

Nothing New Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 1.*

Memory Text: “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (*Ecclesiastes 1:9, NKJV*).

The story is told of a Greek philosopher named Diogenes who walked the streets of Athens with a lantern; his goal was to find an honest man. According to one version of the story, he finally found someone whom he believed fit his expectations. Diogenes, however, was mistaken. The fellow stole his lantern, and poor Diogenes had to find his way home in the dark.

Whether true or not true, this story reveals how easy it is to be cynical about life, how easy it is to put a negative spin on things.

Of course, in one sense, that's not hard to understand. The world can make a person cynical, negative, depressed. Just ask Solomon, at least the Solomon who appears in the opening chapter of *Ecclesiastes*. He looks in nature and sees reason to despair; he seeks wisdom and finds it depressing; he looks at life as a whole and finds it meaningless. And for beings who cry out for meaning and purpose in life, we see this as a hard conclusion to live with. Maybe that's why, even in industrialized countries with lots of wealth, people are depressed. Why else are millions and millions of dollars spent on antidepressants? Because people are happy?

Chapter 1 introduces the book. It begins with a look at the futility and meaninglessness of life lived without the knowledge of God.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 13.*

Kohelet in Jerusalem

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (*Eccles. 1:1*).

The word commonly translated “preacher” here, *kohelet*, is from the Hebrew root *kahal*, which means “to assemble,” “to gather.” In Greek, *kohelet* is translated into a word similar to the Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*; from this, of course, we get the name *Ecclesiastes*. The Jews just called the author, and the book, *Kohelet*.

There’s been much debate over the centuries regarding exactly what the word *kohelet* means. Is he gathering people in order to expound his great wisdom? Or is he a gatherer of wisdom, as he himself suggests (*Eccles. 1:13, 16, 17*)? We’ll have to wait for heaven in order to know for sure.

Read Ecclesiastes 1. Write out a short summary of what Solomon seems to be saying. Don’t worry about understanding each phrase (no one does!); rather, focus instead on the general message and tone. What point is he making, and how do we understand these words from a Christian perspective? And, as you read, keep in mind who wrote them, when, and why.

On the surface these are words of a bitter man, a cynical man, a pessimist. All he sees is repetition, fruitlessness, and meaninglessness in life. Taken in isolation, his words sound like many modern atheistic philosophers, who bemoan the meaninglessness and futility of their existence. This, of course, can’t be said about Solomon. Instead, remembering that we need to view this book in light of the whole Bible, we see, instead, the bitterness and cynicism that come from a life lived apart from God, a life lived in disobedience, a life lived only with immediate earthly things in view, as opposed to the greater picture of God and the promise of salvation. Taken in that context, his words fit perfectly with the overall theme of Scripture, however differently they are presented here.

How much bitterness or cynicism do you see in your own life? What caused it? How can these things be purged before they poison your whole spiritual existence?

Vanity of Vanities

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (*Eccles. 1:2*).

Most translations of this verse use the word *vanity*. The Hebrew word, *hebel*, means literally “vapor” or “breath”; it also carries the idea of emptiness, meaninglessness, and futility. The word will appear numerous times in Ecclesiastes.

When you think of “vapor” or “breath,” what comes to mind? Why would Solomon use this image to talk about life in general? See also *Ps. 144:4*.

Again, think about the perspective that he was writing from: The years of his life, so full of potential and promise, were squandered on things that do not last, things of no permanent value. When most of your whole life is made up of *hebel*, of vapor, when you get to the end of that life the whole thing can seem like a vapor because it passed by very quickly and seemed so full of meaningless things.

Look up the following verses. How are they expressing, in their own way, the same idea presented above?

Isa. 52:3

Matt. 6:19, 20

Mark 8:36

James 4:14

What makes Solomon’s words so powerful is that here was a man who had everything this world could offer. He, perhaps unlike anyone else, had his fill of worldly pleasures. As he himself said later, anything that he wanted he got (*Eccles. 2:10*). Yet, in the end, he calls it all meaningless, an empty vapor or breath. What a lesson about what’s important in life and what isn’t.

Take stock of your life. How much of what you are doing could be deemed as *hebel*? What things are you striving for? What things do you think are important? If you get what you are striving for, might you one day deem them as *hebel*, as well?

The Sun Also Rises

Solomon, in his earlier years, was apparently a keen student of nature, and from nature he learned many spiritual lessons (*see, for instance, Prov. 1:17-19; 6:6-9; 17:12; 26:1-3, 11; 31:10*). In his later years, as well, he was still looking at nature; given his frame of mind, however, we can't be too certain about the lessons he draws from what he sees.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:4-11. What point was Solomon making? How accurate were his conclusions?

Solomon was doing what's often termed "natural theology," the attempt to discern truth about God, reality, and life from nature itself. Which is fine. Nature has been deemed God's "second book" (*see, for instance, Ps. 19:1-7, Isa. 40:26, and Heb. 11:3*).

How does nature speak to us about God? What are the limits of what it can teach us, especially in a fallen world?

However powerful the message of this second book, you can put the most brilliant and wonderful text before someone who can't read, and it will mean nothing to that person. Or, regardless of what you put before them, if they are not open to what it says, if their hearts are set in another direction, then not only will they not accept what the text or what nature says but they could draw the wrong conclusions from them. Solomon here, grousing over his life, looks at nature and draws a conclusion that's not necessarily the lesson to be learned. He's pouring his own negativity and his cynicism into nature itself.

It's easy to do. One eighteenth-century writer argued that, because nature—through famines, pestilence, and floods—is so destructive, "man follows nature's impulses when he indulges in homicide." In other words, because nature kills, so can we. Talk about drawing a wrong conclusion! But again, this shows how easy it is to read our bad attitudes into what's around us.

How capable are you at looking at things "objectively"? How often do you let your bad moods or negative attitudes impact your actions and words? Why is death to self so important in order to protect ourselves from projecting our wrong attitudes onto other things?

Beyond the Cycles

Solomon looked around at nature and saw endless and seemingly meaningless repetition. The sun rises and sets, the wind blows, the rivers flow, and it goes on and on for generation after generation. What was, it will be done again; what will be, it already has been. “There is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccles. 1:9, NKJV*).

His tone, however, suggests that something is wrong in all this and that things shouldn’t be this way. His attitude comes through clearly in the first verses of the chapter.

Read again Ecclesiastes 1:1-4. What is Solomon saying in those opening verses about the transience of humanity in contrast to the endless cycles of nature?

The earth goes on and on; we don’t. We are nothing but vapor, *hebel*. These thoughts get to the ultimate dilemma of humanity: We are beings capable of understanding the idea of eternity, of transcendence, of something greater than ourselves, and yet, we see that it’s beyond our reach. The sun, the rivers, the wind—all were here before us and will be here long after we return to the dust. We come and go; the rivers, the sun, and the wind remain. No wonder life can seem to be, as Shakespeare wrote, a tale “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

How do the following texts answer the dilemma that Solomon touched on here in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes? *1 Cor. 15:26, 51-55; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 21:4.*

There have been many great thinkers, many great philosophers, with all sorts of elaborate and logical systems, all designed to explain the hard questions of life. But unless they can solve the question of death, they have no answers for the questions of life, for, in the end, all life is swept up in death. And, as one can guess, none of these philosophers has answered the problem (most of them are dead themselves). Only Jesus, by His death and His resurrection, has. Jesus has shown us that death isn’t the end and that we, indeed, can one day be alive long after the endless cycles of life on this fallen planet have ceased to exist or even be remembered (*Isa. 65:17*). If not for that hope, Solomon would be justified in his pessimism.

Wisdom “Under the Sun”

Verses 12-18 in chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes give more insight into the background of the author. Not only does he reiterate his role as king, he mentions that he had more wisdom than all before him in Jerusalem, more evidence pointing to Solomon. This all makes sense, considering that the reign of Solomon was one of great peace and prosperity. The king, not worrying about invaders or rebellion or economic collapse, had time to seek for knowledge and wisdom “under the sun.”

Notice the phrase used here, “under heaven” (*vs. 13*), is another way of expressing the same idea as the phrase “under the sun” (*vss. 3, 9, 14*), which appears more than twenty times, and only in Ecclesiastes. What does the phrase mean, and how does it help us understand what Solomon is saying here?

Under heaven, under the sun, is another way of talking about what goes on here, on earth. What we see here is, again, another example of the futility of all earthly knowledge and wisdom. The world, and all that’s in it, can’t answer the hard questions of life; indeed, the world and all that’s in it *cause* many of the hard questions of life. The answer has to be from something greater than the world, above the world, something that has “overcome the world” (*John 16:33*). And that, of course, is Jesus. Otherwise, as Solomon sees here, the world leaves one frustrated, angry, cynical. He gains all this wisdom, and for him it brings only grief and an increase of sorrow.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, sounding like Solomon, wrote, “Everything in life [‘under the sun’] shows that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated.”

Go back over Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. What things in particular does Solomon find so frustrating and vain? Also, how do the words here fit in with 2 Timothy 3:7?

Notice Ecclesiastes 1:15: “That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.” What bent or broken things in your life just can’t be fixed now; what things do you lack that the world just can’t supply? How do these things make you long even more for the return of Jesus?

Further Study: Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.” Go to Proverbs to get another view of Solomon in a different period of his life. What differences in attitude do you see? How does this show why a proper relationship with God is so important in how we view life as a whole?

“Solomon was not complaining of the ceaseless cycles of nature, but saw in them a parallel to the cycles of human life (Eccl. 1:4). Is man’s life, from generation to generation, a mere matter of repetition, with no more sublime object in view? Will there not be a climax to the life of the human race? Does not God have an eternal purpose that will eventually supersede this seemingly endless repetition of human activity from generation to generation?

“The scientific accuracy of the description here given of the motion of air masses about the surface of the earth is unparalleled in ancient literature and reveals an insight into the laws of nature greatly superior to that of most men in ancient times.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1064.

“In its human wisdom the world knows not God. Its wise men gather an imperfect knowledge of God through his created works, and then in their foolishness exalt nature and the laws of nature above nature’s God. Nature is an open book which reveals God. All who are attracted to nature may behold in it the God that created them. But those who have not a knowledge of God, in their acceptance of the revelation God has made of Himself in Christ, will obtain only an imperfect knowledge of God in nature.”—Ellen G. White, *Healthful Living*, p. 293.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, spend some time in nature together and then discuss the following questions: What revelation of God do we get in nature? What can nature tell us about God? What can’t it tell us? What wrong lessons can we draw from nature? What does all this tell us about the importance of revelation for a fuller picture of God?
- 2 Why is it so easy to get cynical about life? Is a certain amount of cynicism valuable? After all, this is a fallen world destined to destruction. How do we strike the right balance so that, while cautious about the world, we don’t sink into the extreme negativity seen in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes?

The Priest Started It!

by HOMER TRECARTIN

We had a delightful visitor at church recently. Joe is a retiree from the United Kingdom who has lived in Cyprus for the past seven years. Earlier in the week he had called the Middle East Union to get directions to the nearest Adventist church. He seemed so excited to know finally where a church was.

Joe explained that he had been watching 3ABN for several months and wanted to visit the church. But he could not find a street address for a church. Armed with the church's address, he showed up for church.

Over lunch he shared more of his story. He has been a faithful member of his church for 66 years. But one Sunday last summer his priest announced that the following week mass would be on Saturday so he could leave for vacation.

"But Father," Joe objected, "we can't do that. The Bible says we are to keep God's Sabbath holy."

The priest smiled and said, "It's OK, Joe. It won't hurt at all. In fact, the Bible says that Saturday is the Sabbath, not Sunday."

Joe was stunned and upset. He bought a Bible—the first he had ever held—and started reading it. He searched the channels on his satellite TV for something that might help, and he found a program that was discussing the Sabbath! He listened intently and wrote down all the Bible texts they read. He found answers to other questions, such as what happens when a person dies.

He realized that his priest was right—Saturday is God's true Sabbath! But suddenly Joe did not know what to do. He decided to ask another priest, but every priest he talked to told him simply to stop reading the Bible, for it would just confuse him.

But Joe loved God and was learning so much from the Bible that he could not bear to stop reading it. So, he turned to the television programs that had brought him the truth.

Joe had just one question: "Why don't Adventists celebrate Communion? I've heard nothing about that on television."

I smiled. "We do celebrate Communion. Today is Communion Sabbath."

Joe rejoices in his new knowledge of God's love and enjoys the fellowship he has found with his new family, those who keep the Sabbath because the Bible says to and not because it will let someone start their vacation early.

HOMER TRECARTIN was secretary-treasurer of the Middle East Union of Seventh-day Adventists when he wrote this. He currently lives in Maryland.