

## Even From My Youth

Seek God When Young

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One of my favorite interests (as you probably know from my sermons, sermonettes, and articles) is what is called "generational studies." Generational studies are where historians and sociologists examine how the prevalent mood and attitude of a generation shapes events and society—and the other way around too, how events in society in general shapes a generation's thinking and attitudes.

I have explained before that, at any given time, four generations co-exists. You have a younger generation, up to about age 20. Then, you have young adults. You have middle-aged adults; and then you have senior citizens. These are four distinct groups, and each has a different way of thinking. Each has a different attitude. Each has different desires, and motivations, and goals that they want to reach.

And, in the right circumstances (whatever those "right circumstances" are), it either produces peace or fireworks. It could produce war, or it could produce prosperity. It could produce all kinds of tumult, or it may be a fairly boring time when things are just 'steady as she goes.' It just depends on how the mix of these generations—with their attitudes, their desires, and their motivations—come together.

We live in a time that is kind of strange. Normally, a generation will have its influence only during the time when it is strongest. Let us say, for some, it might be their young adulthood where they seem to be the strongest. Or maybe they tend to be people who do not really bear fruit until their old age; and, when they are old, that is when they tend to influence society the most.

Well, for us, the past fifty years have been dominated by one generation. That is the "Baby Boomers." The reason for this is because the "Baby Boomers" generation is so huge. It dwarfs the other generations. It is, like I said, the largest in terms of numbers. It is definitely the most vocal. And it is definitely the most activist.

They press what they believe to the hilt. And they will come out and tell you to your face that you are wrong, and they oppose you—or that you are right, and they agree with you. Then they will try to figure out some way to make sure that *their way* of doing things is "the way" of doing things.

Their changing moods and desires have shaped the distinctive eras that are the decades of the past fifty years. You have the "happy days" of the fifties, when they were very young and going into their teenage years. You have the "radical sixties," where they were a little bit older. That is, it was when the peak of them reached their teenage years—in the "radical years" of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, and counter-cultural movements.

Then you have the seventies. I call them the hedonistic seventies, where they just 'went for it.' Then you have the "greed is good" eighties, when they started to settle down; and they became businessmen-and -women. They thought, "Now is the time to make hay," during the sunshine of the Reagan administration. And they became the people in the business suits and the power ties. They were the people in the clubs—not the disco clubs; but I mean, the nice upscale trendy clubs of businessmen and those who make money.

Then, of course, there were the nineties—which I would call "the Clinton Era." The truly politically powerful "Boomers" came out during the nineties. Many of them act like Bill Clinton, where power is everything. I am not talking about, necessarily, his morals—although that is probably part of it (or, *lack* of morals, I should say)—but the idea that power is to be used to get your point across. Of course, that has been done forever and ever; but with the generation being so large and powerful, it has really changed our society. Many of these things have become really entrenched in our society—both culturally and politically.

One of the boomers' most dominant attitudes has been a kind of narcissism. Remember that narcissism is an over-indulged love of the self. Their narcissism, however, has a kind of a twist to it. It is focused on youth—their youth, specifically. They have convinced most of the rest of us that the fifties and sixties were America's "Golden Age." That is when they were young. That is when they made their mark on society. In trying to recapture that "Golden Age," they have created and sustained what sociologists call "a youth culture." A youth culture is a society that caters to, that panders to, that overprotects and basically worships its youth.

Now, we do not have to look very far to see evidence of this. One of my pet peeves, just ask Beth, and she will tell you that I complain about this all the time. Two things: car seats and bicycle helmets. You may wonder what that has to do with the youth culture. Well, how many of us grew up without the benefit of car seats and bicycle helmets? I would say a vast majority of us. They are good. They are fine. They protect kids. They do. They do a wonderful job.

But they go way overboard. Now you need to go down to the local Saturn dealer and get the guy to go in there and make sure that you have installed your high-tech car seat in the proper way, so that your child will be safe. Or, you have to go down someplace to get the bicycle helmet, and make sure that you know how to wear a bicycle helmet properly. I just saw on the news the other day that a large number of children wear them too far back on their head. So, if they get into a crash of some sort, it is not going to do them any good anyway.

Well, I get a little upset at this, because we are coddling our children. The next thing that they will do is that they will come up with some high-tech bubble wrap—where you wrap your kid from toe to head, so that he will never have to scratch his knee, or ever come in contact with some highly contagious piece of dirt. Until he is eighteen—and then you can unwrap him, and spring him on the world. That is kind of silly, but that is the direction that they are going.

We have a generation of coddled and pampered kids that, when they grow up, are going to be absolutely tyrannical on the rest of us—because they will expect *us* to make way for *them*, and to do everything for them like their parents always did. Maybe I should not say they are "going to be" this way. They already "are" that way, because they have already begun to learn this lesson (not a good lesson) that everybody must kowtow to them, and their desires, and their safety, and all of that.

Now, I believe in car seats and bicycle helmets—to a point. If any of you know my son, Jarod, maybe he should have a bicycle helmet strapped to his head at all times, twenty-four hours a day. He has this one spot, right in the middle of his forehead, which continually gets bumped and bruised. He has already had three stitches, and he just seems to have a big target right there. So we need to cover it somehow.

But that is just one small symptom of how we worship our children. Who are the big entertainers these days? Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys—all of these young kids that are still 'wet behind the

ears.' They are young, and they are worshipped by millions (not by just the teenyboppers, but by some of the somewhat older people too). Who are the great stars of Hollywood? The Leonardo DiCaprios, and such people. If you are old in Hollywood, you are pretty much passé—unless you want to be a mother, or grandmother, or a father, or a grandfather. Except for men—old men seem to do pretty well. Sean Connery comes to mind; and he is like 70 now, is he not? And Harrison Ford; these guys have really made their middle age (and young senior citizen years) pay off for them. But still, if you are young in Hollywood, you have a much better chance of being successful.

Here is an experiment that you might want to do. Just sit down in front of your television for a half-hour (if you can stand it), and with a pad and paper, count the commercials that are aimed at young people—along with counting the ones that are aimed at old people. And then ones that are aimed at middle aged people. You will find that most of the advertisement—it does not matter what it is for: It could be for toothpaste, or it could be for some sort of food. It could be clothing, cars, *Preparation H*, you name it—are aimed at the 18-24 year old crowd, or younger.

Now why you would want to aim *Preparation H* at that particular crowd, I do not know. Maybe they are sitting at their computers too much. But they do it! I do not mean to be light about this, but it is kind of funny to look at it from an objective viewpoint. They do this. Television, the shows—they are all aimed at young people. Music—I already mentioned that.

Movies are aimed at the younger set. If you think about *Star Wars (Episode One)*, who was that aimed at? Boys that are probably from ten to fifteen, I would say, are their main audience. And that is the way it is for a lot of movies. They call some "teen flicks," or "date movies." (Like the *Scream* types—that is a good "date movie." Right?) They are aimed at the young—either the teenager or the young adult crowd.

Even our athletes are getting younger and younger. How many athletes are leaving college to go into the pros? Some of them are going directly from high school—more of them than have been in the past. I have heard recently that the NBA draft is going to be made up of a lot of kids that nobody knows—because they will all be coming out of high school, not college.

And our Olympic athletes—many of them are no more than about twenty-two or twenty-three years old. The oldest of them, normally, are those who are just finishing college. Now, with them allowing some of the professionals back in (for basketball, hockey, and other things like that) that age has risen. But just think about who won the last gold medal in skating. It was Tara Lipinski, and she was about fourteen or fifteen.

Then there are our gymnastic stars, who are little girls about two feet tall, weigh about thirty pounds; and it seems like they are no more than fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen years old. That is the way it is getting. It just seems like you have to be younger, and you have to (pretty much) just give your body totally to your sport in order to compete.

Then there are political arguments. Do you know that the most compelling reason for governmental action today—on anything—is "It's for the children"? If a lawmaker, of either party (it does not matter), proposes something—and he makes a big to-do about how "This is going to help the children"—the chances of it passing skyrocket. "It's for the children." We will do *anything* for our children. We will give away our freedoms—so, somehow, it will benefit the children.

Any idea that seems even remotely harmful to children gets trashed immediately—because, "We're killing our children." I mean, look at all the gun laws. Now, I am not a Second Amendment advocate. But you have two hundred and eighty million people in this country; and a few children (in that 280,000,000) find a gun in the house and they do something very stupid with it—because their parents do not teach them properly. But, because of that, we have to have laws that effect all the rest of the 280,000,000 of us.

Now, that is just one little example; but it does not matter. "If it is good for the children, then we should have it." That is just another little bit that shows us that *we worship our children*. The Clinton Administration, boy, they use this line every time. We could be talking about disarmament over there in Russia, and "It's for the children." They find some way to put that in there. "You know, it's perfectly alright for us to see to the future of our children." But it gets to the point where it is nauseating; and something that might be good for society does not happen because "Maybe it won't be good for the children." (I will just let you think on that.)

Here in Charlotte, I do not know how many of you listen to the local news, but the school board issue—and schools, in general—has just been nauseating over the past few years. I sometimes do not even want to listen to the radio in the mornings, because I know that they are going to talk about something that has to do with the school board. Either the school board is trying to raise of bond [of a large amount of money] for our local schools, or they are talking about busing, or they are talking about pupil assignment, or they are talking about certain schools in certain places that need refurbishing (or, to be torn down and new ones put up). They are talking about Magnet Schools. They are talking about school board membership. They are talking about leadership on the school board, or they are talking about political infighting in the schools. And it is *all for the children!* And it is just so much, all the time, that I now turn a deaf ear to it. And I think, "Man, we worship our children!"

Our streets could have potholes every fifteen feet; and we would still put—this is no kidding—about forty-five percent of the county budget into schools. That is ridiculous. Forty-five percent of a budget that is contributed to by more than half a million people, with their property taxes and such. That is a lot of money that gets thrown down the drain which could be used for other things. I would say that these are signs that we live in a society that worships its children.

My main beef with the youth culture is that it teaches our children wrong principles. It gives them bad ideas. Particularly, to always look out for themselves—because everybody has always been looking out for "themselves." But it also tells them that their youth is a time for no-risk, carefree fun—because everybody else is doing the work for them. Everybody else is pulling the load. They are told that they should 'live it up' while they are young; because adulthood is serious, full of trouble and work, and boring. So they say, "Sow your wild oats while you're young." and "Prolong these days as long as possible, because you'll never pass this way again."

Now, I am here to say that—to my own mind—that is a huge serving of phooey! Maybe, to put it another way, a huge serving of baloney! It is really utter nonsense. There is just enough truth there to get people to think that it is all truth. But youth—while you are young—is *not* a time to sow your wild oats. It is not a time to prolong because adulthood is all work and no play. It is a time to have enjoyment, yes; but it is a time *to prepare*, as well.

Let us go to Ecclesiastes, the eleventh chapter. Solomon was very interested in this question. We will start in verse nine; and we will read down into chapter twelve, but just the first verse.

**Ecclesiastes 11:9** Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes . . .

Now, if I stopped there, that would be what the youth culture teaches our children. But Solomon was much wiser than the youth culture. He adds the proper countering wisdom.

**Ecclesiastes 11:9-10** . . . Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for these things God will bring you into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity.

**Ecclesiastes 12:1** Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them."

This is an interesting study—this section. Yes, he says, "Have fun. Enjoy your youth. Pursue all your desires." But he adds three major qualifications to this. The first one is *be aware that God is watching you*; and, if you sin, He is going to call you on it. He will bring you into account for your sins. So he says, "Go ahead. Have fun—but have proper fun. Have fun that won't bite you in the end. Have fun that won't come back as some sort of penalty."

The second thing that he says, at the end of verse ten, is that *childhood and youth are vanity*. He says, "Remember this. Childhood and youth are like the snap of the fingers. They go by quick." But there is another meaning to this too. Not just that they go by quick; but it also can have the meaning that it is useless, or that it is futile, or that it is unsatisfying, or that it is unproductive. That is kind of an interesting way of looking at it. You see: if all you do is have fun, then that is the way it is going to be—futile, unproductive, unsatisfying, useless. But *if you do it properly—if you use your youth in the right way—then* it does not have to be that way. You can get something good out of your youth.

He says, "Remove sorrow from your heart." To us that means, "Oh, let's just have a gay ole time!"—like it says on the Flintstones. But that is not what it means. If you look deeper into what this means, it says *remove the things that will cause you sorrow in your heart*. It means to remove those urges and desires that are going to trip you up and cause you grief in latter years. It is not saying, "Go have a great ole time, and laugh it up." It is saying, "Use your youth to remove some of these lusts from your heart." That is interesting.

Notice also that it says, "Put away evil from your flesh." That is really what 'removing sorrow' is; but he hits it on two levels. He hits it on the level of *your heart* first. That is, your mind, your emotions. That is where the 'removing of sorrow' must start—inside, in *your character*. And once you do that, it is more easily removed from *your flesh*; but it has to start from inside.

And then the third thing that he says is that, *if you seek God early in your life, it will be so much better*. He said, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days come...when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them [in my life].'" He is saying, "Use your youthful energy, your sharpness and mental acuity, in His service, in doing what is right"—before this human machine starts wearing down and you lose your energy. You lose that mental sharpness. You lose that get-up-and-go. You lose the zeal. You become jaded, because of life's experiences. Remember your Creator when you are young, so that you can *embrace Him* with your whole being. And then, when those dark days do come, you have the strength to bear them.

Seek God *before* you experience the world—and accumulate the baggage and penalties of sin and flawed character. It is so much easier not to get into a bad habit than to have to get rid of a bad habit. So, Solomon says, "Don't even go there! Don't go out and experience the world; because, if you do, that is going to be with you the rest of your life. And you will always have the *pull*—even stronger, to go back to it (because you have been there)." If you have never been there, hopefully those pulls will not be as strong.

Now, it can work the other way—that if you have seen the world, and you are so disgusted at it—that in itself, keeps you from it. But for most people it does not work that way. Once people 'enjoy' the pleasures of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the lust of the heart—it is hard to stay away from them. Solomon says, "If you'll just seek God while you're young, you'll remove a lot of these stumbling blocks that pop up before those who have had those experiences."

Part of our problem with this is that we have a devilish (and I mean that specifically), a Satan-inspired, misconception of what is *fun*. I looked it up in my etymology dictionary, to see where the word "fun" comes from; and I was surprised. I did not expect to get anything from it. I just thought I would look it up, to see what its roots were; and I found out that it is derived from an older English word that means "to hoax, to play a trick on, to deceive." When people do that, they laugh and think it is funny. So, when you played a trick on somebody, you had *fun*. But it is interesting that the root of the word "fun" has to do with *deception*—amusement because of deception.

Just put this in conjunction with my sermon during the Days of Unleavened Bread on folly. The original word—that once meant "to hoax," or "to play a trick on"—before that, meant "to fool." And it was also used in the sense of the noun form, "a fool."

I also found out that it did not come to mean "amusement, or gaiety, or having enjoyment" until the 1700s. It is a fairly recent meaning to have fun. People were probably more serious back then, because life was more serious. And it was just in slightly more modern times that the concept of "fun"—meaning this idea of frolicking and having a gay old time—really became popular.

You and I might have different ideas of what is "fun." Some people might think that playing chess is fun. Some people might think that using the computer is fun. Or, some people might think that playing a sport is fun. Some people think talking is fun. Some people think talking on the telephone with fifty thousand people throughout the day is fun. People have all kinds of different things that they consider doing as "fun."

Well, today's young people—in the main—think that fun has to have an edge. I did a short article in the *Forerunner* not too long ago (sometime last year) as kind of a review of a video I saw on the "Lost Children of Rockdale County." That is down there near Atlanta. And it was amazing to me to see what these young people thought was "fun." Everything that they thought was *fun* was wild. It had an edge. It was drugs. It was sex. It was doing things away from their parents' eyes. It was getting away from their parents, altogether. It was doing things that were certainly illegal, and definitely immoral.

Their "fun" had an edge. Many of them ended up as drug addicts. Many of them ended up with abortions. Many of them ended up with venereal diseases. One of them even admitted that he wanted to kill somebody. But to them—while they were going through all of this—they thought it was *fun*.

And that is the idea of "fun" that is current today. Fun is not something good, that you are amused by. It is something that has an edge. It is something that is rebellious. It is something risky. It is something that they can get away with. That is "fun."

Now, this is not the same with everybody; but I am talking about kids in the world—the ones that make the news, the ones that make the opinion pages—tend to have this idea of fun. So their activity is the kind of things that their parents would disapprove of—reckless, illicit, and rebellious. And left to themselves (like those children down there in Rockdale County) it goes to these kinds of extremes.

Let us go to Proverbs 22. The Bible backs me up, on that last statement—that if children are left to themselves, it ends up in an extreme case.

**Proverbs 22:15** Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; [but] the rod of correction will drive it far from him.

I went here first because I wanted you to see that a child's tendency is to foolish behavior—because he does not have the wisdom, or the experience, to know what is good and right. That is why God tells the parents to correct their children, to drive this out of them and to teach them the right and proper way to live.

**Proverbs 29:15** The rod and rebuke [reproof] give wisdom [That is just exactly what the last verse said; but in a more positive sense.], but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.

It brings shame to his father too; but it is usually shown the most in the mother. Mothers tend to react in shame to something that their children do, whereas a father will tend to react in anger—at least, in most cases. "A child left to himself brings shame to his mother." That is what happens when children are allowed to conceptualize and then enact what they think is fun. Remember? Fun comes from the word that means "foolish."

Now, let us go down to verse 18. This is the reason.

**Proverbs 29:18** Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law.

We use this in other situations and for other types of subjects; but it applies here quite a bit. *Young people, when they don't have a godly vision to work toward, run wild.* That is just a paraphrase of that first part of verse 18. This applies to everybody; but it applies very quickly to young people, because they do not have the restraints that older people have developed. It tends to come out more quickly in a child. If he does not have a certain set of rules (and a certain purpose and goal to work toward), they are just all over the place. There are no restraints. So it is the parents' job to place restraints on the young person's unruly nature, and to guide them in the narrow way—so that they end up as a functioning adult in society. And, beyond that, as a well-loved and serving member of the God Family. That is the ultimate goal.

Now, notice the last part of this. "Happy is he who keeps the law." That is the beneficial way to bring this about—to bring about true fun, and true joy—by getting our children to understand and keep the law. That word "happy" is the same word that means *blessed*. We will be blessed, if we keep the law. And if our children keep the law (our law and God's law), they will truly be happy.

Most of them think that keeping the law—doing what is right—is "square," "uncool," "boring," "nerdy." But that is one of those devilish misconceptions, again. God certainly does not think that our children, who do well, are nerds. They are the apple of His eye, just as they would be the apples of our eyes—because they please us, by doing well. A young child (or a teenager, or a young adult), who worries about what his peers think of him, probably will not do what God says. They are too worried about "being cool" and fitting in.

I know that is hard. Peer-pressure has always been a hard thing for the young people in God's church. Five days a week, or more, they are in school—with all these "cool" people that they want to impress. And it is the cool ones that go out to the game on Friday nights. It is the cool ones that go to the party at a friend's house, whose parents have gone away for the weekend. It is the cool ones who drink beer and smoke, back behind somewhere—where no one can see.

And God says, "Don't even think about that! You will be *happy* if you keep the law." And that is where it has to start. We, as parents, need to impress upon our children that this concept—of "coolness" and being accepted by your peers—is misguided, at the very least. The first thing that they should want is to please God. And, though they cannot see Him and it is a hard thing to understand, they can come to understand it if you put it in terms of yourself. That is, that they should, first of all, try to please you; and, if it pleases you, then it is going to please God.

Let us go to Ecclesiastes 2. We are going to hop, skip, and jump through this chapter, because I want you to see that Solomon went through this for us, so we do not have to do it. We do not have to keep reinventing the wheel. (By "we"—I am talking about children, the young people in the church.) Solomon already lived the wild side. He reported on it. And, if we will just *listen* to what he says, we can avoid all kinds of heartache.

**Ecclesiastes 2:1** I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure" [He says to himself.]; but surely, this also was vanity.

He tells you his conclusion right off. It was like the passing of the wind. It was vain. It was useless. It was unprofitable.

**Ecclesiastes 2:2** I said of laughter—"Madness!" and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?"

This "high life" that so many of the young people think is something they should pursue, Solomon says, "Look. I did it, and it's rubbish. It didn't get me anywhere. It didn't accomplish anything." He says:

**Ecclesiastes 2:3** I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, that I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.

He took it to the hilt! He went all the way. He drank gallons of wine. He had, how many concubines? He enjoyed pleasures. I am sure he had the local rock band in to play before the throne. I do not know what all he did; but he just went and did "the Pleasure Dome" thing, and his conclusion is found beginning in verse 9.

**Ecclesiastes 2:9** So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.

You see, he added to it by building great buildings and doing all these wonderful things, and trying to be the best at everything. He gathered all kinds of things. *Materialism* is one of the things that he tried.

**Ecclesiastes 2:9** Also my wisdom remained with me.

This is something that God must have done. He says that God allowed his wisdom to stay, while he was going through all of these experiments—so that he could report on it, to us. I cannot understand how he could have done all of these things and still retained his wisdom. But Solomon was a special person, and he was given this from God. Remember that God asked him what he wanted, and he asked for an understanding heart. And God left it with him, all of his life. No matter what Solomon did—that understanding remained.

**Ecclesiastes 2:10-11** Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. [That is about all he got.] Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

*Everything he did was useless* , because he did it without God.

**Ecclesiastes 2:17** Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing [grievous] to me . . .

Everything he produced just produced sorrow for him.

**Ecclesiastes 2:17** . . . for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Futile, pointless—it did not get him anywhere. He was back to square one, after he had accomplished all these things. Nothing had changed!

**Ecclesiastes 2:18** Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

Now he is going a little bit further, beyond that. Everything he had produced, he was just going to die and somebody else would get it. All these things did not mean a hill of beans. In verse 24, he comes to another conclusion and a bit of advice.

**Ecclesiastes 2:24-25** Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?

Now, that is a bad translation. It should read: "For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, *without Him* [God]? (Or, "apart from Him.") And that makes a whole lot of sense. What good is all of this if God is not there?

**Ecclesiastes 2:26** For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight . . .

Somebody who lives uprightly—somebody who tries to do what is right and good—will have knowledge, will have understanding; and he'll have loads of fun. And it will be *fun* that is lasting and produces joy—not just a quick, ephemeral happiness that goes away and must be renewed with something bigger (something more "edgy").

Now, looks at what happens on the other hand—in the middle of verse 26.

**Ecclesiastes 2:26** But to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting . . .

To the sinner, God gives all the dull and boring jobs—gathering and collecting. It means that you will be doing menial things.

**Ecclesiastes 2:26** That he [that is, the sinner] may give to him who is good before God. [To the righteous go the spoil.] This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

To be a sinner, and to be put in a place of just gathering and collecting for the good of the righteous—totally useless. So the only *satisfying way of life* is one lived *under the guiding hand of God*. Any other way of life is a wasteland. It is useless. It does not produce a thing. A person could do great works, but if God is not in it, it does not mean a thing.

Now, let us go back to Proverbs 15 and pick up another verse.

**Proverbs 15:21** Folly is joy to him who is destitute of discernment . . .

That is interesting. What he is saying is that we tend to fool ourselves when our main goal is to have fun. We think 'having fun' brings us joy; but Solomon says here [that that is not so]. He says, "You're only fooling yourself. You don't understand. *Folly cannot bring joy.*" It is an oxymoron, to think that folly and joy are equal. They do not fit together. That is because we have screwy brains that equate 'having fun' and 'being joyful.' They are really not synonymous. Fun and joy do not go together, unless it is good clean fun—pure fun. That can produce joy. But if all we are out to do is 'have fun,' then we are fooling ourselves. That is not going to bring us joy.

Remember that it said that if we do not have any vision, we are going to cast off restraint. It is saying the same thing here. We go to folly and think it is joy, because we do not have any discernment. We do not understand. Look at what he says:

**Proverbs 15:21** . . . but a man of understanding walks uprightly.

Those, who truly understand what life is all about, live a godly life. Sometimes this wisdom has to come with age and experience. But if you can grasp it while you are young, it will save you a whole lot of misery and a whole lot of misunderstanding.

Now, God taught me this lesson early. I do not want to put myself up as a paragon of virtue here, but I want to give you a little bit of my autobiography in this regard. Looking back, I can see God working with me by the time I was in the sixth grade. It was in the sixth grade that I began to write—not only to write, but also to edit. Most kids, when they start writing, are not really into editing. But as soon as I started writing, I wanted to edit it to make it as good as I could get it.

Guess what I am doing today: I am writing and I am editing; and I like it. Most people think it is boring. Somebody gives me a raw manuscript, and I am having fun; because I love to see English expressed as well as it can be expressed. English is a beautiful language. Most people do not think so, but it is so expressive, because it has so many words. I think that it is very interesting that God chose to spread the gospel (in these latter days) in English. We can make people understand nuances of things, because English is so expressive. We have synonyms out the wazoo, if you know what I mean. The thesaurus is a thick book.

Well, getting back to the story, I really began to write seriously, and I was writing all of the time. I kept a notebook with me, with one of my stories in it. I also wrote poems, and even essays. I enjoyed research papers that the teachers made us do, because I just enjoyed writing and editing. (I know—I was "weird.")

But I reached my middle teen years, and I began to do a few foolish things—things that I am not very proud of. Rebellious things—but I never got away with one of them. I was always caught! If I even had a devious thought, I think people saw it on my face. Now, this was God working with me. He did not want me to do anything really bad. So He always "caught me."

One time I lied. I told my mom and dad that I was going to a movie with a male friend of mine, when actually I went to the movie with a girl friend. And, who shows up at the movie theater but my mom and dad. That is how God worked with me. I got in some pretty big trouble over that.

It began to dawn on me that "the wild life" hurts—that doing things rebelliously causes trouble. It impinges on freedom. After that incident, I lost a month of my life. I did not enjoy that month, but I did not learn *at all* in that month either—because another time (when I did something else that was stupid) I lost another month of my life, and I had to paint the house besides. These kinds of lessons taught me that *sin does not pay*. Doing things that my parents did not want me to do was going to hurt—somehow.

I was thinking about this. I think about God never letting me do anything really major that would hurt somebody, or hurt myself, or have truly lasting consequences years and years down the road. When I think about, I think, "*I was too chicken to do anything like that.*" I had a natural tendency not to want to get in trouble, I think; and so I did not ever do anything like that.

Now, I am very thankful that He did that, because now I do not have the baggage. I can talk about it now before hundreds of people—because, hopefully, it will help somebody else learn a lesson. But I do not have *the baggage* of terrible sin in my background, of which I am ashamed. I am suitably ashamed, and regret, the things that I did; but it is not something that I carry around with me, like a black cloud over my head. And I am very happy that God was kind.

Well, by the time I was eighteen, I decided that I wanted to be baptized. So I was baptized in May of 1984, *before* I left for Ambassador College, and I did this for a reason. I will not say that there is any order, or priority, in the way these came up, but I wanted my dad to baptize me. If I had gone away to

college, I would have been baptized by somebody that I did not really know. I wanted my dad to counsel me, because he knew me best. And so, that was one of my main reasons.

Another one of my main reasons was that I wanted to go to Ambassador College with the support of God's Holy Spirit. I was going to Ambassador College to learn the Bible—to learn God's way of life more fully. And so I wanted the strength and the power of God's Holy Spirit to help me through that. I also knew that there are many chances—at a place that would have so many other kids my age—for things to happen, and I wanted the restraint that God's Holy Spirit can give to those who are young and headstrong.

Now, I did not heed it all the time. I got in trouble at college—even with the power of God's Holy Spirit. I did things that the administration did not look on kindly, but the main thing is that I wanted *God's help*. And I look back, and I have no regrets that I got baptized that young. You know what, I have been *happy* for sixteen years now. There have been ups and downs, but over that period of time, I cannot say that there have been too many low lows.

God's Spirit has helped my life to have joy and it has allowed me to prioritize. I have had more fun, *since* I have been baptized, than I ever had *before* I was baptized—because the fun means something now. My joy is not tainted. My fun is not tainted by guilt, or remorse, or shame, or lost innocence at all. And I sincerely desire the same happiness, and joy, and fun for our youth too, and that is why I am giving this sermon.

Young people tend to think of God and His way as "for old folks." Or, let us put it this way—most young people tend to think of God as 'an old folks' God, that He Himself is old. Of course He is old. He has been around forever! But I do not think He looks old.

Herbert Armstrong was always ninety years old, was he not? And the ministry, were they not old guys too? I mean, some of them even had white hair, and they did not know how to relate to us young folk. Now, I am trying to think here like young folk think, because I am not too far removed from that myself. Parents frequently came into the church in middle age, and they were old (in middle age). The church always seemed to have a disproportionate number of senior citizens to young people. And so the church (with its traditional service, and its old ministry, and its old founder, and its 'old' God) tended to look "old" all over—that it was for old folks. That God's religion is for when you get gray hair, and no sooner!

Did you know that the Bible was written two thousand years ago? Man, that thing is old! And the prophets—they were all these guys with white hair, and they went and preached on the hillside. And the wind would blow them over, because they were so old. And all those apostles—they lived to be geezers of seventy or eighty years old, before God cut them off.

Now I am not making fun of the old people (not in the least), because we need the old people. We need the solidity of the old, to counteract the zeal of the youth. But this is the way that young people look at the church. It is an 'old folks' religion. They do not see the relevance for today. Everything took place two thousand years ago, or more. "What does it have to do with me, in high school?" (Or me, in college? Or me, in trying to find a job?)

Maybe the ministry has had a hard time understanding how to approach the youth. I do not know. I do not want to point any fingers, but you have to realize (and you have to be able to show the children, from when they are young) that *the church is for them too. And righteousness is for them too!*

Some of these factors, we cannot change. God is always going to be eternal—eternally old. The Bible is always going to be old. It is always relevant, but it was written two thousand years ago, and you cannot change that. But you might be surprised at the number of young people that God called in that Book. If you think about it, I think He prefers to call young people (than old people). Youth has a lot of advantages that God can use! Energy, strength, zeal, idealism, resilience, courage, and a boldness to go where angels fear to tread—those are things that God can use.

They only advantage an old person has over a young person is *experience*. They have been over the rocky road of life, and they know where the stumbling blocks are. They know where the pitfalls are. Now, you might think that old people have wisdom. Well, they should, but this is not something that the youth cannot have also. *Anybody who follows God's Word has wisdom—regardless of age!* You can read it with ten-year-old eyes, and if you *do it*, you are wise. Or, if you have a-hundred-year-old eyes, and you *do it*—you are wise. Wisdom is not something confined to the old. Wisdom can fill the mind and the actions of anyone who *does* what God wants us to do. That is wisdom!

Now, let us think. Who did God work with in the Bible? I have a list for you. Joseph was seventeen when God began working with him. Did you know that Joseph was just about that old when he was put into slavery? Did you know that he was just a few years older when Potiphar's wife came at him with her wiles? And he refused her. Then, because he stood up for what was right, he was thrown into prison. He was twenty-eight years old when God used him to tell the butler and the baker the interpretation of the dreams. He waited two more years, and he was thirty when the Pharaoh made him Prime Minister of Egypt. Thirty years old! That is four years younger than I am.

What about Phinehas, who took his spear and stopped the plague. How old was he? What about Samson? He was a young man, when he became judge. He did not do what was right all the time, but by the time that he was about forty years old, he did; and he did a great work for God as judge.

What about Samuel? He was just a little kid when Hannah gave him to Eli, and God prophesied through him. David was about seventeen years old when he struck Goliath. No one else in Israel would stand up to the giant, and a seventeen-year-old kid said, "I'll do it, because he is blaspheming the Lord."

What about Ruth? She must not have been very old when the story all came together. What about Isaiah? Isaiah had a ministry that was about sixty years long. We tend to think of Isaiah as an old man talking to Hezekiah. But he had a ministry that began back in the reign of Uzziah—many, many years before. What about Jeremiah? God said that He had worked with Jeremiah from the womb.

It was the same with John the Baptist; and the same with Jesus Christ—our Lord, and Master, and Savior. Did you know that our God was younger than I am when He finished His work? (Thirty-three and a half years old. He was a year younger than I am.) *God likes to work with young people!*

All the apostles were young men when they started. Paul was a young man. Mark was a young man. Timothy was a young man. Mary was probably a young girl when the angel appeared to her and told her that she was going to have the Son of God.

Now, I have probably missed a few, but I want to impress upon the young people that *God wants to work with you*—just like He worked with these heroes of faith. And they did it without thought of what their peers thought of them. They did not care. God had called them, and they would do His work.

I did miss one. Esther was another one. A young girl—probably no more than about sixteen—when she changed the history of the Jews. It is an amazing thing what God can do. Daniel! I forgot Daniel. He stood up to the very emperor of the world when he was (I do not know) maybe a young teen, or mid-teen. Would you have the courage to do that?

So how does a person seek God? I just want to take a few minutes on this, because some people have an overly sentimental, or a Protestant viewpoint of how you seek God. Some people think that you have to come to the altar and give your heart to the Lord; and that that is how you seek God. But that is not true. We do not have public confessionals, in this church. We do not have altar calls. *Seeking God is a private matter, between you and God, but the result (of seeking God) will be publicly manifested in the way you live.* That is, your conduct will change, and people will notice.

Let us go to Isaiah 51. We will read the first eight verses. God says:

**Isaiah 51:1-8** "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD : Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him." For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody. [Now notice, He is talking to Zion here. That is a symbol of the church.] "Listen to Me, My people; and give ear to Me, O My nation: For law will proceed from Me, and I will make My justice rest as a light of the peoples. My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, and My arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands will wait upon Me, and on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, the earth will grow old like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die in like manner; but My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished. Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, you people in whose heart is My law: Do not fear the reproach of men, nor be afraid of their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but My righteousness will be forever, and My salvation from generation to generation."

This gives us an idea of what seeking God is, and how we go about doing it. In the first verse, He says, "You who seek the LORD." This is a parallelism. He says, "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness." And then He does a parallel phrase. "You who seek God." Usually parallel phrases, like this, define one another. If we allow this to define itself, those who seek the Lord are those who

follow after righteousness. You are seeking the Lord. You are seeking God. You are seeking a relationship with Him *when you do what He says*. When you pursue right doing, when you pursue living godly—that is what seeking the Lord is, *doing what is right*.

It says here, "Look to the rock from which you were hewn." This has a double meaning. The Rock, in the Bible, is often a symbol of Jesus Christ. So one of the ways that we learn how to seek righteousness is by following the example of Jesus Christ. Then He mentions Abraham and Sarah. He says, "Go back and look at the fathers, and mothers, of our faith. See their examples. Learn how they lived."

He also says, a little farther down, that we need to put His law in our heart. That means studying His law and burning it into our characters. *We seek God by learning God's law and putting it into our hearts*. He says, "Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, you people in whose heart is My law." There is another parallelism. Knowing righteousness is having His law in our hearts. When we do these things, God will make contact with us, and we will make contact with Him.

Let us go just a few pages over, to Isaiah 55. The New King James says that this is "The Invitation to the Abundant Life."

**Isaiah 55:1-2** "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?"

He is saying, "Why are you wasting your life and your time on things that aren't going to matter? Come, buy what I have to offer." (Remember that this is God speaking.)

**Isaiah 55:2-3** Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. [God says.] Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David.

**Isaiah 55:6-7** Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

Once we begin seeking the Lord, these are the next steps that we have to take. We should be doing these with them, in tandem. Seeking the Lord requires more than just listening and learning. He says that we must call upon Him in prayer, so that we can get to know Him. "Call upon Him while He is near." It also requires us *to repent*. We have to confess our sins to Him, so that we can seek forgiveness. And it also is forsaking the sinful action and attitude that went into those sins (that comprised those sins), and then do what is right.

Notice how He said that. "Seek the LORD while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. [That is the prayer.] Let the wicked forsake his way [That is repentance.], and the unrighteous man his thoughts." Notice that it says "way"—that is your conduct, the path you take. And your "thoughts" once again are the motivations for your way. So He hits *heart* and *actions* again, just like Solomon did. "And let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him. . . and [God] will pardon." He will have mercy and the relationship will begin.

You might want to jot down Zephaniah 2:1-3. This says, pretty much, "Seek Him now, before the day of the Lord; and maybe He'll have mercy." There is always *a sense of urgency* in our relationship with God. Do it now! Do not delay! Do not think that we have all kinds of time. We do not know quite how long a time we have until Christ returns, and we surely do not know when we will draw our last breath. So do not procrastinate when it comes to having a relationship with God. Do it now, before the dark days come.

Let us conclude in Amos, the fifth chapter.

**Amos 5:4** For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: "Seek Me and live."

This does not mean just physically. This is talking about the abundant life, an eternal life. He says:

**Amos 5:5-6** Do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba [These were areas where there was idolatry. He says, "Don't seek a false way."]; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity. [That is what that will produce. Going the wrong way will produce captivity.] And Bethel shall come to nothing. [It will be obliterated. Do not be there when that happens.] Seek the LORD and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel.

**Amos 5:14-15** Seek good and not evil, that you may live. [He repeats Himself.] So the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

We are *the remnant of Joseph*. Those of us sitting here "live" in Joseph; and we are the remnant of that people whom God has called out. God wants us to seek Him and live, so that He can be gracious to us.

And remember that it says, in Malachi 4:6, that before Christ comes, He expects the hearts of the fathers to turn to the children, and the children to the fathers. The time is coming—the time is soon—when God wants to see *everyone* in the church turn to Him, and seek Him, and live. So let us begin that process among us, so that we can say with the psalmist (in Psalm 71), "For even from my youth, O God, by You have I been taught."