

An Allegory

About Aging Poetry & Prudence©

The Great Literature of Life

The Bible is all inclusive in that it speaks to and has bearing on every single area of life. This does not mean it speaks exhaustively on every subject, but God's Word is so complete and thorough that it includes information which has a relevance to every aspect of man's existence. The sincere student of Scripture will be impressed by the range of topics on which the Creator has spoken. The Bible contains pertinent facts and vital instruction invaluable to life.

The Bible is readable and readily understood as the historic narratives are contemplated and enjoyed. The best in poetry and prose, the richest of imagery and symbolism, the most profound philosophy and preaching, the marriage of the miraculous and the commonplace, the boldest predictions and sublime truths are included in this Book without peer. All of this is accomplished by couching the literature of God's people in the precise Greek language of the New Testament and the vivid, picturesque Hebrew language of the Old Testament.

The Bible truly is the greatest masterpiece of

writing ever compiled into one book. It is also very practical as the grand guide in life. There is no portion of Scripture which is without profit to the one who is seeking its counsel.

The Great Lesson of Life

Having thus expressed a few words on the grandeur of the entire Bible, we will narrow our focus to consider a somewhat obscure Old Testament selection of a few verses. Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, attributed to the pen of King Solomon, is an example of Scripture's literary genius, while at the same time, enlightening the reader by using the most obvious and observable realities of life and death.

A description of the latter stage of man's physical existence is depicted in a singular way. It is done in an allegorical fashion. [According to the dictionary, the word allegory has the following definition: "a story in which people, things, and events have a symbolic meaning, often instructive."] This unique literary style is unusual and distant to the experience of many modern men of the West who think in simplistic or concrete terms, but it is effective in conveying vivid messages. The reader is forced to think deeply, to conjure up memorable pictures of intense scenes in his mind, to accept his mortality and to place his life in perspective.

The allegory of Ecclesiastes is a grim warning with a clear message. The conclusion is given first. The elderly, in the midst of their infirmities, are to be a

testimony to the rest of us; the young are admonished to pursue the Lord and the things of the Lord while health and vigor allow. To strongly make this point, the conclusion is followed by a series of sobering, albeit symbolic, snapshots conveying the often challenging realities of old age with its failing health.

1. *Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them":**

We are told to acknowledge and serve our Creator with our strength and time, as it is due Him, before health and reason are lost. The latter days of our life may be “difficult days” as we struggle with grievous bodily deterioration which robs us of earthly “pleasure”. We are called to serve the Lord by giving Him the best and most productive years we have. It should also be understood that our service to the Lord, while we have health, will, in turn, serve us in our old age. The happy memories of a well-spent youth while healthy, will comfort and sweeten the inactive days of old age and lift our spirits. When the “difficult days” come, and they come without lots of memories of a godly life well-spent, those days will be the most painful and wearisome and dark in all of life. This verse is certainly a call to serve the Lord in health and in youth, but it also contains a warning of the mental and emotional distress which will be added to the physical infirmities

of old age when this call to service is not faithfully heeded.

- 2. While the sun and light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain;*

This may express either the approaching dimness of eyesight accompanied by old age (thus the sun and moon and stars will no longer appear to produce enough light) and/or the loss of comprehension of the mind and failing memory (thus the figurative sun and moon and stars represent the enlightening of the mind which will wane). In the young, the “clouds” of old age—infirmities, disease, and grief, do not normally come in succession as one rain cloud following another like they pour forth on the aged.

- 3. In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow down; when the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows grow dim;*

The analogy of a house is used to characterize the sad state of one suffering from the throes of declining health in old age. The trembling of the “keepers of the house” refers to the hands and arms being unsteady and weakened by tremors. The “strong men bow down” refers to the legs and thighs which now have difficulty supporting the body and allowing it to move

easily. The “grinders” refer to the teeth and their inability to perform their work of chewing because of lack of numbers and their loss of strength. The ones who “look through the windows” is a reference to the eyes having diminished vision or blindness.

4. When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low; when one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of music are brought low.

The “doors” here refer to the mouth, or more specifically, the lips; the “streets” refer to the passage-way of the throat. The “sound of grinding is low” refers to struggling speech. All these together indicate the difficulty in producing clear, audible words which can be understood by others. Also, this verse refers to the one who “rises up”, or gets out of bed, at the “sound of a bird”. The elderly, unable to sleep well and long, get up early when the birds begin to chirp. A third reference to sound is that of music. The “daughters of music” is a reference to the lungs-voice-ears which are employed in the production and enjoyment of music, and their being “brought low” indicates their ineffectiveness or inability in this matter.

5. Also, they are afraid of height, and of terrors in the way; when the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails. For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the street.

A fear of “height” refers to difficulty in maneuvering hills, stairs, or other steep places. “Terrors in the way” would be obstacles which could cause one to stumble or fall. The “blossoms” of the almond tree, being white flowers, would be a reference to the grey and white heads of hair common to those in old age. Finally, feebleness is so extreme that, proverbially speaking, even the lightness of a “grasshopper” is a heavy weight to bear. Lastly, “desire fails”- old age has taken away the most basic pleasures of life as food, music, conversation, etc. Unabated, death surely comes and man “goes to his eternal home”. The grave is the body’s repose. The “mourners” accompany the corpse to its burial. In fact, in Jewish culture, death was publicly and loudly lamented in the streets by hired mourners who decried the end of a life.

6. Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well.

The call to “remember your Creator” is trumpeted again, before health fails and death overtakes! God remembered in youth will be a Friend in old age. One who prays, who has grown old in this remembrance, has a confidence which will not be disappointed. Here is the prayer of the godly facing the trials of old age: “Oh God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God do not forsake

me.” (Psalm 71:17-18a) Here is the answer given by God to His faithful: “Even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hair I will carry you! I have made and I will bear; Even I will carry, and will deliver you.” (Isaiah 46:4)

The “cord is loosed” is an illusion to the spine or backbone allowing the body to go limp; the “bowl is broken” is a stunning reference to the brain. These are called “silver” and “gold” to allude to their necessary preciousness to the body and life. The “pitcher shattered” is the bursting heart. To be more exact, the “fountain” could be a direct reference to the right ventricle from which the blood is pumped and the “well” a direct reference to the left ventricle where the blood collects. When these are broken, they no longer hold or draw the water of life any longer. This is the moment of death.

*7. Then the dust will return to the earth as it was,
and the spirit will return to God who gave it.*

The allegory is complete. The body decays and will return to the dust. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground...” (Genesis 2:7) “...For dust you are and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) “You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.” (Psalm 104:29) Meanwhile, the spirit of man goes to God. “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” (Job 33:4) “And the Lord God...breathed into his nostrils

the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) “Shall we not...be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?” (Hebrews 12:9) Each part of man returns to its original source- the body to the earth, the spirit “to God who gave it”. Thus, the body and spirit are separated at death.

We may thus draw two critical conclusions from this short allegory. (1) Coming to our Creator, who is Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:15-17; John 1:1-3), in our youth will be of great comfort to us in our old age. The remembrance of those godly and productive years for Christ will be a balm to our spirits when we are laid low by poor health. By contrast, a remembrance of health and youth ill-spent without Christ will provide no consolation in the latter years of life when infirmities and old age advance. (2) By observing the plight of many in advanced age and the normal decline of the human body in old age, a warning is issued to the young. The enjoyments and pleasures of this world are fleeting; good health is not promised or even to be always expected. We must look beyond this tainted life and seek the eternal. In youth we are instructed to open our hearts to Christ and serve Him with vigor.

The Great Loss of Life

Ecclesiastes, along with the books of “Job” and “Proverbs”, is known as the Wisdom Literature of Scripture. As we have read and studied even this short passage we acknowledge God – His wisdom is to be admired, His Word is to be consulted, His *providence*

is to be observed, and His faithfulness is to be relied upon.

Old age, with its troubling infirmities, is a *proof* of God's eminent kindness. Many might say: "What? How can the struggles of declining health be a blessing or a proof of God's goodness?" Hopefully, this booklet has answered that question. The difficulties of the elderly, as they physically decline before the eyes of their families and friends, is to be for the benefit of those who are watching. God brings to us, through such situations in the lives of others, a constant remembrance.

Also, we cannot say this time of old age is not a proof of God's love toward the ones experiencing the afflictions too. For example, I have visited with and spoken to many elderly persons who had recently lost the ability to drive their cars. Usually their relatives will take away this privilege as the danger becomes more and more evident. After a lifetime of driving and enjoying a great measure of independence, it is suddenly taken away! When out visiting elderly clients for the ministry I head, I've been privy to this sort of situation many times. An old man's brother sadly told me, "One of the hardest things we had to do was take away his car." An elderly widow recently explained, with some emotion, "My children won't let me drive any more." She had put her car up for sale. It has thus been impressed upon me how important the ability to drive a car is to us. It is independence, it is freedom, and for many it is now gone. I cannot over emphasize

this particular experience of the elderly because it is tough for them.

For the elderly, the loss of driving privileges is a sudden reminder that they are not independent. For the young and old alike, we learn we are dependent creatures. We tend to easily forget this as long as we are freewheeling. With no transportation, the elderly are sometimes solitary for long hours or days at a time. Loneliness and inactivity are a problem, but it may be a helpful time as well. Now is the time to talk with God in prayer, to read the Bible (or listen to it on tape), and meditate on eternity. The memories of past years of mobility and health may be sweet or they may be sour. The memories may comfort or condemn. Nevertheless, God delivers people into this place in His providence. Old age can be a time of reconciliation to the Redeemer who has been neglected in years past. Although it is late, it is not finished. This may be the sweetest years of life as it is graciously given by God as a means of bringing people to enjoy a nearness to their Creator.

As believers we have the Holy Spirit (the Comforter), we have His Word, we have brothers and sisters in Christ, we have God-given family relationships, we have prayer, and we have a store of rich memories. In old age we can remember the words to Christian hymns and sing them, we can remember Bible verses and recite them, we can remember answers to prayer over which we anguished, we can fondly recall our Christian relationships, and we can

remember how we diligently served Christ with our time and resources. Remember?

Certainly we do not counsel individuals to throw their lives away in wasteful folly while neglecting the Lord until they are old and worn out! This would be a great danger for several reasons. We are not promised old age in which to repent. If we are given old age, it is noted that very few do come to Christ at an advanced age. It is remarkable but it does happen! In addition, it is indeed a shame to waste our healthy lives in selfish pleasures and worldly ambitions and then, in old age, seek religion to offer Him the dregs that are left.

Nevertheless, the Lord of life laments and warns from His Word: “As I live, says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die...’” (Ezekiel 33:11) The loss of the ability to drive a car may lead to distress; the loss of a life wasted while in health will lead to despondency; the loss of an eternity in heaven with Christ leads to utter disaster!

As Charles Wesley was near death, the great hymn writer penned these words:

*In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?
Jesus: my only hope thou art;
Strength of my failing flesh and heart.
O let me catch a smile from thee,
And drop into eternity.*

The closing lines to Augustus Toplady's famous hymn "Rock Of Ages" (written with the notation in its original title A Prayer, living and dying) are as follows:

*While I draw this fleeting breath,
When my eye-strings break in death;
When I soar to worlds unknown;
See thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.*

The Great Libation of Life

No one wants to get old and endure the hardships of health loss. No one wants to become enfeebled and dependent upon the care of others, even their loved ones. This truism has been vividly highlighted by a remarkable, and well-known, exploration event. The record of one man's peculiar pursuit has captured the imagination of historians and others for several hundred years. But is it so odd?

Don Juan Ponce de Leon arrived in the Americas with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. In 1509 he became governor of Puerto Rico. From the carib (Caribbean) Indians he heard tales of a spring located on an island named Bimini. Drinking from this fountain of water would cure diseases and restore youth. Ponce de Leon begged and finally convinced the king of Spain to provide him with men and ships to search for the "fountain of youth". In the search for the fountain, Ponce de Leon accidentally discovered the extreme southeastern, North American

coastline. He sighted this land on April 3, 1513 and, going ashore at a location known as St. Augustine today, he claimed “Florida” (the name he gave the region) for Spain. While exploring Florida, he drank water from every spring he came across, hoping to discover the fabled fountain of youth. Despite his best efforts he never did find the mystical fountain he sought the rest of his life.

Although we are enamored with youth, although we live in a “youth culture” where growing old is disdained, we cannot stop the aging process. We may not tell our age and we can color the grey out of our hair, but old age is inevitable. There is no fountain of youth and we are not allowed to eat from the tree of life. (see Genesis 3:21-24) This is the way God has intended it to be.

Unfortunately, having an absorbing youth mindset and an obsession against growing old, it may cause the busy sophisticated children and grandchildren of the old folks to feel embarrassment or discomfort about their aged relations. The elderly may be thought a nuisance or an unproductive drain on society. The aged may cause family members to feel uncomfortable by placing them in a position of having to make difficult decisions. In such cases, the young do not learn lessons and gain wisdom from the old because they seldom, or never, go to see them in their homes or nursing homes! Eldercare could be viewed as a duty devoid of delight as many try not to think of growing old and becoming unhealthy themselves.

Remember, a fount of wisdom is found in Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible. There is no way to reverse the aging process, but we can gain wise instruction from it. There is no fountain of magic water either, but there is a fountain of living water.

There are a number of Scriptural references to this “fountain of life”. Drinking from the fountain of life is abundantly satisfying (see Psalm 36:8-9); the fountain of life preserves one from death (see Proverbs 14:27); the fountain of living water is a source of dependable refreshment (see Jeremiah 2:13); the fountain of living water is a source of hope (see Jeremiah 17:13). What is this fountain of life? What does this mean? Jesus explains by saying: “It is done! I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.” (Revelation 21:6)

Water from the fountain of life symbolically refers to the salvation which is found in Jesus Christ. Any who thirst for this water may freely drink. This fountain will not promise anyone present freedom from earthly aging and infirmity, but it will promise eternal life in heaven with Christ and more. Heaven is where we find cessation from the temporal ills most commonly experienced in old age. In heaven “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

The fountain of youth was only a whimsical

daydream, like so many things in which men falsely place their trust, while only the fountain of life can bring true and eternal healing.

The famous hymnist and poet- William Cowper, penned the following words to the old familiar hymn, still widely sung, entitled “There Is A Fountain”:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day,
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.*

*Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more.*

*E’er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die.*

*When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave,
Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I’ll sing thy power to save.*

Explanation

The purpose of this booklet is two-fold. The first purpose is to show how old age is used of God to impress upon us the urgency with which we should fly to Christ. Good health is a gift but it is not to be taken for granted. When we view the poor health of the elderly, it should cause us to be that much more thankful and zealous for the Lord. Unbelievers are called to serve Christ before it is too late, believers are called to work with more enthusiasm as the time is short. We are challenged to be intent on “redeeming the time.” (see Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5)

The second purpose of this booklet is to remind us of the benefit believers receive when they reach old age. A wasted life is a sorry comforter in old age which is often spent, not only in declining health, but in periods of solitude bringing to mind the past years. God uses the fond memories of His incapacitated aged to assist them in coping with their plight. We have many helps in life to bear up under the weight of our trials, especially in old age – the least of which is not our memories of a life well-spent for Christ and His work.

*All Scripture citations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.

–Robert Smith