

## **Ecclesiastes 12:1-8-Death, an Impetus for Life**

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In the Book of Ecclesiastes the author described his search for the key to the meaning of life. That search, however, became an exercise in futility because the more he sought for the answers to life, the more he discovered that life itself is unfair, that human wisdom is woefully insufficient, and that death continually laughed in his face. Furthermore he realized that of those three barriers- injustice, ignorance, and death-death by far is the most devastating. As Fuerst wrote, "Death is clearly the major problem, which intensifies and exacerbates all others; the spectre of death mocks the brave plans of the living. Man cannot argue with this spectre, and cannot combat it. It will win in the end."<sup>1</sup>

Death has a voracious, insatiable appetite. Much like a vicious animal, it silently stalks its prey and then strikes with great fury and often little warning. It tears asunder hopes and dreams, and declares that life itself is "vanity," "futility," "meaninglessness," or "emptiness" (לְהֵיטָל). Thus death "can make a man hate life, not because he wants to die, but because it renders life so futile."<sup>2</sup>

Since death cannot be circumvented, Solomon argued that the

<sup>1</sup> Wesley J. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids Baker Book House, 1972), p. 143.

key to life and living is to be found in facing death and dying. Going to a wake will help one become awake to the realities of life (7:2, 4). Perhaps to his surprise, Solomon discovered that the meaning of life can be found only by facing the inevitable reality of death.

Ecclesiastes includes numerous references to death and dying.<sup>3</sup> The most thorough treatment on the process and finality of death is in 12:1-8, a passage that graphically depicts the decay of life with its frailty, fear, and ultimately its finality. Before discussing this passage six principles on death and life will be presented.

### Principles on the Death-Life Phenomenon

*Principal One: All die* (2:14-16; 3:19-22; 9:3). There is an inescapable finality to death; "the inclusiveness of the grave [is] universal."<sup>4</sup> Whether human or animal, wise or foolish, righteous or unrighteous, clean or unclean, sacrificer or nonsacrificer, good or bad, swearer or the one who refuses to swear oaths, each one must face the fate of death. Being a human may have its advantages over being an animal, and being wise may have its advantages over being foolish in being able to live longer. Yet ultimately death functions as the great equalizer. Thus the one certainty of life is death.<sup>5</sup>

*Principal Two: Death has certain advantages over life* (4:1-3; 7:1-2, 26). In life, wickedness abounds; in death, there is no suffering and there are no snares to entrap a person. In life, there is constant oppression, often with none to offer comfort; in death, there is a sense of escape. For the living, there is seldom relief—the innocent are unable to "throw off an oppressive yoke, and in the absence of hope, life becomes intolerable."<sup>6</sup> Contemplating these truths, Solomon concluded that death is to be preferred to life and nonexistence to either

<sup>3</sup> 2:14-16; 3:2 19-22; 4:1-3; 5:15-16; 6:3-4, 6; 7:1-2, 4,17,26; 8:8, 10, 12-13; 9:2-3, 4-6, 10-12; 12:1-7.

<sup>4</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 453.

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes does not soften the harsh reality of death. In fact little by way of a theology of the afterlife is presented, leaving it to be understood primarily as a mystery. Moreover, when the subject of the afterlife is addressed (9:5-6, 10), it is presented as a contrasting existence to the present life, as a place where all earthly experiences cease (Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983], p. 129). Furthermore even though at death the human spirit returns to God (12:7), no one is able to show what that existence will be like (3:21).

<sup>6</sup> James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Israelite Wisdom*, ed. John G. Gammie et al. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 208.

death or life.<sup>7</sup> The quest to find meaning to life by investigating life itself, therefore, becomes a hopeless and vain effort.<sup>8</sup>

*Principle Three: Death cannot be avoided, but it is best not to act foolishly and to rush it* (3:2; 6:6; 7:17; 8:8, 12-13; 9:11-12). Humans desire to control death and, to a limited extent, they are able to forestall it. They are capable of acting in ways that would seem to hasten death on the one hand or to extend life on the other (7:17; 8:12-13). Yet typically death happens without regard to people's plans. In the ultimate sense, it is controlled by God (3:2; 9:11-12).

Remarkably, despite principle two (that death has certain advantages over life), the author of Ecclesiastes never encouraged the shortening of life, by either unintentional or intentional means. To the contrary, he urged people to refrain from wickedness or foolishness which conceivably could hasten the end of their lives (7:17). Furthermore he avoided offering suicide as an option—a lure which "would seem irresistible for one who hates life and falls into despair's vice-like grip."<sup>9</sup> A voiding such extremes, he offered principles four and five as positive affirmations of life in the face of death.

*Principle Four: Studying the reality of death can be instructive on how to live life to the fullest* (7:4; 12:1-7). "The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning" rather than in "the house of pleasure" (7:4). Such a perspective forces the individual to face the reality of death toward which all life inevitably points. A soberness or an attitude of reflection thereby is thrust on the individual. "Sorrow penetrates the heart, draws the thought upwards, purifies, transforms."<sup>10</sup> By advocating the study of death, Qohelet challenged his readers to face life in light of their mortality. Also he urged them to

<sup>7</sup> Qohelet's conclusion regarding the preference of nonexistence over present existence appears on the surface to be at variance with the Old Testament Israelite's aversion to Sheol, the place of the dead. Knudson states that "the Israelites looked forward to it [Sheol] with unconcealed dread. Almost any kind of earthly existence was to be preferred to it" (Albert C. Knudson, *The Religious Teaching of the Old Testament* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1918], p. 390). Qohelet, however, did not embrace the place of the dead as the place to be. Rather, he preferred nonsuffering as the "place" to be. The dead and the never-alive do not face the miseries of this life. Their fate, moreover, is not a question mark but a reality; it is not something to be feared by the child of God but something to be experienced. (Compare principle five in which Qohelet argued that there are advantages to being alive when compared to being dead.)

<sup>8</sup> J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon*, The Layman's Bible Commentary (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1908), p. 110. See Ecclesiastes 1:13-2:11.

<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. M. C. Easton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 315.

consider their fate early in life (12:1) while there is still time to make a difference in how they live. The longer the delay, the more old age will rob them of the ability to make changes necessary to live life to the fullest to the glory of God (vv. 1-5).

*Principle Five: Life has certain advantages over death* (9:4-6, 10). While One is alive, there is a hope of finding meaning to life and the Possibility of attaining success in life that carries beyond the grave. Qohelet illustrated this truth by maintaining that even the lowest of the low (i.e., the dog)<sup>11</sup> that is alive is better off than the greatest (if the great (i.e., the lion)<sup>12</sup> that is dead (9:4). By this contrast he reinforced the superiority of life to death. Whereas life offers hope, death shatters all dreams. Death allows no further opportunity for obtaining any reward in this life or the next.-

*Principle Six: Living solely for this life is meaningless* (5:15-16; 6:3-5; 8:10). Securing all possible physical possessions (wealth, health, and family) and religious credits does nothing to ensure an enduring reward or a meaningful existence after the grave. Riches in fact deceive the individual who places his or her trust in them (5:13-16). They are inherently unsatisfying-they are never enough; someone always desires to take them away; and they produce worry and misery in this life. Riches also are temporary-they provide no true security. They cannot be taken into the next life; they are as fleeting as the wind.

Having a long life with many descendants (6:3-5) does not guarantee earthly satisfaction, much less eternal rewards. The joy of children's laughter may fade through the years and children's love for their father may turn to resentment or apathy-the resultant tragedy being that none of a man's children may care enough even to save face by giving him a decent burial.<sup>13</sup> Such a man, as Kidner states, would "have the things men dream of-which in Old Testa-

<sup>11</sup> Crenshaw describes the Hebrew view of "dog" as follows: "The lowly cur [9:4b], restricted to a life of scavenging on the perimeters of human existence, functioned as a term of opprobrium. The epithet 'dog,' was hurled in the faces of male prostitutes, who belonged, in the speaker's opinion, outside the domain of human beings (Deut. 23:18-19). The term also became a means of self-abnegation, particularly in the presence of nobility 1:1 Sam. 24:14)" ("The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," p. 209).

<sup>12</sup> In direct contrast to the dog, which was despised by the Hebrews, the lion enjoyed an exalted status. "To the Jews the lion was the mightiest of beasts, having a king's regal bearing (P:v 30:29-31). Thus it symbolized leadership (Gn 49:9, 10; Nm 24:9)" (Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 198~], 1:107-8).

<sup>13</sup> Eichrodt argues that the Israelites attached much significance to having a proper burial. He states that they saw a direct relationship between the absence or inadequacy of a burial and the realization of a less desirable position in the afterlife (Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961,1967],2:212).

ment terms meant children by the score, and years of life by the thousand-and still depart unnoticed, unlamented and unfulfilled."<sup>14</sup>

These tragic situations are compounded by the fact that even if an individual is religious, he is quickly forgotten after he dies (8:10).<sup>15</sup> The seemingly solid permanence of this life fades quickly into the shadowy, elusive specter of the next. .

### **An Introduction to 12:1-8 on Death and Life**

Many attempts have been made to unify Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 under one analogical scheme.<sup>16</sup> Some scholars have advocated that the passage describes physiological changes. Others have suggested that it pictures a funeral, and still others have indicated that it depicts a ruined house. The wisest approach seems to be that suggested by Gordis who maintains that "most plausibly, old age is pictured here without one line of thought being maintained throughout."<sup>17</sup> Fuerst concurs, stating that "it is better not to insist on ...the presence of just one dominant figure of speech."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Solomon saw death and dying as such debilitating and devastating events that he determined to portray them through a multiplicity of analogies with great rapidity to ensure that the thrust of his message was clearly understood.

Because of the diversity of illustrative material in the passage, it is necessary to analyze each of the images separately to determine its specific point of reference.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, the various conundrums will be clarified and the integrity of the passage maintained.<sup>20</sup> The passage is framed by references to God as the Originator of life. Despite the inequities of life and the terrors of death, God is

<sup>14</sup> Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> This verse may be understood either as focusing solely on the wicked who in some way make a pretense of being religious or as presenting the wicked in the first half and the righteous in the second half. For a discussion of these two positions see Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, pp. 345-47, and Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of some of the more common approaches toward unification, see Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, and Robert Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968)

<sup>17</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 339.

<sup>18</sup> Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations: the Five Scrolls*, p. 152.

<sup>19</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 163-64.

<sup>20</sup> Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 101.

ever the Creator of both the living (v. 1)<sup>21</sup> and the dead (v. 7). God's sovereignty is thus recognized as a regulating element in all human activities. If God is present at the beginning and the ending of life, He most certainly is there throughout the totality of life. God thus can give meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence; He can even help individuals make sense out of the senselessness of death.

To aid the flow of thought through the passage, Qohelet employed three times the temporal marker **עַד אֲשֶׁר** ("before") (vv. 1-2, 6) to denote the transitions between the temporal-psychological shifts in the passage. While signaling a new thought, the words also recall the command of verse 1, "Remember also your Creator." The primary activity to undertake throughout all phases of life is to consider God and His involvement in the life-death phenomenon.

### **The Days before the End (12:1)**

"Remember also" (**וַיִּזְכֹּר**) provides a transition from the injunction to live life to the fullest because it is short and the future is uncertain (11:1-10) to a serious enjoinder to live life wisely precisely because it is short and the future is certain (12:1-7). That future certainty is the fact that every individual will die. Furthermore the process of dying is an experience filled not with pleasure but with sorrow.

"Remember" (**זָכַר**) is the most appropriate choice for this solemn religious adjuration.<sup>22</sup> Though the *Qal* form of this verb normally refers "to inner mental acts, either with or without reference to concomitant external acts,"<sup>23</sup> the context of this passage (and of the entire book) implies that action subsequent to the mental activity must be undertaken. Readers are challenged to remember, not for the sake of reminiscing but for the purpose of revolutionizing their lives, bringing them into conformity with God's eternal and sovereign plan.

Various commentators have sought to emend **בֹּרְאֵי יְהוָה** ("your Creator") in the Masoretic Text to read "your well" or "your cistern"--euphemistic terms for one's wife.<sup>24</sup> These commentators argue that the verse is recommending "the enjoyment of marital relations."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See below for a discussion of the arguments for and against **בֹּרְאֵי יְהוָה** as a reference to God as Creator.

<sup>22</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 340.

<sup>23</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v. "זָכַר," by Andrew Bowling, 1:241.

<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 5:15, 18 presents this euphemistic use of the term **בְּאֵר**.

<sup>25</sup> Both Whybray and Gordis discuss and reject this view that requires an emended text (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 163, and Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 340).

Others have suggested "your pit" as a possible alternative, thereby implying the grave. Still others have offered "your vigor, well-being."<sup>26</sup> These options are similar in phonics but not in orthography.<sup>27</sup>

Though there is no textual support for these alternative readings,<sup>28</sup> those who recommend an emended text do so because they believe that an "allusion to God the Creator ill fits this context."<sup>29</sup> However, strong arguments based on the context may be made in favor of the reading "your Creator." First, in 11:5, God is first mentioned since 9:7. Then the Person of God is kept before the minds of the readers in the concluding verses of the book (11:5, 9; 12:1, 7, 13-14). Second, the reference to God provides an effective inclusio to the discussion of death, picturing God both as the One from whom life comes (v. 1) and as the One to whom life returns (v. 7). Third, though in 11:9-10 Qohelet urged his readers to enjoy the pleasures of life, he counterbalanced that charge by a solemn warning to remember the judgment of God. To shift away from that God-oriented perspective in 12:1 to encourage the embracing of one's wife would be contrary to his argument.<sup>30</sup> Fourth, remembering one's "grave" or one's "well-being" might be shown to fit the context of 12:1-7, but their use would weaken the impact of the text.

In contrast to the alternative renderings, the term **בִּוְרָאֵי יְיָ**, a probable plural of majesty,<sup>31</sup> is highly appropriate in this context. Since the theme of 12:1-8 is death, the end of physical life, what better way is there for expressing the nonfinality of that death than to remind the readers that God is Creator? Death is pictured not as the end but rather as the beginning of an everlasting existence.

Readers are to remember God early in their lives ("in the days of your youth")<sup>32</sup> "because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting" (11:10). As the days of one's youth pass quickly, the onset of the

<sup>26</sup> Crenshaw discusses these various alternatives and selects "your wife" as his preferred translation (*Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, pp. 184-85).

<sup>27</sup> Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 184.

<sup>30</sup> Qohelet commended spousal love-making in 9:9 in a somewhat less somber context. To reintroduce it here would be an unnecessary (and incongruous) redundancy.

<sup>31</sup> Whybray suggests that **בִּוְרָאֵי יְיָ** is a plural of majesty (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 163); Gesenius says that the singular should be read (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2d Eng. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910], p. 399).

<sup>32</sup> Qohelet did not define the age of "youth," except as a contrast to what follows (1:12:2-5). Furthermore he did not indicate that an older person cannot or should not remember his God, but rather he seems to imply that the older an individual becomes, the more difficult it is to change his life when he does remember

aging process brings with it a decline that impacts the vigor and drive of one's life.<sup>33</sup> Pleasure and hope are inversely proportional to age. Thus people ought to turn to God while there is still time to discover the meaning of life and alter the course of their lives.<sup>34</sup> Goldberg suggests the intent behind Qohelet's concern as follows: "We are encouraged...to commit ourselves to our Creator while we have our wits about us, while we can still enjoy life, and before we lose the fullest capacity to even think of God's purposes and desires."<sup>35</sup>

In verse 1 the first of the three עַד אֲשֶׁר ("before") temporal clauses, "before the evil days come," highlights the time of life before the onslaught of death's decay is noticeable. This summarizes in an overview fashion what is described in detail in verses 2-7, namely, that in his dying the individual will have no delight.

To what do "the evil days" refer? Rather than being a reference to moral perversion<sup>36</sup> or the darkness of Sheol,<sup>37</sup> as some suggest, "evil days" synonymous with "old age, in which there is no pleasure."<sup>38</sup> Such a view is contextually appropriate because of its contrast to "in the days of your youth" and because of its continuation of the argument (11:6-10) that the early years of life provide opportunities for enjoyment whereas the later years do not.

Furthermore the closing chapter of one's life reduces dramatically the of opportunity for accomplishing the desires of one's heart. They are in fact times of "no delight"--times in which there is an absence or impossibility<sup>39</sup> (רֵיָא) of delight. This "delight" (רֵפֶן) is an emotion-laden word that implies an attraction to some object, hence a "desire" or a "longing" for something.<sup>40</sup> It conveys the idea of "delight" or "pleasure" and may be used "in reference to a person's great interest."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly Qohelet did not suggest that the act of "remembering" God acts either as a deterrent to or as a cosmetic against the ravages of old age; it is not an elixir from the mythical fountain of youth. The assumption is that everyone who lives long enough will experience the natural debilitating effects of the aging process.

<sup>35</sup> Louis Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), pp. 185-86.

<sup>38</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 341.

<sup>39</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "רֵיָא," by Jack B. Scott, 1:37.

<sup>40</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 343.

<sup>41</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "רֵפֶן," by Leon J. Wood, 1:311.



The fact that an individual will lose his delight in life seems to indicate that he may tend to focus too much on his infirmities to the detriment of enjoying what God has created.<sup>42</sup> He will have lost the proper perspective on life and will have run counter to the commands to rejoice while growing up, to follow the impulses of one's heart and the desires of one's eyes, and to enjoy life with one's own spouse (9:9; 11:9). As Hengstenberg perceptively summarizes this message: "How mournful a thing must it be to pass into the ranks of those who are here described, without having tasted of the feast of joys prepared by the Creator for all those who remember Him."<sup>43</sup>

### **The Days of the Ending (12:2-5)**

The second thematic marker (רָשָׁע בְּעֵד, "before") shifts the reader's thinking from that time of life before the individual is fully aware of the aging process to that time when he is painfully aware of his personal decay. Verses 2-5 include a series of metaphors that reveal 'that the signs forewarning old age are no longer mere warnings; they have become realities.

The beginning metaphor is that "the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened" (v. 2). Because the passage speaks of aging and the dying process, this verse should not be thought of as referring to the future cosmic judgment in which the sun, moon, and stars will be destroyed (Rev. 6:12-13). In addition, this clause should not be considered a reference to the loss of one's family, drawing on the symbolism of Genesis 37:9-10 (i.e., the sun meaning father, the moon meaning mother, and the stars meaning brothers). Rather, it should be understood as being generically suggestive of one or more of the following: "a time of affliction and sadness,"<sup>44</sup> "the fading capacity for joy,"<sup>45</sup> "the more general desolations of old age,"<sup>46</sup> or the failing of one's eyesight "so that the lights of all sorts become dim."<sup>47</sup> Most simply,<sup>48</sup> the clause is expressing metaphorically the

<sup>42</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 274.

<sup>43</sup> Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (reprint, Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1977), p. 245.

<sup>44</sup> J. M. Fuller, ed., *Proverbs-Ezekiel*, The Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker I Book House, 1972), p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 148.

<sup>46</sup> Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 186.

<sup>48</sup> Simplicity and caution are perhaps the best guides in attempting to understand these and the following analogies regarding old age. Kidner agrees: "If some obscurities in these lines can be clarified, so much the better for kindling our imagination; but

loss of joy and excitement in life.<sup>49</sup>

Solomon next pictured old age as clouds that return after<sup>50</sup> the rain. Delitzsch succinctly describes the Hebrew concept of the cloud image when he states, "A cloudy day is = a day of misfortune, Joel ii. 2, Zeph. i. 15; an overflowing rain is a scourge of God, Ezek. xiii. 13, xxxviii. 22:"<sup>51</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:2 may have in mind a Middle Eastern winter rainstorm, which is normally followed by blue skies that promise good weather. However, "the unexpected return of the clouds soon after a storm, once more shutting out the light, is a bad sign and brings gloom, both literally and psychologically."<sup>52</sup> This imagery is not depicting gradually failing eyesight or the onset of glaucoma,<sup>53</sup> but rather the repetitive gloom into which the elderly may be prone to fall as they encounter setback after setback in the final years of their lives. Much as an elderly person recovers from one injury or illness only to be subjected to another, the individual's hopes and dreams are continually being dashed. Thus as Kidner comments, "the clouds will always gather again, and time will no longer heal, but kill."<sup>54</sup>

so much the worse if they tempt us into treating this graceful poem as a laboured cryptogram, or forcing every detail into a single rigid scheme" (*A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 101).

Furthermore stepping beyond the bounds of simplicity and caution may lead to an allegorical hermeneutic. The reader must be wary of commentators who pull from these analogies more than can be justifiably proven. For example Plumptre states that "the sun may be the Spirit, the Divine light of the body, the moon as the Reason that reflects the light, the stars as the senses that give but a dim light in the absence of the sun and moon" (E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes: or the Preacher, with Notes and Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881], p. 214). Delitzsch, though decrying various attempts at interpreting these figures and calling those attempts "wholly or for the most part unfortunate," also oversteps the bounds of careful hermeneutics. He suggests that the sun, light, moon, and stars may be understood as alluding, respectively, to the spirit, the light of self-examination, the soul, and the five senses (*Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, pp. 403-5).

<sup>49</sup> Leupold states, "In the Scriptures 'light' is quite generally a symbol of joy and, when it is sent by God, a token of favor. Just as clearly the Scriptures let darkness be synonymous with judgment and punishment, cf., Joel 3:4; 2:10; Amos 8:9; Isa. 13:10; 5:3; Jer. 4:33; Ezek 32:7; Rev. 6:12" (*Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 276-77).

<sup>50</sup> Eaton suggests that אַחֲרַי ("after") may mean "with," though he recognizes that such a translation is not normally associated with אַחֲרַי (*Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 148, n.).

<sup>51</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 405.

<sup>52</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 185.

<sup>54</sup> Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 102. Fredericks suggests that the returning clouds are representative of "the despair and terror of imminent death" that the individual faces "at the close of those miserable years" (Daniel C. Fredericks, "Life's Rise and Demise in Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8," paper presented to the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, CA, November 18, 1989, p. 19).

The metaphors in verse 3 have been variously interpreted by some as "a household falling into decay or house struck by a violent storm."<sup>55</sup> Other commentators understand the verses to be picturing the deterioration of the human body as it ages<sup>56</sup>--the watchmen representing the arms, the mighty men the legs, the grinding ones the teeth, and those at the window the eyes.<sup>57</sup> The uncertainties in these images, therefore, result in a general lack of agreement among scholars regarding how best to depict each individual image.<sup>58</sup>

What can be noted, however, is that Qohelet did not play favorites. He did not picture the decaying process of old age as solely the lot of one sex as opposed to the other. In fact, of the four metaphors in this verse, he relates two of them to the male population and the other two to females. Thus the terrors associated with dying are a reality of life for all people.

"The watchmen of the house" who "tremble" are those who preserve, protect, and guard the house. Their function is to ensure that everyone within the house is safe and secure. Yet these men "tremble," "quake," are "in terror," or "quiver."<sup>59</sup> What might cause this trembling is the degeneration of the nervous and muscular system of the body<sup>60</sup> or a powerful outside force that greatly intimidates the watchmen, causing them to cower in fear.

What then is the impact on the house? What is the impact on the elderly when the guardians tremble? Protection against a dreaded enemy decreases. Vulnerability to attack increases and there is a subsequent increase in the potential for catastrophe or ultimate destruction to occur.

The second of the two male-oriented metaphors is that "mighty men stoop." Because לַיָּמִי ("mighty") has a broad semantic range including strength, efficiency, ability, wealth, force, army, and

<sup>55</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 164.

<sup>56</sup> The words found in the Egyptian Ptah-hotep's preface to his Instruction to his son may be of interest at this point. He wrote, "Feebleness has arrived; dotage is coming. . .The eyes are weak, the ears are deaf, the strength is disappearing. . .The heart is forgetful. . .All taste is gone" (cited by R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965], p. 255). See also 2 Samuel 19:35 for Barzillai's description of his physical deterioration at the age of 80.

<sup>57</sup> Fuller, *Proverbs-Ezekiel*, p. 111, and Rylaarsdam, *The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon*, p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 186. J'

<sup>59</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 266; and *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "יָמִי," by Andrew Bowling, 1238.

<sup>60</sup> Plurnptre suggests that the trembling may be caused by "the unsteady gait of age, perhaps even of paralysis" (*Ecclesiastes: or The Preacher, with Notes and Introduction*, pp. 214-15).

virtue,<sup>61</sup> determining exactly who these men are is difficult. They undoubtedly are men of high standing, at least in the house, if not in the city. Whybray indicates that they "may be masters, but are probably the stalwart men-servants."<sup>62</sup>

Why would such honorable (and perhaps strong) men stoop? Are they doing so because of old age or are they bending over in abject submission to some outside force? The verb **נָטַף** ("stoop," here in the *Hithpael* form) is best translated "bend themselves,"<sup>63</sup> and therefore would seem to favor the latter position. They are not naturally bent over nor do they choose to be, but rather forces working contrary to their will impose conditions to which they finally succumb.

The next metaphor states that "the grinding ones [feminine form] stand idle because they are few." An often held view of this metaphor argues that "the grinding ones" (**תְּחִנִּיּוֹת**) are teeth. If this is true, then Delitzsch is correct when he states that "they [the teeth] stand no longer in a row; they are isolated, and (as is to be supposed) are also in themselves defective."<sup>64</sup> This view, however, does not seem to fit the pattern of development in this verse. The other three metaphors in the verse are more easily understood as references to actual people rather than as references to body parts.

A second view of this metaphor presents "the grinding ones" as women (i.e., female servants) who make flour for the household's bread.<sup>65</sup> This metaphor thus suggests that the women are no longer able to complete their work because they are few in number and apparently need a full complement of laborers to function properly.<sup>66</sup> Though this view is plausible, it has one major weakness, as Crenshaw points out. Would not one expect the grinders to work even more diligently if they are few in number, unless the implication is that the residents of the house are also few in number and have little need for food?<sup>67</sup>

If Crenshaw's implication is correct, then the metaphor changes its focus from the visible grinders to an unspecified group of people in the house who no longer possess the wherewithal to support a flour-

<sup>61</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 298-99; and *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "נָטַף" by Carl Philip Weber, 1:271-72.

<sup>62</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 164.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 736.

<sup>64</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 407.

<sup>65</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 164.

<sup>66</sup> Hengstler, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 246.

<sup>67</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 186.

ishing household. Whereas such a shift of focus is possible, it would seem to lessen the impact of the metaphor, making the reference to the aging process indirect rather than direct.

An alternative suggestion is that the grinders themselves have become few through attrition due to old age, incapacitation, or death. Under such conditions, there would be much sadness among the remaining grinders because so many of their friends are no longer around to make their work a joy. So the remaining grinders, themselves too weary to carry on, have just given up.

The fourth metaphor in this verse (and the second one directed toward women) states that "those who look through windows grow, dim." Most commentators agree that "those who look through windows" is a reference to the women of the household who, according to Middle Eastern custom, were not allowed to mingle with the men in the business of the household and so they peered through the lattice-work of the house.<sup>68</sup> That they "grow dim" means either (a) that others outside the house have a more difficult time seeing them in the windows because they go to the windows no more,<sup>69</sup> (b) that it has become dark,<sup>70</sup> or (c) that they themselves have a harder time seeing, for their eyes have lost their brilliance.<sup>71</sup> In each case, the women are becoming progressively isolated from the outside world, shut off from whatever joys and pleasures they once knew.

The writer continued this isolation-fear imagery as he began verse 4 by stating that for the aging person "the doors on the street are shut." Immediately the reader grasps the idea that life is not as it once was or as it should be. What once allowed people or objects to go in or out no longer does so. The doors are closed—perhaps through inattentiveness or a lack of care by those responsible for opening them, or perhaps through their own inability to be opened any more.

"Doors" (דָּלָתַיִם) is a dual form meaning "literally 'double doors,' only found at the entrance to cities, temples and exceptionally grand houses,"<sup>72</sup> most houses apparently having had only one door.<sup>73</sup> The doors may remain shut as a picture of a self-enclosed, self-isolated group of people or may refer symbolically, as many suggest, to the lips or the ears.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 342.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>70</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 405.

<sup>71</sup> Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 188.

<sup>72</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 165.

<sup>73</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 186.

<sup>74</sup> Fuller, *Proverbs-Ezekiel*, p. 111. Those who accept the lips or ears metaphor do so

"The sound of the grinding mill is low" because few people are working there (cf. v. 3). Such a condition would be discouraging to the elderly because what they remember as a cheerful indicator of the exciting activities of business is now more and more being shut out of their lives. They in turn find themselves "increasingly cut off from the hum of daily life."<sup>75</sup>

The Hebrew of 12:4, however, does not isolate the metaphor of the grinding mill from the previous metaphor of the doors on the street being shut. Rather, it uses the sound of the mill being low to explain why the doors are closed. The **ב** in **בְּשֵׁפֶל** ("as. . . low") functions as a temporal preposition indicating that the doors on the street are shut "when" or "at the same time as" the activity of the grinding mill decreases dramatically. If the grinders in verse 3 are understood as a reference to teeth, then that lends credibility to the view that "doors" here refer to lips. On the other hand if the grinders in verse 3 are women who prepare flour for bread, then the house imagery better fits the closing of the doors in this verse. This latter view seems preferable.

Having completed what Fredericks observes is a chiasm beginning with verse 3b and ending with verse 4a,<sup>76</sup> the symbolism shifts to picture death from still another angle, the chirping of birds—"one will arise at the sound of the bird." Whybray offers two possible interpretations for this illustration: "either that the elderly get up early in the morning...or that their voice becomes high like that of a bird."<sup>77</sup> What is so discouraging or sad about arising when birds sing or about the pitch of one's voice being elevated? The latter would be merely a statement of fact and therefore not necessarily a source of worry, but simply rather a reminder that one has aged. The former (rising when birds sing) only becomes a matter of dread if it implies that one is awakened by every little sound. Kidner points out, however, that if the previous metaphors imply that deafness

because of the dual nature of those organs. The closure of the lips would imply that little is ingested in the way of food or that little is allowed to pass out in the way of speech. The shutting off of the ears, of course, would suggest that the hearing of the older person has diminished greatly. Those who favor the lips and ears metaphor here in 12:4 tend also to argue for the eyes symbolism of verse 3 in reference to "those who look through windows grow dim." Hence they do not understand "doors" to be eyes despite what might seem to be a logical metaphoric relationship due to the dualism of the doors and the dual nature of the eyes (or of the eyelids).

<sup>75</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 149.

<sup>76</sup> Fredericks states that in 12:3b and 12:4a "a chiasm is formed by two comments on the limited milling (either ceasing or its sound is decreasing) which frame the comments about the openings in the houses of the millers ('windows' and 'doors')" ("Life's Rise and Demise in Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8," p. 21).

<sup>77</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 165. See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, pp. 186-87.

Accompanies old age, then the elderly person would "hardly be wakened or startled by the sparrow."<sup>78</sup>

The music metaphor is continued in the final portion of verse 4: "all the daughters of song will sing softly." This may refer to female singers, to song birds, or to musical notes.<sup>79</sup> That they "will sing softly" may mean that the sound is faint to the ears of the elderly,<sup>80</sup> that for the elderly "all singing as well as all appreciation of singing is a thing of the past,"<sup>81</sup> or that the singers themselves have lost the ability to sing.<sup>82</sup> A further possible interpretation is that the singers sing softly for fear of waking the elderly who have difficulty sleeping and who arouse easily, even at the sound of the birds chirping. No matter which view is correct, the disheartening fact is that those who have aged in this way are no longer able to enjoy what was once a pleasure to them.

The quiet sadness of the metaphors in verse 4 changes in verse 5 into what Crenshaw terms "a full measure of existential Angst."<sup>83</sup> Fear now runs rampant. Those who have grown old "are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road." A straightforward rendering of these two pictures of fear best expresses their meaning. To a person who is old, feeble, and defenseless, the world looms as a place of great risks and physical dangers. Delitzsch equates this fear to that of the sluggard of Proverbs 22:13.

As the sluggard says: there is a lion in the way, and under this pretence remains slothfully at home ... so old men do not venture out; for to them a damp road appears like a very morass; a gravelly path, as full of neck-breaking hillocks; an undulating path, as fearfully steep and precipitous; that which is not shaded, as oppressively hot and exhausting—they want strength and courage to overcome difficulties, and their anxiety pictures out dangers before them where there are none.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p.102, n. Kidner suggests that the phrase may simply be "a note of time, like our 'up with the lark.'" Such a view again would seem to present merely a statement of fact rather than a condition of sadness related to old age. Perhaps the tragedy is to be explained by a realization that in an agricultural society everyone who works is expected to rise at the break of dawn. The elderly person who is no longer required to work and thus has the privilege of sleeping later in the morning than others finds it impossible, however, to enjoy that luxury because his sleep is disturbed by the slightest sound.

<sup>79</sup> Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, p.418, and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p.165.

<sup>80</sup> Fuller, *Proverbs-Ezekiel*, p.112.

<sup>81</sup> Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p.280.

<sup>82</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p.165.

<sup>83</sup> Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qohelet," p.207. Actually Crenshaw makes this statement regarding Qohelet's overall view of death as observed throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes. Crenshaw's words, however, seem especially appropriate here.

<sup>84</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, pp.411-12.

The remaining three metaphors in Ecclesiastes 12:5 are difficult to interpret. The two primary views are that the imagery symbolizes either the rapid growth of spring or the deterioration of the human body. The former contrasts the downfall of a house which will never rise again with the fresh renewal of nature which offers a wellspring of hope. The latter understands that the words focus on the gradual encroachments of old age.<sup>85</sup>

Regarding the first of these three images—"the almond tree blossoms"—most commentators say the symbolism refers to the white hair of an elderly person. This view is favored because the almond blossom, which exhibits a pink color when it blooms in January, very soon thereafter becomes white at the tip, only to fall to the ground later like white snowflakes.<sup>86</sup>

Hengstenberg, however, offers a different perspective. He contends that both the context and the etymology of the word for almond tree (אֲמָלַן) support the notion that the tree is "a symbol of that watchfulness with which old age is visited."<sup>87</sup> The word for almond tree is similar to the verb "be watchful" (אֲמָלַן).

For the second of the three metaphors—"the grasshopper drags himself a long"—the following views are most often suggested: (a) the stiffness of the joints; (b) the bent figure of an old person, (c) the enormous appetite of the locust which, becoming weighted down by its full stomach, moves awkwardly, (d) the inability of the male sex organ to function as it should in old age, and (e) an emblem of smallness, indicating that even the smallest object is a burden to carry.<sup>88</sup>

The first two explanations (stiffness and being hunched over) and possibly the fifth suggestion (difficulty in burden-bearing) offer the more reasonable suggestions of the meaning of the grasshopper illustration. The overeating view (view c) functions at cross purposes to imagery regarding the elderly's loss of ability to eat (if grinders in verses 3-4 refer to teeth) and to the picture of the elderly's loss of a desire to eat in the caperberry metaphor below. Furthermore the diminished sexual capacity view (view d) requires that a double entendre be understood—a suggestion about the grasshopper not observed elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 187.

<sup>86</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 413; Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 345; and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 166.

<sup>87</sup> Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 248.

<sup>88</sup> Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 190; Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 345; and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 166.

<sup>89</sup> The word used here for grasshopper (אֲרָבִי) is used only four other times in Scripture: Leviticus 11:22; Numbers 13:33; 2 Chronicles 7:13; and Isaiah 40:22. In Leviticus it is



The third metaphor in verse 5, "the caperberry is ineffective," is easier to interpret than the other two. Caperberries were used in ancient times as a "provocative to appetite."<sup>90</sup> This implies, therefore, that in old age, not even an artificial stimulant can move the individual to do what in years gone by would have been done with gusto and relish.<sup>91</sup>

Verse 5 concludes with a straightforward presentation of the fact of death: "For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street." The verb  $\text{לָלַךְ}$  ("goes") is used euphemistically in typical Hebrew fashion to express the concept of dying.<sup>92</sup> "To his eternal home" indicates that the end of that "going" is the individual's final resting place.

As a common designator of the grave,<sup>93</sup> the "eternal home" is "a 'home' for successive generations of a family [that] spans an endless period of time."<sup>94</sup> It should not be thought of as expressing anything more than the grave, nor should it be assumed that it introduces the nascent underpinnings of a theology of the afterlife. As Youngblood states, "OT references to the afterlife are, for the most part, shrouded in darkness when compared to the fuller revelation of the NT."<sup>95</sup>

The final clause of this section, "while mourners go about in the street," reveals one last insult that the dying process has in store for the aged. The irony of the clause should not be missed. While the man dies, and even before he is dead, professional mourners gather

said to be an edible food, whereas in 2 Chronicles it becomes an instrument of God's plague against the people of Israel. In the remaining two passages it indicates the small stature of people compared to the Nephilim giants of the land (Num. 13:33) and to God (Isa. 40:22).

<sup>90</sup> Fuller, *Proverbs-Ezekiel*, p. 112.

<sup>91</sup> Some such as Crenshaw have suggested that the caperberry was used as an aphrodisiac, and thus the caperberry metaphor is a reference to dwindling sexual desire in old age (*Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 188). Delitzsch and Whybray, however, find 110 records from antiquity (the earliest being from the Middle Ages) that support such a usage for the caperberry (Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 416, and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 166-67).

<sup>92</sup> Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), p. 167.

<sup>93</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 167; and Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 347. Youngblood provides a thorough treatment of the phrase  $\text{אֶל-בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ}$  ("to his eternal home"). Analyzing contemporary uses from Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician sources on the one hand, and Egyptian sources on the other, he concludes that  $\text{אֶל-בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ}$  should be translated as "his dark house" rather than as "his eternal home" (Ronald F. Youngblood, "Qoheleth's 'Dark House' [Ecc12:5]," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 [December 1986]: 383-410).

<sup>94</sup> Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament*, p. 78.

<sup>95</sup> Youngblood, "Qoheleth's 'Dark House' (Ecc. 12:5)," p. 410.

around in front of the dying man's house seeking employment to engage in the practice of mourning (cf. Jer. 9:16-20; Amos 5:16). Little thought, if any, is given to the one who has suffered the mockery and misery of death. As Gordis concludes, the tragedy of this man's death "constitutes merely one more professional routine for the hired mourners--the vanity of life is climaxed by the vanity of death!"<sup>96</sup>

#### The End of Days (12:6-8)

The beginning of this final analysis of death again employs the temporal marker **רִצְּוֹן עֵד** ("before"), the third such usage of this Hebrew phrase in the verses under study.<sup>97</sup> The first (v. 1) places the individual under the indictment of death but seemingly (though not actually) far removed from it. The second (v. 2) dramatically portrays the rapidly deteriorating conditions of life and the fast approach of death. Finally, here, the last act of life (i.e., death) is played out. There is no timidity about death when it comes and there is no escape for the individual whom death attacks. Ultimately what is discovered is that both the body and the spirit of the dead man return to their place of origin--the body to the ground and the spirit to God (v. 7).

In verse 6, Qohelet portrayed the end of life by three graphic metaphors: the crushing of a lamp, the shattering of a jar, and the breaking of a wheel. Each presents an irreversible destruction, symbolizing the suddenness and finality of death. Furthermore each picture may be thought of as suggestive of a different type of life that is taken in death. The rich imagery of the lamp made up of the cord and bowl appears to reflect the fact that even the wealthy do not escape death. The pitcher illustration, by contrast, seems to show that those who are fragile and helpless also do not escape death. And the wheel at the cistern pictures apparently the strong, utilitarian type of person as still another category of individuals who are unable to avoid death.

The two metaphors--the silver cord being broken and the golden bowl being crushed--are in reality only one,<sup>98</sup> for the cord and the bowl are parts of one lamp. Once the cord is cut, the bowl drops to the ground and is irreparably damaged. So too, when the cord of life is cut, the individual falls to the ground never to rise again.

The final two images in this verse--the pitcher and the

<sup>96</sup> Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and His World*, p. 347.

<sup>97</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 419.

<sup>98</sup> Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 192; and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 167.

wheel-may also, according to certain commentators, be two components of one metaphor. Gordis suggests that Levy is correct when he states, "One end of the cord has a pitcher, the other a metal ball . . . as a counterweight. When the cord is tom, ball, pitcher and wheel all fall to the bottom and are broken."<sup>99</sup>

Other commentators, however, view the two as separate metaphors.<sup>100</sup> The fragile, easily broken pitcher suggests the fragile life of the elderly. It, like they, needs only to be struck once and then it is of no use to those who are under the sun.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, the crushing of the wheel is assumed to symbolize the total destruction of life at the point of death.

Concluding these dramatic illustrations of devastation, Solomon moves from what to many has been a series of indistinct metaphors in verses 2-6 to a picture that is unmistakably clear in verse 7. Death, simply and finally, is the separation of body and spirit.

An important point to note, however, is that the purpose in verse I (and throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes) is not to present a theology of the afterlife. The goal was not to have readers understand the details of life after death, but rather to have them recognize the fact of the existence of an afterlife so that they might live eternally purposeful lives here and now. Wright states this thesis in this way:

The dead have run their course. They are waiting in Sheol for the judgment. They do not, like the living, know what is happening on the earth. They have no further opportunities of earning the Master's reward. Their bodies, the vehicles of the emotions of love and hatred and envy, have gone to dust, and no more can they share in life under the sun.<sup>102</sup>

Verse 7 begins by stating that "the dust will return to the earth as it was." "Dust" (עֶפְרָה) refers symbolically to the physical nature (If the individual. This is a favorite term employed by Old Testament writers to remind the reader of his or her "earthly origin (Gn. 2:7; 3:19; Jb. 10:9) and physical weakness (Ps. 103:14)."<sup>103</sup> The human body, being in essence dust, returns to dust when the individual

<sup>99</sup> Gordis and Crenshaw also espouse this view (Gordis, *Koheleth-The Man and his World*, p. 348, and Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 188).

<sup>100</sup> Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 192; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 150; Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 103; and Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 283-84.

<sup>101</sup> Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p. 285.

<sup>102</sup> Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," p. 147.

<sup>103</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 150.

dies.<sup>104</sup> Fuerst presents the perspective of life and death in Ecclesiastes as follows: "Migration from dust to dust, with a brief moment for wisdom and striving and reflection, is the fate of man."<sup>105</sup>

Verse 7 ends by differentiating the disposition of the human spirit from the dissolution of the human body. Despite the interplay between the two during life, there is no absorption of the one by the other in death. Each has a separate destiny. Whereas the body goes back to the earth as dust, the spirit returns to God who gave it.

To his credit, though he understands the finality of death to be a tragic disruption of human life, Solomon neither condemns that fact nor reproaches God for making life "a temporary gift which God would one day withdraw."<sup>106</sup>

As the body and spirit of the dead person return to their origins (v. 7), so the author in verse 8 returns to his original remarks in 1:2 "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'all is vanity!'" These words seemingly declare that all in life and in death is "futile"<sup>107</sup> (לְהַבֵּל). Crenshaw is led to assert that "one cannot imagine such a conclusion if the allusion to breath's return to God contained the slightest ground for hope. In truth, divine support of life has vanished for Qoheleth."<sup>108</sup> Crenshaw's pessimistic position, however, fails to recognize that the statement "all is futile," is thoroughly steeped in Qoheleth's positive understanding of the significance of life as he presents it throughout the book.

In line with this view of life and in light of the reality of death, individuals are challenged to live to the fullest and at the same time to be ever mindful of the transitory nature of life and of the sudden, irreversible coming of death. Qoheleth urged individuals, moreover, to remember their Creator in the days of their youth (12:1) and to "fear God and keep His commandments" throughout all the days of their lives (v. 13). This therefore presents a balanced picture of life: "Man should enjoy what he can, be circumspect and pious, and fear the Lord; but [at the same time recognize a sense] of

<sup>104</sup> Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974-75): 62.

<sup>105</sup> Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls*, p. 153.

<sup>106</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 168.

<sup>107</sup> Though לְהַבֵּל may be used in a variety of ways depending on its context, the sense of "futile" seems to fit the present context best. Furthermore it completes the introductory remark in 1:2 and gives structure to the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. For a discussion of the uses of לְהַבֵּל, see Theophile Meek, "Transplanting the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960): 331.

<sup>108</sup> Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," p. 210.

helplessness because the inexorable round of life finally does come to an end."<sup>109</sup>

### Conclusion

Based on this study of death and dying in Ecclesiastes, including an examination of 12:1-8, the final and most extensive passage in the book on the subject, several conclusions may be drawn about the life-death phenomenon.

1. Everyone must turn to God while there is still time, because the end of days will come swiftly.

2. The aging, dying process, though in no way to be considered beautiful, does post warning signs of impending doom-signs that need to be heeded to ensure a successful life now and a proper reward after death.

3. Laying up treasures in this world is futile, because death will come for the individual, and the world will continue on as though he or she never existed.

4. No matter how long one lives or how much preparation one makes for dying, death comes suddenly and without fail.

5. Life after death does exist, and one needs to live now in such a way as to be ready to meet one's Maker.

Hengstenberg summarizes well this philosophy of life and death in Ecclesiastes.

Since all things are vain, man, who is subject to vanity, should do all in his power to enter into a living relation to Him who is the true absolute Being, and through fellowship with Him to participate, himself, in a true eternal being. All being vanity, man should not further vex himself about a "handful of vanity"-he should not care much whether he have [sic] to suffer a little more or a little less, but [should] attach importance alone to that which either hinders or favours his fellowship with Him who is the true absolute, personal, Being.<sup>110</sup>

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"; yet with God there is hope.

<sup>109</sup> Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 137.

<sup>110</sup> Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 257.

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