

Where did life go?

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Keep your Bible open on that passage or make sure you have the text in front on your service sheet. And there's some points there for where we're going this afternoon with this passage.

Okay, here's a fact. We are all getting old. I am so sorry to remind you of that. It's true. The Beatles used to sing about this in their song, When I'm 64. You know the one? When I get older, I won't sing it to you, so don't worry. When I get older, losing my hair. I can't even remember the words. Many years. Must be getting old. Forgetting. Many years from now, will you still be sending me a Valentine birthday greeting bottle of wine? If I've been out till quarter to three, would you lock the door? Will you still need me? Will you still feed me when I'm 64?

Without eyes, without taste, without everything. And I discovered this past week about the seven signs of ageing and how to fight them. Who knew? There were seven signs of ageing. These are the seven signs. You're welcome. Fine lines and wrinkles, dullness of skin, uneven skin tone, dry skin, blotchiness and age spots, rough skin texture and visible pores. I mean, I just thought skin was skin. But it seems that there's a big ploy by the cosmetics industry, the beauty industry, to get us to buy seven different kinds of anti-ageing face cream. And we're fools and so we buy it. Not me, but I believe others do. So you can guess where we're heading today. We're thinking about old age and we're thinking about death. We're asking the question, where did life go? Where did life go?

Because life passes by so quickly, we grow old and then we die. And the brutal reality of this is portrayed for us in the Bible book of Ecclesiastes. So as the teacher of Ecclesiastes, the author, as he's nearing the end of his book, he's been searching for meaning in life all the way through.

And in his search for meaning in life, he has got us to confront death because death is a reality that we all must face. And so here he describes the decaying nature of our bodies. And he does it in a poetically beautiful, but also a perceptively blunt way. They come with a health warning. So if you were feeling good walking in this afternoon about how fit and well you were, you'll probably find his words quite difficult to hear. And yet we need to hear them whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, because the reality of our impending death teaches us how to live life.

[2 : 4 5] And so the teacher forces us to confront not just the fact that our bodies decay and die, which they do, but he forces us to confront the fact that God is the author of life. And so life will only make sense with reference to God. We'll be confused, we'll search and we'll struggle for meaning and purpose and joy and satisfaction if we keep God out of the picture. And so I'd like us to look at this passage under three headings this afternoon. The first is the opportunity of youth, chapter 11, verse 7 through to chapter 12, verse 1. The second is the fragility of old age, chapter 12, verse 2 to 5. And the third is the certainty of death. There's the opportunity of youth, there's the fragility of old age, and there's the certainty of death. So first of all, the opportunity of youth.

Life is short. That's why we need to enjoy life while we're still young and while we still can. And so the teacher's instructions here are mainly for the young, but they're probably best understood by the old. And so if you're not sure, he doesn't mention the middle age, it's either young or old.

So if you're not sure which side of the line you fall on between being young and old, then I'll try and help you. I guess it's fair to draw the line to four. So 44 and below would be young, we're talking youth, 44 and below, 45 and above, we're talking old, old age. And I would reserve the right to revise that next year. But whatever age we are, and we're all different ages, we all need to hear what he's got to say, whether we're young or old or middle aged. And so what does he say, verse 7 and 8? He says, So here he's using poetic language, which is fantastic. He's saying the days of youth are generally light. But as you get older, the darker days come, and there are plenty of them. And so the message is enjoy every single day of life that God gives you. Why? Because life is fleeting. It passes so quickly. And he's not denying the difficulties of life. He merely wants us to enjoy the years we have with an awareness that our joy will be temporary. And so life will also be meaningless if we keep

God out of it. And so he wants us to see that while we just don't know what the future holds, we can know that what's the future. And it's in knowing him that we're able to enjoy the present.

And so he suggests in verse 9, you who are young, be happy while you're young and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see. But know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment. So I guess we love the first part of verse 9, don't we? Nobody's got a problem with the command to be happy, let your heart give you to follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see. Yes, yes, yes, we all want that. But then he says, but know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment. So he's not saying go out and break all the commandments, as many as you can. But he's saying that real enjoyment in life will only be found within the boundaries that God sets up for us. And so life works best, and we flourish best as human beings, not by turning away from what God tells us, but by obeying what God tells us.

[6 : 37] And so our culture would say, you've got to be true to yourself. It's the expressive individualism of our culture, where you become what you are, not by listening to anyone else, or by conforming to any other kind of expected behaviour, whether from your family, but you express yourself in the way that you want to. But as the teacher has already shown us in Ecclesiastes, this will never satisfy us as human beings. It will never bring the joy we crave if we shut God out. And so now he warns that God is going to judge us for how we live. Augustine, who was one of the early church fathers, he said, love God, and do what you like. And I think he had grasped what the teacher is saying here. And yet sometimes many Christians don't, and somehow live as if it's a wrong thing or a bad thing to enjoy the life that God has given us. And you can see it in the killjoy attitude, or in the tone of voice, or even in the facial expressions. And that's the opposite of what the teacher of Ecclesiastes is saying to us.

But those who love God can and should enjoy the life that God has given to us. And that's why he says in verse 10, So then, banish anxiety from your heart, cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. So we must enjoy youth and vigour while we can, because they'll soon fade away.

Derek Kinder, one of the commentators in Ecclesiastes, says this, he says, To idolise the state of youth and to dread the loss of it is disastrous. It spoils the gift even while we have it. Passing phase, beautiful in its time, but not beyond it, is to be free from its frustrations.

So what he's saying is, youth is full of opportunity, but we must neither idolise it, nor must we forget about God in those youthful years, or we'll spoil the whole thing. And that's the message the teacher is driving home. But what's he driving us to? Well, chapter 12, verse 1, he says, Remember, dear Creator, in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them. So what he's saying is, God is our Creator.

And so we're to remember our Creator in the days of our youth. Now, remember here, doesn't that God exists, or thinking about him now and again, like Christmas or Easter. Rather, this is a constant awareness that God is our Creator, and we are merely creatures. We are the people that he has made.

[9 : 20] And so we must let this reality conquer all our attempts in life to try and be like God. And so it means we humble ourselves, we bow down in reverence and awe and fear before God, and we give God his rightful place in our lives, acknowledging that he is in control, and we aren't, and we are accountable as his creatures to him. And we're commanded to do this while we are young, because the days of youth are those formative years in our lives, and they set the course for our future, don't they? Because the older we get, the more trouble life brings, until we get to an age where we don't actually enjoy life at all. And so we've got to remember our Creator before we're rushed into old age and inevitable death. And that's where the teacher is heading next. But before we get there, we shouldn't fail to see the opportunity of youth.

And we shouldn't fail to recognise that there is an urgency to do business with God whilst we're still young. So we can't postpone this, thinking that somehow we might get round to this sometime in the future.

And we'll make an appointment with God and we'll do business then. Well, he's saying we must remember our Creator in the days of our youth, before those days of trouble come, because they are coming.

But this isn't just a command to the young, of course, because many of us are past that now. Not past it now. Past that stage of being young now.

In which case, there's an even greater urgency to remember our Creator, isn't there? And to place our life around Him, with Him at the centre, instead of you and I being at the centre.

[11 : 14] So the teacher is saying, do this whilst you're still young. Whilst your Creator is causing the blood to course through your veins and make your heart beat.

So that's the first point, the opportunity of youth. The second point is the fragility of old age. And this is chapter 12, verse 2 to 5. I love this, because what he does is, he gives this graphic description of growing old.

And he uses a decaying fragility of old age. Now, commentators would disagree about the finer points of interpretation, but what he says here is pretty clear.

And it is an uncomfortable read. And so if you're young, you've got all this to look forward to. Or maybe if you're older, you'll find some of what he says just too close to the bone.

Either way, I would buckle up, because we're in for a bumpy ride. So verse 2, he says, before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark and the clouds return after the rain.

[12 : 16] So he's describing the winter of life. We need to say the twilight years, when life is dull and overcast and things go dark, when our bodies and our minds begin to fail, when the good things in life disappear, our health, our family, our friends, as well as our enjoyment of the beautiful creation.

And then he says the clouds return after the rain. So no sooner has one storm passed in life than another one comes along. So it might be another appointment or another funeral to attend, even though you just attended one last week.

There's another one this week and then next week. He's saying that we're growing old and as we grow old, we decay, we fall apart. So verse 3, when the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few and those looking through the windows grow dim.

So the keepers of the house tremble, probably a reference to the arms and the hands, arms that were once strong, able to protect you and your family and to provide for others, those arms now are weak and shaky.

So it's hard to pour the teapot and it's hard to walk with a china cup and saucer whether the tea is spilling everywhere. And he says the strong men stoop, probably a reference to the legs.

[13 : 38] So the legs that used to do the park run every Saturday morning now struggle to bear the weight of the rest of our body. And we're unable to stand up straight anymore because the physical body just is in terminal decay.

And you know what he's saying, don't you? Don't say you don't, you do. Strange things happen to your body as you get older. We discover that the older we get. So the fat is harder to keep off.

Recovery time after sport just takes far longer. Various aches and pains come, but they don't seem to go away. And then he says the grinders cease because they are few.

The grinders cease meaning the teeth. They're either rotten or they fall the night or they're false. So it's a case of you and your teeth don't sleep together anymore because your teeth sleep in a cup by the side of your bed.

And so you need to be careful when you go out for a meal and how you order from the menu. So steak is out. You can't bite into steak in case your teeth stay there.

[14 : 45] Bread rolls. Well, possibly. But not too crusty because they'll be bad. Corn in the cob. Don't even go there. Soup. Yeah, please.

I'll have some soup. Soup would be nice. I'll eat soup. Forget everything else because that's as much as my teeth will cope with. And then he goes on. And those looking through the windows grow dim. So the eyes start to fail.

You can't make out things in the distance. You need to read under a spotlight. You need to go to the large print section of the brain. And then you need to go to the hospital for the cataracts.

Verse 4. When the doors to the street are closed. So you spend more time inside than you do outside. And even if it isn't forced on you, you just prefer to be at home on your sofa.

And you realize that your back goes out more than you do. And the sound of grinding fades. So your hearing is not quite what it used to be. And it's hard to have conversations.

[15 : 44] And when you watch the TV, the TV volume is going to be turned up to the max. Which is fine if you're watching on your own. But then if the title is on. So you don't deafen all of them as well.

And then he says, When people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint. So you find it harder and harder to sleep through the night. And you're up several times to go to the toilet. So I believe.

And then you're wide awake with the birds. Even though you can't hear what the birds are singing because you're deaf. In verse 5. When people are afraid of heights. And of dangers in the streets.

When the almond tree blossoms. And the grasshopper drags itself along. And desire no longer is stirred. So when people are afraid of heights. The ladder is just now too high to climb.

This begins to scare you. If there's no handrail you can grab onto. So you used to bag them in rows. As a youngster. You used to dangle off your roof. To clear out your gutter.

[16 : 41] But no more. That's what he's saying. So there are dangers in the streets. So there's a fear of venturing outdoors. Especially at night time. Or to busy places.

So you start to experience increased anxiety. Panic attacks. Even paranoia. And then he goes on. When the almond tree blossoms. The almond tree has a dark head in the winter.

But then through spring and into summer. It turns white. As it blossoms. Just like hair turning grey. And then turning white. And of course people try to combat this in various ways.

For me the jury's still out. As to whether having grey hair is better than having no hair. I don't know. But I actually find that my body hair has started to migrate.

The older that I've got. So it migrates by moving from my head. Round onto my back. And then somehow up my nose. And out my ears. But you know what that means.

[17 : 41] I mean I'm sorry for the personal details. But it means that I'm growing old. And you know what I'm talking about. So don't laugh as if that's not your problem. Because it probably is.

Male or female. I don't know. So. We're growing old. And then he goes on about the grasshopper. The grasshopper drags itself along. So there's no more hopping or skipping or jumping.

Standard walking. Even becomes a challenge. So you need to do. So the arthritis and the worn out joints. Mean that you just have to drag yourself around. Or worse. Shuffle with the aid of a Zimmer frame.

Somebody said to me. You know when you're old. And you bend down and tie your shoelaces. And you ask yourself. Is there anything else I can do whilst I'm down here. And then he goes on.

Desire is no longer stirred. He's saying there's not much of an appetite left for anything. Because as the body fails. Desire disappears. And then he says.

[18 : 37] Then people go to their eternal home. And mourners go about the streets. So if a decaying body wasn't bad enough. It's followed by death. We die. And we leave our loved ones to mourn.

And so. Young person. 44 and below. This is your future. Your person. This is your life. And it's brutal isn't it?

The way he describes it. We rapidly transition. From the opportunity of youth. Straight to the fragility of old age. And then we move on to death.

Our bodies fail. Physically. They fail mentally. And so we can become deaf. And blind to God's good gifts. That are scattered throughout these verses.

Family. Friends. Food. Fun. Fitness. They're all here. But the ability of old age. Means that we're not able to enjoy life. The way that we once did. And so he's not telling us this.

[19 : 33] Because he's a skeptic. When it comes to life. He's concerned. Not just about our bodies. He's concerned about our spiritual life.

Because the time will come. When we may not even have faculties. To remember our creator. Because we've wasted. Our whole life.

And so if we've chased after everything else in life. Already described in Ecclesiastes. Then we'll end up asking ourselves. What have I really achieved? If we've left God out.

Our life will pass. And we'll think. What have I done. With my life. Because the day is coming. And it will be too late. To do anything about it.

That's what he's saying here. And he's brutally honest. Because he is urging us to respond to God. Whilst there is still life in us. While we still can. While we still have some level of fitness and health.

[20 : 32] But it gets worse. So there's the opportunity of youth. There is the fragility of old age. And there's the certainty of death. Chapter 12 verse 6 to 8.

We're going to die. And that's the essence of the metaphors that he uses in verse 6. So just read those with me. So we've got four pictures here of things that break.

And it's a poetic description of the certainty of death. And by using pictures. He's not trying to soften the blow here. Because these images are powerfully poignant.

Before the silver cord is severed. Possibly referring to the spinal cord. And the golden bowl is broken. Possibly referring to the skull. Before the picture is shattered at the spring.

And the wheel broke at the well. Possibly a reference to the heart. And so however we understand this. The items he describes. Are all used to hold.

[21 : 44] Or to carry water. Just look at them. And what does water symbolise? Well water symbolises life. And so he gives us this startling picture. To show that when the vessel that carries life.

Our body. When it dies. When it breaks. Then the precious life within. Flows and ebbs away. And so he says in verse 7.

And the dust returns to the ground it came from. And the spirit returns to God. Who gave it. So our bodies decayed. And we returned to the dust. From which we came.

Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. And so the teacher here is echoing words. From the beginning of the Bible. Away back in Genesis chapter 3. About God's curse on creation.

Because of the fall. Because when sin entered into the world. When we rebelled against God's. instructions. His perfect creation. And death entered into the world.

[22 : 44] And the world was no longer perfect. And so for us it may come in old age. Or it may come sooner than expected. But death will come. We will return to the ground.

Whether we go into the grave in the cemetery. Or the incinerator or the crematorium. But that's not all he's saying. Because the teacher doesn't just give us a secular perspective on life here.

Because while our bodies return to the ground. He says our spirit returns to God. To God who gave it. In other words. Our existence continues beyond our physical life on this earth.

It continues beyond death. And that's why a perspective on life without God is so bleak. And it's no wonder he says in verse 8.

Meaningless, meaningless. Says the teacher. Everything is meaningless. Now the word meaningless here is translated from the Hebrew word hevel. And it has the sense of breath or vapour.

[23 : 47] And so he pictures life as fleeting. Like a mist that comes and goes. Or just like a puff of smoke that quickly disappears. And so while our culture would try and hold off death.

With all those skin creams and beauty treatments. And hyposuction and plastic surgery. Whilst our culture would try and hold death off. What the teacher wants us to see is that death is coming.

And he's confronting us with it. Because if we turn up at the judgment. Having ignored God our whole life. Then we have made a serious mistake.

Because if God is our creator. Then we are accountable to him. But the problem is that we failed to worship, love and serve God.

With the life that he's given to us. We have separated ourselves from him. And so as a result we deserve his condemnation. And that's why it's not just foolish to live life in rebellion against God.

[24 : 50] But it will be too late to do anything about it when we die. The opportunity will be lost forever. And so when the judgment comes.

If we haven't remembered or created the life he's given us. Then we will be plunged into an eternity. Apart from God. That's what the Bible describes as hell.

And yet the good news of Christianity. The good news that the teacher is ultimately pointing us to. Is that God has come to find us. And God has come to save us.

Because he became a man in Jesus Christ. To live the life that we can never live. A life fully remembering God. And Jesus died the death that we deserve to die.

A death for our sinful rebellion against God. And so Jesus took our punishment on the cross. For our failure to treat God as God.

[25 : 48] And then when he rose from death. Jesus demonstrated that death had no hold over him. Nor any who entrust their lives to him. Listen to what Jesus said in John chapter 11.

He said, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live. Even though they die. And whoever lives. Leaving in me. Will never die. Do you believe this?

So Jesus is asking the ultimate question. Do you believe this? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? And no eternal life? Life. I read those words from John chapter 11.

At every single funeral I ever take. Because they come from the one. Who is our only hope. In life. And for death.

And so the resurrection of Jesus. Means that those who die. Believing in him. Never really die. Just like the teacher. In Ecclesiastes. He also uses the image of a decaying house.

[26 : 50] To describe our decaying physical bodies. But he also speaks about them being remade. Or rebuilt. Listen to what he says in 2 Corinthians chapter 5.

He says, For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed. We have a building from God. An eternal house in heaven. Not built by human hands.

So he's talking about the resurrection body. That we will receive. If we believe in Jesus Christ. Which means we will be forever young. And so while the reality is that these bodies that we live in.

They will die because of a cursed creation. But we can look forward to a new creation. And a resurrection because Jesus lived and died.

And rose again. And so there will always be sickness, disease and death. And so it shouldn't surprise us. But the issue is. Will we face death alone?

[27 : 53] By ourselves? Or will we face death with Jesus? By our side? Let's pray. Thank you God for the life that you give.

We pray that whoever we are here today. That we would remember you. That we would put you at the very centre of our lives.

That we would look to Jesus Christ. The one who said, I am the resurrection and the life. And know what it means to live life in all its fullness. Help us as we have been reminded today about the brutality and the bloodiness of growing old.

Help us to remember that this is the life that you have given us to enjoy. And to use it for you. And so we pray that we would do that. And know that this life is not all there is.

And death is not the end for those who know and love Jesus Christ. And so we give our thanks and praise today in Jesus name. Amen.