

graphic pictures presented by the Preacher of the final, crippling stages of old age. Previously "The days of darkness" (11:8), referred to the grave, but this is not the meaning here. "I have no delight" means that such closing years of life have lost the pleasure of youth and the prime of life. One does not find pleasure in the loss of strength, eyesight, and hearing; or does he look forward to the time when he no longer can walk or properly chew his food.

### FACT QUESTIONS 12:1

546. What is the significance of speaking of God as Creator?  
 547. Explain what is meant by "the evil days."

### G. DEATH COMES TO EVERY MAN. 12:2-8

#### TEXT 12:2-8

- 2 before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain;  
 3 in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim;  
 4 and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly.  
 5 Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street.  
 6 Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed;  
 7 Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the

spirit will return to God who gave it.

8 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!"

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS 12:2-8

407. Identify all that will be withheld from the eyes when one finally loses his sight in old age (verse two)?
408. If the darkness in verse two is the same as that of 11:8, to what does it refer?
409. After reading through verses three through five, find the corresponding word or phrase which best matches the following parts of the body: (1) white hair; (2) the eyes; (3) the molar teeth; (4) the feet and knees; (5) the hands and arms; (6) the voice and ears; (7) the lips. For additional explanation of these analogies, study the COMMENTS on 12:3-5.
410. What is man's "eternal home" (verse five)?
411. When man has gone to his "eternal home," who goes about in the streets?
412. The *two* figurative descriptions presented in verses two-five and verses six-seven picture what stage or event in life?
413. It is good for a man when he comes to the end of life if he remembered whom in the days of his youth?
414. What happens to the physical body at death?
415. What happens to the spirit of man when the body dies?

### PARAPHRASE 12:2-8

The time will come when your sight will be diminished and you will no longer see the light from the sun, moon, or stars. At this time the clouds of sorrow return. When that day comes, the protectors of the house will tremble and the powerful, upright, strong men will be bent low, the grinders will have to stop because they are few, and they will see only darkness who look out through the windows. As the sound of the grinding

mill fades away, the doors to the street will be closed. One will be surprised at the sound of a bird as all who sing songs will be hushed. Also, when the hair becomes as the blooms of the almond tree the old will fear high places and dangers along the way. The ability to move about as a grasshopper will fail. The appetite and drives of life will vanish. The reason for this inactivity is that man is nearing his final resting place—his everlasting home. Listen! The mourners go about the streets and into the market places. It is important, therefore, to remember God before the silver cord pulls apart or the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is broken at the spring or the water wheel breaks down at the cistern. At that time the body will return to the earth from which it originally came, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Life is indeed transitory. Like a vapor of vapors, life quickly fades from view. All is futility and unfulfilling.

#### COMMENT 12:2-8

This section pictures the final "evil days" which await men. Death terminates the decaying process and the Preacher appropriately turns to the oft-repeated "vanity of vanities." Nowhere in the book could the idea of transitoriness be more to the point than in verse eight.

v. 2 This verse most logically represents the end of life under the sun. "Light" is used throughout the Bible for *life* and *joy*. In this context it undoubtedly refers to life. Just as man's life slowly slips toward the grave, so the light diminishes: first the sun and then the lesser light, the moon; finally the faintest light represented by the stars. The diminishing order of light is intentionally arranged to represent life from "childhood" to the "prime of life" until the "evil days." Each light is finally extinguished and the darkness (death) comes. "Clouds" are symbolic of trouble and could refer to the judgment. Usually the clouds and rain pass and the sun shines to renew happiness and joy. This time, however, the storm continues with the

threatening clouds returning *after* the rain. Although this interpretation is imaginative and without definite support, it fits the context of the book and the immediate context of this section.

v. 3 This highly figurative language (verses three-five) has challenged the imagination and inventiveness of many. There is general unanimity, however, that regardless of the individual meaning given to each symbol, the passage is describing the frailties of old age, and ultimately of death itself.

The "house" represents the whole person while the "watchmen" would be the arms or hands. They are the protectors or guards of the house. They were mentioned first because they would be noticed first. They are also afflicted with palsy and thus tremble. Scriptural references of the body likened unto a house are found in II Corinthians 5:1-4; II Peter 1:13-14.

"The mighty men" are the legs which now are bent and stooped. Man can no longer walk erectly. Formerly the legs carried the youth pillars of strength, but now they are feeble.

"The grinding ones" are the teeth. They cease to function and "stand idle," because they are few and undoubtedly arranged in such a way that they are inefficient in the chewing process. The "millers" (grinders) is the feminine form. This is probably because women did the grinding. (Cf. Exodus 11:5; Job 31:10; Isaiah 47:2; Matthew 24:41)

"Those who look through windows" refer to the eyes. No longer will they see the light under the sun. The sun, moon and stars will only be a memory as they begin to experience total darkness.

v. 4 "The doors" refer to the mouth. Such reference is given in Psalms 141:3: "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips." It is possible that since the teeth are nearly gone, the lips now shut more closely. The chewing is then described by "a door opening onto a street so the sound inside could not be heard by those on the street."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Zerr. *op. cit.*, p. 225.

Also, in Hebrew, the form is dual and may refer to the double door (*lips*): "On the streets" suggests communication with the world, but now such activity has ceased. In youth the appetite is keen and the mouth is employed in work and pleasure, but now the lips are drawn over the toothless gums and "the sound of the grinding mill is low."

"The sound of the bird" has numerous interpretations, but the one that appears most likely suggests that older people arise at the *same time* as the first sounds of birds in the morning. It does not follow that they are awakened by the chirping sparrow or crowing rooster, but they are anxious to start the day after restless and sometimes painful nights. The hearing is impaired and thus they would not be wakened by the faint chirp of the small bird.

"The daughters of song" represent the voice and ears of the aged when they no longer can produce melodious songs or discern those sung by others. When David offered to take Barzillai to Jerusalem and care for him in return for favors previously received, Barzillai answered him with the words: "How long have I yet to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am now eighty years old. Can I distinguish between good and bad? Or can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Or can I hear any more the voice of singing men and women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king?" (II Samuel 19:34-35). To the elderly, the notes of song run together and the tones are indistinct. On the basis of this, some interpret the former "sound of the bird" to be a description of the high, shrill voice of the older person when he arises at the early hour. The fact that the "daughters of song will sing softly" implies deafness and supports the interpretation that this section refers to the voice and ears.

v. 5 "Men are afraid of a high place" is to be taken literally. The preacher departs from the highly figurative language and states a universal truth in simple language. When one grows old and his speech and hearing are dulled, he often finds difficulty in ascending steps or hills, and is often short of breath.

The energy which such activity demands is now missing. The strong muscles are atrophied, and the bones, which carried him securely and confidently in his youth, are bowed and fragile.

"Terrors on the road" could refer to the obstacles over which they would stumble or wicked individuals against whom they would have little or no defense. The obvious interpretation, however, would be to simple travel on the way. Their bones are brittle, their muscles are weak, and they have difficulty ascending even the slightest incline. Narrow and crowded streets would enhance the difficulty.

"The almond tree blossoms" refers to the white hair which indicates he is come to the final stages of life and is "ripening for the tomb." The almond tree first puts forth light, pink blossoms which turn snowy white before falling from the limbs to the ground.

"The grasshopper drags himself along" is clearly a vivid analogy of the inept physical condition of the dying man. Biblical analogy would point also to the symbol of smallness. (Cf. Numbers 13:33; Isaiah 40:22) In the light of this it would be understood that the message is, that to the elderly, even the most insignificant task becomes a burden. However, the comparison of the condition of the elderly with that of the appearance of the grasshopper best fits the context. Note the following description: "The dry, shriveled, old man, his backbone sticking out, his knees projecting forwards, his arms backwards, his head down, and the apophyses enlarged, is like that insect."<sup>2</sup>

"The caperberry" is also translated "desire" and "appetite." The difficulty in translation stems from the fact that the word appears only here in the entire Old Testament. "Caperberry" would necessitate a figurative meaning while "desire" or "appetite" would be literal. This does not aid the translation,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, David Brown. *A Commentary: Critical Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, II (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 542.

however, as both figurative and literal terms are used in the Preacher's picture of old age and death. The caperberry is considered a stimulant and the obvious meaning is that neither the appetite or sexual desire can be aroused. Since the caperberry was not believed to be an aphrodisiac until the Middle Ages, the safe explanation would be that the stimulant is to preserve life (through eating, which desire is often lost in old age) not propagate it. However, as Luther says, "all desire fails," and again, "an old man has pleasure in nothing."

"The eternal home" or "house of eternity" speaks more to *duration* than it does to the place. It is a future state of being as compared with the existence "under the sun." Life here is transitory compared with "eternal" life there. The term "eternal home" is found only in Ecclesiastes. Characteristic of inspired literature, the meaning of certain terms often penetrate beyond the limits of man's present knowledge. Future revelation, on the same subject, often amplifies the meaning, and it becomes clear that God *intended* for the reader to look back and see that the term held the full-grown truth in seed form. The terms used by Solomon, who claims inspiration for his writing (12:11) are exact. However, the understanding of the terms, even by the author, is often very limited. Solomon says nothing to negate the richness of the full orb of the doctrine of eternal life taught by Jesus and the Apostles.

On the subject of the "eternal home," read and study Job 10:21; 30:23; Psalms 49:11 and John 14:1-6.

"The mourners" are, as tradition teaches, the paid "wailers" who prepare even before the death event to make loud lamentation in the streets and places of commerce. (Cf. II Samuel 3:31; Jeremiah 9:17; 34:5; Amos 5:16-17; Matthew 9:23; 11:17) The implication of such terms as "silver" and "gold" in the following verse would suggest affluency on the part of the one about to be mourned.

v. 6 The translators add "remember" because the "before" of this verse refers one to 12:1 where the Preacher is admonishing young men to live their lives in harmony with the designs of their Creator.

Two distinct figures are mentioned in this verse which speak to the final termination of life under the sun. The preceding detailed insights to the frailties of old age were intended to motivate young men to live thier lives to the fullest joys (Cf. 11:9-10) *before* the body breaks and the soul slips away.

"The silver cord" and "golden bowl" are to be considered together. They represent the lamp which hangs from the ceilings of oriental or near-eastern homes. The cord is interspersed with silver and the lamp itself is made of gold. Nothing is intended beyond the fact that life, like silver and gold, is valuable and much to be desired. The intention is to show that "light," which is here symbolic of one's life, is going to be extinguished regardless of how fine it is. Death does not come because one terminates his own life, but the cord *breaks* allowing the bowl to fall to the floor and break and the oil to be released upon the floor. The separation of the oil from the container negates the utilitarian purpose of the lamp. The original design of the lamp has been thwarted; the value of the practical aspect of the lamp is now nullified. So when death comes, the body returns to its source and the spirit slips away.

"The pitcher" and "the wheel" illustrate the same truth as the cord and lamp. The symbol is different, however, as the lamp represents life as light and the pitcher represents life as water. Jesus took advantage of both physical symbols to demonstrate spiritual truths. (Cf. John 8:12; 9:5 and John 4:10-11; 7:38) The NASB mentions both "well" and "cistern." The broken pitcher would render the well useless, while the wheel which falls into the cistern when it breaks, prevents the water from being drawn. The intent of both pictures painted by Solomon in this verse is intentionally clear in the following observation.

v. 7 Throughout the book the Preacher's emphasis has been on the transitory nature of man, and the fact that he, together with the world in which he lives, has been marked by vanity. (Cf. COMMENT 6:10) The body of man returns to its primary source—the dust of the earth. The admonition to the young man to enjoy life in his youth is based on the fact



that man will soon begin to die and move slowly toward the dust.

"The dust will return to the earth as it was." This doctrine complements similar passages on the same subject. The Preacher has previously stated that "all (men and beasts) came from the dust and all return to the dust" (3:20). (Cf. Genesis 2:7; 3:19; Job 34:14-15; Psalms 104:29) In this section (verses two-six) there has been strong emphasis upon the *dust nature* of men. When the spirit is released from the body through the death event, it does not join the process of decay and regression, but it returns to God.

"The spirit will return to God who gave it." Solomon's reference to God as Creator has established a principle of ownership. He now argues for right behavior on the basis of the certainty of final retribution. The judgment is a doctrine which has already been introduced but now takes on major intensity as the Preacher moves through the final stages of his arguments. There is no full doctrine of immortality taught here, but the fact of eternal life is not denied and the spirit is distinguished from the body with the emphasis upon the fact that it is the spirit that God receives. For the sinner, the ungodly person who has been described so often throughout the book, there is nothing for him to anticipate but the depressing picture of death and then the sudden and sure appearing before God's judgment. Leupold wisely states that Solomon is teaching such a judgment as a motivating factor to lead all men to live righteously. He adds, "You personally will at your death appear before the judgment seat of God, therefore get ready."<sup>3</sup>

v. 8 There is nothing new in this verse that has not already been thoroughly discussed, but the insertion of the subtheme of the book (Cf. 1:2) at this particular place serves to prove that the Preacher believes that such "vanity" has been sufficiently demonstrated. It serves to terminate his discussion in the first part of this chapter, and also introduces the final

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<sup>3</sup> Leupold, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

section of the book. Hengstenberg offers a word of warning when he writes, "The knowledge of the vanity of earthly things conducts to the fear of God afterwards recommended. 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."<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Solomon once again refers to himself as "the Preacher" reflects upon the hortatory nature of the closing two chapters of the book. Especially is he eloquent in this final section. In the epilogue (verse nine through fourteen) he speaks of himself as the Preacher two more times. Never can a preacher reach a higher pinnacle of confidence than when he claims divine authority for his message. The following "conclusion of the whole matter" is driven to the heart with strong conviction.

#### FACT QUESTIONS 12:2-8

548. Why is it appropriate that the oft-occurring "vanity of vanities" *immediately* follows this section?
549. What is the significance of the "light" order of first the sun, then the moon and finally the stars?
550. What is significant about the fact that the clouds return again *after* the rain? Explain.
551. Although the language beginning in verse three is highly figurative, it is generally accepted that it has what meaning?
552. Identify the "house."
553. What is the significance of the "watchmen" *trembling*?
554. Why are the "grinding ones" in the feminine form in the original language?
555. "The doors" refer to what part of the body? The Hebrew

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<sup>4</sup> Hengstenberg. *op. cit.*, p. 257.

form is *dual* and implies what?

556. If the elderly are not *awakened* by the "sound of birds," what is the significance of mentioning the birds?
557. Is verse five to be taken figuratively or literally? Explain.
558. Why are elderly people afraid to travel on the road?
559. Explain why the grasshopper is an appropriate symbol of the elderly.
560. How does Luther translate the *idea* that "the caperberry is ineffective"?
561. "The eternal home" suggests what primary lesson?
562. Why are the "mourners" going about the streets prior to the death of the elderly person?
563. The two figures in verse six suggest what event?
564. Explain the lesson of the "bowl."
565. How does verse seven relate to the two symbols of verse six?
566. Why say the body will return to dust?
567. To what extent does Solomon explain the doctrine of immortality in verse seven? Discuss.
568. Identify the "sub-theme" of the book.

### CONCLUSION 12:9-14

#### A. MAN IS ADMONISHED TO WORK IN HARMONY WITH GOD THROUGH THE WORDS OF ONE SHEPHERD. 12:9-12

#### TEXT 12:9-12

- 9 In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs.
- 10 The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.
- 11 The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one