

Ecclesiastes 12:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

Analysis

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble—the allegory of aging continues with household imagery. The 'keepers' (שְׁמֻרִים הַבָּיִת) likely represent arms/hands that once protected the 'house' (body) but now tremble with palsy. **The strong men shall bow themselves**—the 'strong men' (אֲנוֹשִׁים כַּפָּרִים) probably signify legs that once stood firm but now bend and fail. **The grinders cease because they are few**—the 'grinders' (טְרִינְנוֹת הַלְּבָשׁ) are teeth, now so few that chewing becomes difficult. **Those that look out of the windows be darkened**—the 'windows' symbolize eyes, whose sight dims with age.

This verse employs extended metaphor (the body as house) with remarkable precision: trembling hands, stooped posture, tooth loss, failing vision—all hallmarks of advanced age. The imagery creates both poignancy and urgency: physical decline is inevitable, making youthful vitality precious and service to God urgent (v. 1). The passage doesn't romanticize aging but honestly acknowledges its difficulties. Yet Scripture elsewhere affirms that aging believers can still bear fruit (Psalm 92:14) and that inner renewal continues despite outer decay (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Historical Context

Ancient Israel had no dentistry, ophthalmology, or treatments for arthritis—aging's effects were severe and irreversible. Average lifespan was shorter than today, but those who survived to old age experienced pronounced decline. The household metaphor would resonate with a culture where extended families lived together—elders' physical limitations were daily observable. The passage's detailed observation suggests authorship late in life—perhaps Solomon reflecting on his own aging, or a later sage observing the elderly. The metaphor's literary sophistication marks it as one of Scripture's most artistic passages. Church tradition applied this allegorically to spiritual decline: maintain vigilance lest faith's vitality fade.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does honestly facing aging's inevitability (rather than denying it) reshape your priorities and use of current strength?
2. What spiritual 'fruit' can you cultivate now that will endure even when physical faculties decline?

Interlinear Text

בַּיּוֹם	שְׁמַרְתָּ	בַּבְּיַם	אֲנָשִׁים
In the day	shall tremble	when the keepers	of the house
H3117	H2111	H8104	H1004
וְבָטַל	בְּטַבּוֹנֹת	כִּי	מַעֲטִים
and the strong	cease	themselves and the grinders	because they are few
H2428	H988	H2912	H4591
וְחַשְׁכֵּנָה	בָּאָבּוֹתָן		
be darkened	and those that look out	of the windows	
H2821	H7200	H699	

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 102:23 (Parallel theme): He weakened my strength in the way; he shortened my days.

Zechariah 8:4 (Parallel theme): Thus saith the LORD of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age.

Genesis 48:10 (Parallel theme): Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age, so that he could not see. And he brought them near unto him; and he kissed them, and embraced them.

Genesis 27:1 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his eldest son, and said unto him, My son: and he said unto him, Behold, here am I.

1 Samuel 3:2 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see;