

To the Young and the Old

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

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Because growing older is difficult, many people make jokes about it. The singer Pete Seeger put it like this, *“How do I know when my youth is all spent? When my get up and go has got up and went!”*

People freely offer their insights about getting older.

- *“It’s paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn’t appeal to anyone.”* (Andy Rooney)
- *“You know you’re getting old when you stoop to tie your shoelaces and wonder what else you could do while you’re down there.”* (George Burns)
- *“I don’t feel old. I don’t feel anything until noon. Then it’s time for my nap.”* (Bob Hope)
- *“At age 20, we worry about what others think of us. At age 40, we don’t care what they think of us. At age 60, we discover they haven’t been thinking of us at all.”* (Ann Landers)
- *“Today is the oldest you’ve ever been, and the youngest you’ll ever be again.”* (Eleanor Roosevelt)
- *“Youth is wasted on the young.”* (George Bernard Shaw)

Someone else has said there are seven stages of life: *spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, and wills.*

An unknown author captured how quickly we move through the stages of life.

*When as a child, I laughed and wept,
Time crept;
When as a youth, I dreamed and talked,
Time walked;
When I became a full-grown man,
Time ran;
When older still I daily grew,
Time flew;
Soon I shall find in traveling on,
Time gone.*

This brings back memories of three rusty iron statues on display in a park in Pontiac, Illinois, where we used to live. Standing twenty-five feet tall, these figurines symbolize the changing seasons of life.

- The first statue displays youthfulness illustrated by movement and activity.
- The second one shows a man in the prime of life, portrayed with fervor and eagerness, as if he's reaching out to grasp the moment.
- The third image shows a man hunched over with his head down and walking with a cane. At the bottom is a plaque with these words: "*In old age, give good advice; then die without regret.*"

As we come to the final chapter in Ecclesiastes, as an Old Testament Second Winder, Solomon gives good advice to the next generation by exhorting the young and the old to live with resolve and to die without regret. This makes me think of a line from *Braveheart*. William Wallace, a Scottish rebel fighting for independence from England, explained his determination like this, "*Every man dies, not every man really lives.*"

Here's a summary of what Solomon is saying: *Don't waste your life trying not to die; spend your life living for the One who died for you.*

1. If you're young, remember the Lord so you're ready to live. Solomon continues his focus on youth as we saw last weekend in the closing verses of chapter 11: *Say yes to God when you are young.* Chapter 11 focuses on what to avoid and chapter 12 tells us what to embrace. Let's drill down into Ecclesiastes 12:1: "***Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'***"

In English, the word "**remember**" means, "*to recall, to mark, to set aside.*" In Hebrew, "**remembering**" is not just bringing something back to mind; it implies a change of behavior, so our lives line up with what we've been reminded of. Remembering is not a passive attitude; it's a proactive activity which leads to action. In addition, this is in the imperative tense, meaning this is a call to obey by submitting to the sovereignty of God.

In short, to remember is "*to embrace and own for ourselves.*" The word "**remember**" is used over 200 times in the Bible. We need to remember because we tend to forget God's faithfulness and neglect our faith. In short, we need

reminders to remember because if we don't, we'll rebel. Ray Stedman writes, *"Recall God's presence daily; live in a relationship with Him; seek to discover the greatness and glories of God while you are still young, before it is too late."*

The word **"also"** can mean, *"now."* Young person, it's time to remember right now that God is **"your Creator."** The use of the word **"your"** indicates this relationship must become personal. Can you say, *"He is my Creator?"* This is the first time God is referred to as **"Creator"** in Ecclesiastes. Because humans are image-bearers of our Creator, our purpose is to reflect, reveal, and represent Him as we see in Genesis 1:26: ***"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...'"***

Lean in and listen, young person. Your worth and value is intrinsic because you have been created in the image and likeness of God. You don't have to work to establish your worth; you already have worth because of Him who made you. To fully know who you are, you must first know *whose* you are. According to Isaiah 43:7, the main reason you've been created is to show forth God's glory: ***"Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."***

You are not the result of some coincidental cosmic accident, nor have you somehow evolved from a single-celled organism over the space of a million years. You are more than just matter, and you matter greatly to the Almighty. You are way above an animal and you are not a "fursona" or a "furry." Since you are the product of divine design, you have been created with dignity, value, and worth. God designed you for His delight and He made you on purpose for His purposes.

Notice the next phrase: ***"in the days of your youth."*** The word **"youth"** refers to the teens and twenties. Lamentations 3:27 says, ***"It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth."*** As a young ox has to be brought under a yoke, so young people must learn to endure hardship and work responsibility.

The word **"days"** reminds us that each day is a gift from God and is not to be wasted. We're to remember our Creator in the days of our youth because bad days are coming. The word **"evil"** refers to difficulties or infirmities, when days of pleasure turn into years of pain.

As someone has said, *"Just about the time your face clears up, your mind begins to go!"* This is captured well by this picture and caption of a girl looking into a

mirror when she sees her reflection as an elderly woman, *“It is only a short trip, enjoy it.”*

Notice how the word **“before”** is used three times in our text.

- 12:1 says distress is coming: **“before the evil days come...”**
- 12:2 says darkness is coming: **“before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened...”**
- 12:6 says death is coming: **“before the silver cord is snapped...”**

Solomon is pleading for young people to remember their Creator before they get old. I love how much life change we’re seeing in our children, teens, and young adults! We give priority to proclaiming the gospel to all generations through the leadership of Marcy, Liesl, Becca, Pastor Chris, Micah, and Pastor Kyle. This is important and strategic because studies show 94% of Christians give their lives to Jesus before age 18. Marcy, our Children’s Ministry Director, attended the Child Discipleship Forum several weeks ago where she learned that only 1% of preteens and teens are on track to develop a biblical worldview. That’s not the case here!

I’m thankful that our young people are being saturated with Scripture and learning how to pray. A week ago, our students spent over an hour in prayer, interceding for those who are homebound, for pastors, and the spiritually lost. They also prayed they would submit to God and practice forgiveness.

Don’t waste your life trying not to die; spend your life living for the One who died for you.

2. If you’re older, revere the Lord so you’re ready to die. Our country is experiencing some huge demographic shifts as our population is older today than it has ever been.

- The number of Americans ages 65 and older is projected to increase from 58 million in 2022 to 82 million by 2050 (a 47% increase).
- By 2060, nearly one in four Americans will be 65 years and older. In addition, the number of 85-plus will triple, and the country will add a half million centenarians.
- According to the Census Bureau, for the first time in U.S. history, adults 65 and older are projected to outnumber children by 2034.

Ecclesiastes 12:2 paints a picture of the dark cold winter in Israel, when storm after storm hide the heavenly luminaries: ***“Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain.”*** Solomon is urging young people to live for the Lord before the darkness of old age and the clouds of bad health roll in.

In verses 3-5, Solomon uses the picture of a decaying house to describe the aging and dying process. This poignant poem describes the relentless discomfort of old age and the impending end of human life. Let’s walk through this passage phrase-by-phrase.

- ***in the day when the keepers of the house tremble*** – the keepers of the house refer to trembling arms and hands, which previously provided a strong defense. The word ***“tremble”*** means, ***“to shake”*** because our muscles are not what they used to be.
- ***and the strong men are bent*** – legs, knees, and back weaken while the body begins to bend. Song of Solomon 5:15 refers to young legs as strong as ***“alabaster columns.”***
- ***and the grinders cease because they are few*** – this refers to losing our teeth. According to a book called *Being Mortal*, many seniors have lost a significant number of teeth: ***“By the age of sixty, people in the United States have lost, on average, a third of their teeth.”***
- ***and those who look through the windows are dimmed*** – our eyesight begins to fade. According to the National Eye Institute, ***“By age 80, more than half of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery.”*** Others experience age-related macular degeneration or glaucoma.
- ***and the doors on the street are shut*** – some end up becoming homebound and feel like they have been abandoned by others. Geriatricians suggest that loss of function leads to a loss of independence, which can lead to boredom, loneliness, helplessness, frustration, and even bitterness.
- ***when the sound of the grinding is low*** – in that culture, the sound of grinding grain was an everyday occurrence. Because of diminished hearing, sounds that were once clear become hard to make out and words need to be repeated. One sign of old age is that everyone seems to be talking too softly.
- ***and one rises up at the sound of a bird*** – as we age, we get up earlier and earlier. I know that’s the case for me and my dad. Sometimes we text each other at 4:30 a.m. because we’re both wide awake.
- ***and all the daughters of song are brought low*** – this could refer either to music being hard to hear or to our voice weakening. 2 Samuel 19:35 says,

“I am this day 80 years old...can I still listen to the voice of singing men and women?”

- ***they are afraid also of what is high*** – it’s common for us as we age to become afraid of falling from high places.
- ***and terrors are in the way*** – many older people develop fears they never had before, like driving at night. In addition, according to research, around 40% of people aged 65 or older experience some form of age-associated memory impairment. Around 10% of people over 65 are estimated to have dementia, with the rate increasing significantly with age, reaching up to 35% in people over 90. We offer a memory loss support group that meets on the last Sunday of the month from 2:00-4:00 p.m., led by Marcy Kongkousonh.
- ***the almond tree blossoms*** – when an almond tree blossoms, everything turns white, just like our hair.
- ***the grasshopper drags itself along*** – a grasshopper normally jumps high and is very agile, so when it drags itself close to the ground you know it’s nearing the end. The word ***“drags”*** refers to enduring with exhaustion or walking with a slow gait.
- ***and desire fails*** – many older people experience a loss of appetite and other desires wane. I’m reminded of the man who was filling out an application for a retirement village. He very carefully and deliberately answered all the questions. After writing out his current address, he came to the word “Zip” and printed: *“Normal for my age.”*
- ***because man is going to his eternal home*** – since death is coming, it’s important to get ready. Solomon reminds us that this is not our home because we’re headed to our ***“eternal home.”*** 2 Corinthians 5:1 says, ***“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”*** The grave is not our final destiny.
- ***and the mourners go about the streets*** – in that culture, professional mourners were hired for funerals. I’ve heard many seniors say all they do is go to funerals. After one of my dad’s closest friends died, he told me he now has to go the cemetery if he wants to see his friends because they’re all gone.
- ***before the silver cord is snapped*** – some think this refers to our spinal cord.
- ***or the golden bowl is broken*** – commentators believe this symbolizes our skull.
- ***or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain*** – the word ***“shattered”*** means to be broken into pieces. The word ***“fountain”*** reminds us our lives will be poured out like water as we read in 2 Samuel 14:14: ***“We must all die; we***

are like water spilled on the ground.” In Philippians 2:17, Paul said he was being *“poured out like a drink offering.”*

- *or the wheel broken at the cistern* – some commentators believe this phrase refers to the circulatory system and the ventricles of the heart. Studies show that more than half of people develop hypertension by age 65 and heart disease is the most frequent cause of death in the U.S. today.
- *and the dust returns to the earth as it was* – due to Adam’s descent into depravity, every one of us will die (unless the rapture comes first) and our bodies will return to dust. We see this in Genesis 3:19: *“...till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*
- *and the spirit returns to God who gave it* – as we learned last week from Ecclesiastes 11:5, God brings the spirit *“to the bones in the womb of a woman with child.”* When we die, our spirit returns to God. In that sense, we live forever, in either Heaven or Hell. This week, I was lamenting with another guy how our health issues become more pronounced the older we get. I loved his response: *“I don’t like getting old...but I’m closer to heaven. I like that part.”*

In Ecclesiastes 12:8, Solomon bookends the beginning of the book with his overriding theme of what life is like when lived apart from God: *“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity.”* The period of youthfulness is fleeting, and life itself is futile and fragile. Everything is temporary and fleeting, like a wisp of smoke. It looks like there’s something there, but when you try to grasp it, you can’t.

In this type of literature, when the same word is repeated even once, it’s for the purpose of emphasis. It’s like our exclamation point. It’s as if he was saying, *“Super empty. No substance. There’s nothing to it. Everything is blah!”* The ESV translates this word as *“vanity,”* which is used 35 different times in Ecclesiastes. Since no one English word captures the many nuances of the Hebrew, this multipurpose metaphor has been translated in various ways: *temporary, transitory, vanishing, fickle, meaningless, senseless, futile, hollow, empty, puff, smoke, vaporous.*

Tim Challies writes: *“Scarcely do we draw our first breath before we draw our last. Scarcely do we open our eyes before we close them once more. Scarcely do we live before we die...there is a time to live and a time to die. But the time to live seems so short and the time to be dead so long.”*

In our very first message in this series, we established this truth: *Because life is fleeting, base your life on what will last forever.* Don't waste your life on that which does not matter. As we've been learning in Ecclesiastes, no pleasure, pursuit, person, or possession will provide lasting satisfaction.

As a way to put some feet to this sermon I want to interview an expert on ministry to seniors, who still has a lot of "zip" left in him. Let's give Pastor Ed a hand as he comes up. Pastor Ed has served as a pastor at Edgewood for 45 years, starting as the student pastor and now he's the Senior Adults pastor. When I asked if I could interview him, he wondered if I was just going to parade him up here as an illustration of the passage. Actually, I want to ask him some questions.

I thought you might be interested in what Ed looked like when he was a young guy. In the interest of fairness, here are a couple pictures from my younger years.

Interview with Pastor Ed

1. What are some unique challenges and struggles that seniors experience today?
2. How do the ministries you lead help to meet the needs of this generation?
3. Why do you think the Second Winders luncheons are breaking attendance records this year?
4. How can we as a church do a better job serving our senior saints?
5. What are some significant ways seniors can serve others?

Action Steps

Brothers and sisters, let's not view aging as a failure or weakness. Instead, let's see getting older as part of the normal process of life. Here are some action steps.

1. **Celebrate a senior every day.** Start by seeing them and say something kind. Offer to help with something. Send a note. If your parents and grandparents are still alive, call them at least weekly.
2. **Keep growing in Christ whatever season you're in.** I want to suggest two verses, one for youth and one for the young at heart.
 - 1 Timothy 4:12: *"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."*

- Psalm 92:14-15: ***“They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.”***
- 3. Get involved in Intentional Discipleship.** Under Pastor Kyle’s leadership, we are matching mature believers with those who are just starting out in their faith. We want everyone at Edgewood to disciple someone or to be disciplined by someone. To date, around 100 people have been part of this. To learn more, simply fill out a connection card.
 - 4. Make sure you’re serving, no matter what season you are in.** According to a report from “America’s Senior Volunteers,” just 17% of adults age 55 and over who were not directly asked to volunteer actually end up volunteering. Among those who were asked, however, 84%, or more than four times as many, volunteered! If you’re a senior saint, consider yourself “asked” by the Almighty! We could use some more help with our Snow Removal Team, serving meals at Celebrate Recovery, and serving in our vibrant Children’s Ministry. As Pastor Ray often says, *“If you’re not dead, you’re not done.”*
 - 5. It’s not too early if you’re young, nor is it too late if you’re old, to get saved.** You must make it personal. Is He your Creator? Is He your Savior? Is He your Lord? Remember and repent right now. If you feel invisible or forgotten, please know that God sees you and will always remember you. Psalm 136:23: ***“It is He who remembered us in our low estate, for His steadfast love endures forever.”***

I close with a charge from Charles Spurgeon. If you are over the age of 50, would you please stand as you are able: *“If, like David, you have slain the lion and the bear and the Philistine when you were young, up, man, and do another deed of daring, for the Lord liveth still, and his people have need of you. Though your joints are rather rusty, and your limbs can hardly bear you to the battlefield, yet limp to the conflict, for the lame to take the prey. He who helped you when you were but a youth and ruddy, will help you now though you are old and infirm, who knoweth what you may do yet? Oh, my honored brethren, revered for your years, show us your metal. Let the young ones see how victories are won...and let us see how he who is washed in the blood of Jesus would not hesitate to shed his own blood in the Redeemer’s cause. Your zeal will stimulate us, your courage nerve us, and we, too, will be valiant for the Lord God of Israel. So may God’s spirit work in you and in us. Amen.”* (From “The Old Man’s Sermon”)