *Ecclesiastes* could have been summed up with the phrase “Without God life makes no sense.” But that can be read two ways, not just that if no God exists life makes no sense but that if we live without God, without acknowledging Him or His commands, life makes no sense. And that’s because, among other reasons, death is always there, waiting to swallow us up into oblivion. Without the answer to death, there’s no answer to life, and that answer is found only in Jesus, who beat death and with that victory offers us what we can’t get anywhere else. “‘Without Me,’” Jesus said, “‘you can do nothing’” (*John 15:5, NKJV*), and that includes finding any good reason for our existence.

This week we take our final look at *Ecclesiastes*, one of Scripture’s more creative ways of getting that important point across to us, who can so easily forget it.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.*

Remember Your Creator

Solomon here picks up somewhat where he left off in the previous section. He's still giving advice to young people, still warning them about the "evil days." Though last week we looked at them as being days of any kind of trouble, the emphasis here seems to be on old age. Evil days seem to be (at least in his thinking here) old age.

What is Solomon saying here in 12:1 that reflects what he said in the last few verses of Ecclesiastes 11? What's his basic message?

Solomon's use of the word for "Creator" here comes from the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1 for "created." The Hebrew verb *bara* is almost always found in the context of divine activity (*Isa. 65:17, Amos 4:13, Mal. 2:10*); that is, *bara* is never used to describe humanity's activities. Solomon, therefore, is expressing the biblical concept that ties in God as our Creator. He is our God because He is our Creator.

Also interesting is that the Hebrew word for "Creator" is in the plural, just as the word for God in Genesis 1:1 appears in the plural. Though all sorts of explanations have existed through the centuries for this plural form, some Christians have seen it as evidence of the plural nature of the Godhead (*Gen. 1:26, 3:22, 11:7*).

Solomon, having squandered the best years of his life, his youth, is now seeking to warn others from following in his footsteps. Though it's important for everyone, at any age, to accept the Lord, the earlier the better, for any number of reasons. That's clearly his message now: Don't turn away from God in your youth.

Why would it be better for someone while young to accept the Lord as opposed to waiting until later? What are the advantages of doing it while being young? Take your list to class on Sabbath and compare it with what others say. What can you learn from each other? See also Deut. 10:13; Luke 13:4, 5; Phil. 3:13, 14.

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 12:13*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: For Christians, life on earth is anything but a meaningless exercise.

Feel: The purpose-driven life begins with having a relationship with God.

Do: Life can be lived to the fullest only through Jesus.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Better Now Than Later (*Eccles. 12:1-8*)

A God asks us to use our talents for His glory. Name at least one thing you do very well and say how you're using it to build up God's kingdom.

B We don't have to think very long to come up with a regret or two about choices we wish we had made differently. What would Solomon say concerning our regrets? What would Jesus say?

II. Our Whole Duty (*Eccles. 12:9-14*)

A Solomon's statement, "Much study wearies the body" (*Eccles. 12:12, NIV*), is a tacit admission that most of us don't need more information; we just need to do what we already know. What are our essential responsibilities to God and others? In what tangible ways are we putting them into practice?

B What must the world's population see before it will be moved to join us in honoring God? How are you as an individual or a congregation accomplishing that?

▶ **Summary:** In *Ecclesiastes* we have the benefit of Solomon's experience (and mistakes). If God can teach good lessons from bad examples, think what He can do with us.

Learning Cycle

▶ **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **Why is this lesson important to me?**

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When the Grinders Cease

Ecclesiastes 12:2-7 is a beautiful and poetic description of the aging process. Many commentators agree that the phrase “before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain” (*vs. 2, NIV*) deals with the loss of mental faculties in old age. The “keepers of the house” could be the arms, which were once strong and healthy but now tremble and shake.

Read through Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. Work through the images the best you can. But as you read, also ask yourself this question: Why is Solomon here talking about old age? What’s the message for us?

Solomon, especially as he himself reaches old age, is pointing us to our mortality. This is a theme he touched on over and over in the book. And no wonder. Regardless of who we are, how we live, or even how long we live, sooner or later we all face death. It’s an unavoidable reality of life.

Some Christian youth wear a T-shirt with the saying “It’s not that life is so short but that death is so long! John 3:16.” Solomon, now in his old age, with death before him, is seeking to remind us all, especially the young, that our day will come, as well. Of course, if you are fortunate, you will live long, only to face the “evil days” of old age, and then you will die. The other option is that you will simply die young.

In short, Ecclesiastes, among other things, reminds us again of our mortality, reminds us of the shortness of life, that it is *hebel*, a vapor or a breath. Thus, we all need to keep the big picture in mind, the picture of eternity, the picture of what God has offered us through Jesus Christ—eternal life.

Read through Revelation 21 and 22, a description of the future world that God has made available to all of us through Jesus’ death. What elements stand out the most in your mind? What touches you the most? Try to imagine what it will be like. And remember that this will be for eternity. This is the hope God offers us through Christ. All this considered, what else matters? How seriously are you taking the promises offered you through Jesus?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Have your class members reflect on how they have changed physically in the past ten years. Have they noticed an increase or decrease in physical strength and endurance? (Depending on your class, an alternative question would be: What have you noticed about the physical changes that have taken place in a loved one over the past ten years? What leads to these changes?)

Then ask how they have changed mentally. Have they seen an increase in knowledge? What do they want to do with the knowledge they have gained? Why do we desire to share what we know with others? Do we, like Solomon, want to help others so that they don't have to learn things the hard way? For your older members, ask when they feel at their greatest strength both physically and mentally.

► STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: What do I need to know from God's Word?

Bible Commentary

I. Moving Toward Eternity (*Eccles. 12:1-5*)

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Youth is the time of life when strength and endurance are greatest. Solomon admonishes us to use our energy in service to our Creator.

Solomon contrasts youth with growing old. When we grow older, our strength diminishes. We do less, but our aches increase. The desires and hopes of youth are now past. It is frustrating to lose the vigor we once had, especially with the wisdom gathered throughout life. Solomon again restates the theme of Ecclesiastes: We are to focus on our Creator.

Ecclesiastes 12:2

The sources of light turning to darkness may be verbal imagery to help us imagine what it is like to have our eyesight begin to fade. It also may be a description of all our senses beginning to dull.

Ecclesiastes 12:3

In the broad sense, aging brings a loss of strength.

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The Making of Many Books

In Ecclesiastes 12:9-12 Solomon starts talking about wisdom, knowledge, and his attempts to teach it to others. Whether he was referring to all his writings or just that in this book, the text doesn't say. His point, though, was that he truly attempted not only to learn truth but to teach it to others.

Look at verse 10 in particular. He wanted words that were “pleasing” (*RSV*). Does that mean he simply wanted to tickle people's ears with what they wanted to hear? That hardly makes sense, considering the kind of words that he wrote, especially in Ecclesiastes. The key, perhaps, is in the rest of the verse. He sought pleasing words but also “words of truth” written “uprightly” (*RSV*). The words were not so pleasing that they ceased to be true. Ultimately, words of truth are pleasing, in the sense that truth itself—Jesus (*John 14:6*), who died for our sins—is pleasing, at least to those who know and accept Him.

Read verse 11. What point is he making there?

The “goad” mentioned here was probably a pointed stick used to prod cattle. Along with the other image of “nails,” his point seems to be that the words of the wise should have two effects: prodding people to action and staying in the memory. According to many commentators, the “one shepherd” here is a reference to God Himself (*Ps. 23:1, Jer. 31:10, John 10:11-14*); that is, in the end, the words of the wise come from God. In short, Solomon here is talking about divine inspiration. He, like other wise men and the prophets, “spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (*2 Pet. 1:21*).

What's the warning in verse 12?

How interesting that right after talking about divine inspiration Solomon gives this warning about books, which is really a warning about the wrong kind of learning. How many people study themselves right into eternal ruin? Today, especially, when there is so much information out there, how crucial that we be careful about the kind of learning we get.

What kind of “knowledge” is out there that, if not tested and judged by Scripture with the teaching of the “One shepherd,” could lead you astray? Why must you be careful in the kind of knowledge you acquire?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

“Grinders” in the original sense are the women who prepare the grain for cooking and baking. The reference here may be about teeth.

“Looking through the windows” (*NIV*) refers to the tradition of women not appearing in public very much. These women often would peek through their lattice windows. This also may be a reference to old age, when vision becomes less clear.

Ecclesiastes 12:4

As people age, they tend to wake up early. The voice of the birds implies that the person is rising early in the morning.

The “daughters of music” may be a reference to the vocal cords. These cords lose their strength with age, and voices may crack or become feeble.

Ecclesiastes 12:5

With less strength, diminished senses, brittle bones, and difficulty healing, an older person is more cautious. We become less willing to take chances and experience new adventures. Shortness of breath and stiff joints make exertion more painful.

The “blooms of an almond tree” are white, which makes this a good description of an older person’s white hair.

A grasshopper is small or insignificant. An older person finds that even small things can become great burdens.

Consider This: What is Solomon comparing in these statements? Going home may refer to the grave. See Job 10:21. This would be likely, since the next phrase talks about mourners (*2 Sam. 3:31, Jer. 22:10*).

II. Remembering Our Creator (*Eccles. 12:6-8*)*Ecclesiastes 12:6*

The “silver cord” may be a figurative expression for life and its fragility. For example, if a link in a silver chain that is used to suspend a lamp breaks, the lamp itself will fall and break.

Women going to the village well brought a water pot and rope with them. The wheel they used to put the rope over eventually would fall apart from weather and age. When the wheel broke, the pitcher fell and shattered. Solomon uses these images in reference to death.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

After death, a person physically decays and returns to the elements, the dust which God had used to create Adam (*Genesis 2:7*).

At death, we sleep in the dust (*Job 7:21*).

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Faith, Law, and Judgment

After going on for so long about all these matters of life, death, and God, Solomon ends this book with two verses, Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14. In your own words, summarize the essence of his conclusion.

Solomon's final message in Ecclesiastes, the sum of all that he wrote before, sounds somewhat like what's at the heart of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

Read Revelation 14:6-12. What elements can you find in there that are similar to Solomon's conclusion to Ecclesiastes?

Solomon ends by telling us to keep the commandments of God; that's part of the third angel's message (*Rev. 14:12*). Solomon talks about judgment; the first angel's message also talks about judgment (*vs. 7*). Finally, Solomon's call to "Fear God" is a Bible way of expressing what it means to have faith in God, to worship and obey Him, all part of the three angels' messages (*vss. 7-12*). The fear of God and the worship of God are linked. "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth" (*Ps. 96:9*). "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple" (*Ps. 5:7*). No wonder the first angel's message, which tells us to worship God, tells us (as did Solomon) to "fear God," as well.

Thus the three basic elements in Solomon's conclusion are crucial elements in what we understand as present truth. Does this mean, then, that Solomon was thinking specifically of our time when inspired to write this? Of course not. Instead, this brings home a crucial point: From the beginning, God's message of faith in His atonement for us, reflected in a life of obedience to His commandments, all against the backdrop of a judgment, is nothing new. As Adventists we didn't invent it. We've just been given the call to preach it to the world.

If you were to explain to someone what it means to fear God and keep His commandments, what would you say?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

This leads us to the promise of sleep until the resurrection when the dust of the earth will live again (*John 11:11-13, 1 Thess. 4:13-17*).

The word translated “spirit” is from the Hebrew word *ruach*, translated “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit” in the sense of vitality, courage, temper, or anger. It also refers to disposition. Elsewhere in the Bible *ruach* is translated to mean the seat of emotions, the mind, the will, the heart, moral character, and the Spirit of God. It is never used as an intelligence capable of existing apart from the physical body. What returns to God is the life principle imparted by God to man.—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1104.

Ecclesiastes 12:8

In Hebrew, the word *hebel* can be translated to mean “breath” or “vapor.” It also can mean vanity. “Vanity of vanities” in Hebrew is *hebel habalim*.

Consider This: One definition for vanity is: excessive pride in one’s appearance or accomplishments; conceit. Another is: a lack of usefulness, worth, or effect; worthlessness. How does thinking that vanity is nothing but a vapor help clarify your understanding of vanity?

The person speaking in this text is a preacher or teacher. He is someone who has studied to gain a clearer understanding and to share what he has learned.

▶ **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 Why shouldn’t I keep putting off working toward my goals?
- 2 Why should I be working for the Lord now, rather than planning to do so later?

Application Questions:

- 1 What are some things I can do for my church now that I may not be able to do when I’m older?
- 2 What should I study that will bring me closer to my Creator?

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The Conclusion of the Matter

We've come to the end, the conclusion of the conclusion of our study in Ecclesiastes. What is the meaning of this strange book, which is so different from almost every other book of the Bible? What's the message God has for us here? What are we to make of this?

Go back over the book of Ecclesiastes. Mull over it, pray over it, and then write out what you would deem the key point of this book. What was God's message to you from Ecclesiastes? What have you taken away that helps you better in your walk with the Lord? Be prepared to read your answer in class on Sabbath.

It will be interesting to see the various responses. One point, though, does seem clear: God, with this book, warns us against getting too caught up in the ways of the world. Sure, we have been given bodies, we have been given physical pleasures; these are all gifts from God, and they all have their role. But they are not the end; in and of themselves, they are all *hebel*. As you get older, your ability to enjoy them diminishes, and the moment you die they are gone.

In other words, whatever else Ecclesiastes is saying to us, it is at least saying, Think about who you are, why you are here, how you got here, and, most important, where you are going when this short life, this *hebel* of existence, is gone. God has given us gifts, but the gifts don't last; nothing in this life does.

Ecclesiastes is 12 chapters saying to us what Jesus said in one verse: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (*Matt. 16:26*). Sadly, what people give for their own soul is, always, *hebel*. How tragic, especially when our souls have already been bought, bought through the precious blood of Jesus, whose death offers all of us a one-way ticket out of all the "madness and folly" that we suffer here "under the sun."

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Witnessing**

How do my fellow church members know about my dedication to my beliefs? What am I doing to help strengthen others to stand firm in the faith?

Consider This: Think about what you can do to help others grow in their faith. Make it a matter of prayer this week.

▶ **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

“In the book of God’s remembrance every deed of righteousness is immortalized. There every temptation resisted, every evil overcome, every word of tender pity expressed, is faithfully chronicled. And every act of sacrifice, every suffering and sorrow endured for Christ’s sake, is recorded.”
— Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 481.

Consider This: Each time period of our life provides special opportunities for service. What are these time periods, and which types of services might be included in them? Following are some suggestions to get the discussion started.

1. Childhood, a time to share unconditional love.
2. Youth, a time of energy, courage, and willingness to try new activities.
3. Young adults have the time, energy, and fresh ideas to enrich the church’s current programs.
4. The prime of life includes more money than time. Now members may have the means to support the church’s financial needs and provide encouragement and emotional support for other members.
5. The mature member may now have time and money available to support the church but less energy to be engaged in spring cleanups or remodeling projects.
6. The retirement years should be full of words of wisdom. The voice of experience helps guide and lead the decisions of the church family.

Challenge your class members to spend time and prayer contemplating what they can do for others during their current stage of life. With God’s leading, encourage them to enact their plan.

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 113; book 3, p. 405; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 455.

“Human strength is weakness, human wisdom is folly. Our success does not depend on our talents or learning, but on our living connection with God. The truth is shorn of its power when preached by men who are seeking to display their own learning and ability. Such men display also that they know very little of experimental religion, that they are unsanctified in heart and life and are filled with vain conceit. They do not learn of Jesus. They cannot present to others a Savior with whom they themselves are not acquainted. Their own hearts are not softened and subdued by a vivid sense of the great sacrifice which Christ has made to save perishing man.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 158, 159.

“You need not go to the ends of the earth for wisdom, for God is near. It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. We need to have far less confidence in what man can do and far more confidence in what God can do for every believing soul. He longs to have you reach after Him by faith. He longs to have you expect great things from Him. He longs to give you understanding in temporal as well as in spiritual matters. He can sharpen the intellect. He can give tact and skill. Put your talents into the work, ask God for wisdom, and it will be given you.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 146.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, go over your answers in Thursday's lesson and discuss your conclusions.
- 2 Have people of different ages get up and talk about the aging process. What do we learn about life, about God, about faith, as we get older? What lessons can the older ones teach the young?
- 3 What are the things in your society that make it so easy to get caught up in the world? As a class, how can you help each other avoid these pitfalls?
- 4 As a church, how well do we help our members discern between what's eternal and what's *hebel*? That is, might we even subtly be promoting things—i.e., wealth, power, prestige, knowledge—in ways that can blur the line between what's gold and what's dross? Discuss.