

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?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

Key Text: *Ecclesiastes 1:9*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: True contentment comes from knowing and serving God.

Feel: Even when faced with mysteries that defy explanation, Christians are grounded in an eternal reality greater than themselves.

Do: Live with purpose in Christ Jesus.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. The Emptiness of Life Without God (*Eccles. 1:12-18*)

A Solomon looks back at his life and sees that his quest for earthly acquisitions and accomplishments is empty and meaningless apart from God. What do we need at the heart of every pursuit in order to ensure that its attainment is not futile and dissatisfying?

B Often our attention is drawn to the suffering caused by inexplicable natural and human-made disasters. Yet we're also surrounded by simple everyday miracles. List at least ten of these.

II. Interpreting the Seasons of Our Lives (*Eccles. 1:3-11*)

A Nature in its fallen state only reflects God's character imperfectly. What life lessons must we learn from the Bible, in addition to the ones nature teaches?

B Read Ecclesiastes 1:11. What seems to be Solomon's chief concern?

C What legacy do you hope to leave behind?

▶ **Summary:** In the eternal scheme of things, our brief lives seem but the blink of an eye. Yet both Creation and Redemption testify to the high regard that God has for each one of us. How should we then live?

Learning Cycle

▶ **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **Why is this lesson important to me?**

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: Which of the characters in the following story portrays Solomon?

A powerful CEO (chief executive officer) of a corporation was strolling along a riverbank when he came upon a fisherman relaxed against a tree trunk, cap pulled over his eyes. “Why, you lazy so-and-so!” the CEO thundered. “Why don’t you get up and make something of yourself?” “Why should I?” responded the fisherman. “So you will have something to your name—own some assets.” “Why?” asked the fisherman. “So you can have some security and some free time.” “For what?” “To do the things you like!” “Like fishing?”

Answer: Both. The CEO portrays Solomon at the peak of his “desire to acquire,” when his value was determined by his valuables. The fisherman portrays Solomon after he decided, What’s the use? It’s all for nothing. In the end, I’m going to die just as everyone else is.

Consider This: Why is Solomon’s despair recorded for us?

► STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: What do I need to know from God’s Word?


Bible Commentary

I. Why Such Passion for “Under the Sun”?

In Ecclesiastes 1:3, Solomon introduces his “signature phrase,” which he uses nearly thirty times before finally easing off in the last chapters.

Consider This: What is the “under the sun” point Solomon felt so desperate to nail home? (See *Eccles. 12:11.*)

The relationship between Solomon and God was not like yours and mine; it was that of king to King. One was “under the sun”; the Other, above. As Solomon beheld the King above, he realized that his role—compared to

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the Trinity—was nothing more in the universe than “middle management.”

II. What Else Is “Under the Sun”?

Solomon took a special interest in natural history, from which he gained a clear conception of the Creator. (*Review Ecclesiastes 1:3-9 with your class.*)

This passage is about the natural phenomena of sun, wind, rivers, and sea; yet it opens and closes with references to “labor.” Why? The point that both appear to be exercises in futility—flows of energy going nowhere but to be recycled—is easier grasped than one more subtle. Reread verse 4: Generations pass away, “but the earth abides forever.” Is Solomon really saying that while nature itself has the ability to live on, he—a king, no less—has to die?

III. Is It True That There Is *Nothing New* “Under the Sun”?

By verse 9, Solomon has worked himself into a pity party.

Consider This: Where in verses 10 and 11 can your class find the following attitudes?


- Everything there has already been done in ancient times, so what’s the use of doing it over?
- Nothing has been, or will be, remembered anyway.

■ *Had Solomon truly believed that nothing would be remembered by future generations, would he have bothered to write Ecclesiastes?*

IV. What Good Is Wisdom “Under the Sun”?

Verse 12 serves as a transition to another “under the sun” concern.

Consider This: Invite the class to identify in verses 15 and 18 two complaints Solomon had about “wisdom.” Verse 15: Wisdom doesn’t change anything anyway; what is done is done. Could Solomon here be referring to his own experience—that whatever wisdom he now applies to his past sins, it’s too late to do anything about them? Verse 18: Wisdom brings grief.

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

But is ignorance truly bliss?

■ *A class member may be invited beforehand to share a personal experience contrasting wisdom/grief with ignorance/bliss.*

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 Do we regard our possessions as “ours” that we worked for—and deserve—or as gifts graciously on loan from the Lord? If we are widowed, do we resent God for “taking away” what was “ours,” or do we thank Him for the years in which He lent His gift to us?
- 2 “You can’t take it with you, but you can send it ahead of you.” Are we sending our fair share of gold ahead, in the form of mission funding for converts?

Application Questions:

- 1 Solomon says that “history merely repeats itself” (*Eccles. 1:9, TLB*). In the following context, is this also true? “The Lord brings His erring children over the same ground again and again” to see if they will heed His admonitions or if He will have to leave them to their own weakness. —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 182. What “ground” in our lives that we want never to see again are we going to start doing something about?
- 2 Are there areas of our lives, too, that seem like an endless cycle, going nowhere? If the answer is Yes, how do we refocus “above the sun”?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Fasten your seatbelt!

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Speaking of the workers on the tabernacle who demanded higher wages for their professional skills, Ellen White wrote, “Not for the wages we receive [in God’s work] are we to labor. The motive that prompts us to work for God should have in it nothing akin to self-serving.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 65, emphasis supplied.

Consider This: Since God has revealed that He has given each person a work that no one else can do for Him (see Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 495), for which are we actively searching?

- to find the right wage
- to find the right “place”

■ *Would God appoint you to a position and then not be “big enough” to take care of you? “Is anything too hard for the Lord” (Gen. 18:14)?*

■ *Could anything be more exciting than to know that God cut out a position you alone can fill? Do you feel special?*

■ *In our search, how can we be sure that we can determine the right place? Is it “my obsession” or “God’s impression”? First, “Christ is ever sending messages to those who listen for His voice.”—Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, p. 542. But read on!*

“The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as He will teach somebody else. If we come to Him in faith, He will speak His mysteries to us personally. . . . Those who decide to do nothing in any line that will displease God, *will know*, after presenting their case before Him, *just what course to pursue.*”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 668, emphasis supplied.

We may wish that the opportunity of Solomon might be ours. Or is his experience recorded to spare us from going through the peril and humility that he experienced? Why are we so sure that we would not make the same mistakes?

“It is not the empty cup that we have difficulty in carrying; it is the cup full to the brim that must be carefully balanced.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 59. This passage continues with assurance that in the valley of humiliation, where every step we take is dependent on God, there is comparative safety.

■ *A class member with a personal experience on this subject might be invited beforehand to share a brief testimony.*

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

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?