

Explore the Bible Series for August 20: Old age has its own rhythms

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Old age has its own rhythms

- Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14

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After an examination of life from a variety of perspectives and inquiries into such issues as the possibility of knowing God's will, the proper approach to life and the value of character, the book of Ecclesiastes ends with a poem on youth and old age (11:7-12:8), followed by an epilogue (12:9-14).

Whether the teacher actually wrote the poem as an old man, or whether he was projecting himself into the future, the poem stands as an inspiration and a warning to all who are young, or young at heart. The theme of approaching old age, and how to live one's life in view of its imminent arrival, is a subject many poets have investigated. Robert Herrick urged people to make the most of their youth: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old Time is still a-flying; And this same flower that smiles to-day, tomorrow will be dying."



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Dylan Thomas took a more confrontational approach to old age. No, it can't be put off indefinitely, but its assault on one's vitality can be resisted. "Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light," he wrote.

One of the most moving poetic descriptions of the challenge of old age is "Ulysses," a poem written by Alfred Lord Tennyson, when he was only in his mid-20s. It depicts an aged Ulysses (Odysseus) at home in his kingdom of Ithaca, longing to return to sea. It is interesting to read "Ulysses" alongside the Hebrew poem of the teacher to compare their takes on the possibilities and pitfalls of old age.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-8

The teacher contrasts the days of youth, which are characterized by light, with the days of old age, which begin the "days of darkness," that culminate in Sheol. Tennyson similarly uses the imagery of darkness to describe advancing old age: "The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks; the long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep moans round with many voices. Come, my friends. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."

Ecclesiastes 11:9-10

The teacher advises the young to take full advantage of their youthful vigor: "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment."

Tennyson recognizes the relative advantages of youth, but he also believes not all who are young know how to live life. In the poem, Ulysses praises his son Telemachus, but he doubts he has the adventurous spirit necessary to really enjoy life. Because of his own experiences, Ulysses has come to understand that life is more than mere existence.

Tennyson writes: "Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move. How dull it is to pause, to make an end. To rust unburnished, not to shine in use! As though to breathe were life!"

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Finally, the teacher describes the creeping obsolescence of the body that overtakes every person who reaches the so-called golden years. The bones ("strong men") begin to stoop over, teeth ("the women who grind") fall out, the eyes ("those who look through the windows") see dimly. Sleep is fleeting and unsatisfying, phobias multiply and desire for the pleasures of life ceases.

Is old age really this grim, or can something more be made of it, despite the undoubted diminution of strength and vitality? Tennyson is realistic about old age, but he hopes life still will have challenges that may be faced and overcome: "Old age hath yet his honor and his toil. Death closes all; but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with gods. ... Though much is taken, much

abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.”

The teacher offers sage advice to his listeners to take advantage of the benefits of youth: strength, health, enthusiasm, vigor. Old age certainly has its drawbacks, as the teacher reminds us, but Tennyson also reminds us old age is not without advantages of its own—wisdom, experience, perspective, compassion.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

One of the favorite undertakings of certain educated Jews from the post-exilic period onward was the art of Gematria, or assigning numerical values to words based on the numerical values of individual letters, then using these numbers to generate other words and in other sorts of calculations. Like many other ancient peoples, the Jews used the letters of their alphabet to double for numerals. The first letter, aleph, represented 1, the second letter, beth, represented 2, and so forth, up to 9. Then the next letter, yodh, stood for 10, then kaph for 20, etc.

Gematria shows up in the book of Ecclesiastes in relation to the theme of the book: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” This phrase, which first appears in 1:2, then again with variations throughout the book, shows up for the last time in 12:8. It turns out that the numerical value of the phrase in Hebrew is 216, exactly the number of verses from 1:1 to 12:8, thus indicating that 12:9-14 is an epilogue, added after the book was initially completed, though probably not long after.

The epilogue gives a brief testimonial concerning the teacher and makes a few closing comments regarding wisdom. The most famous of the latter is a

favorite of students, “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” Yes, but that’s not an excuse for not knowing the assigned material!

Discussion questions

- Both Dylan and Tennyson were younger than 40 when they wrote the poems mentioned above. How would you evaluate their descriptions of old age?
- Is there a positive note in the teacher’s description of senescence?
- What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the poem on youth and old age in Ecclesiastes and Tennyson’s description of one old man’s dreams in “Ulysses”? Which poem strikes you as more realistic? As more inspirational?

