

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

by Ray C. Stedman

Ecclesiastes is one of the favorite books of the Bible for skeptics, scoffers, atheists and certain of the cultists. The reason for that is that there are certain passages in this book which seem to deny that there is life after death, that it is all over when this life ends. Atheists love to contend that the book of Ecclesiastes seems to confirm that view. That is why they frequently quote from it. Hedonists love this book too because it apparently endorses a rather Epicurean lifestyle. Those who pursue pleasure as the chief aim of life -- and there are a great many of them in this country today, as the United States is probably more hedonistic than any nation that has ever existed -- love the book because again and again throughout it we are exhorted to an "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we must die" philosophy. Then there are passages in this book which are the favorite texts of those who declare that even if we survive beyond this life we enter a period of quietness, a time when we have no knowledge or desires. This teaching falls in line with those cultists who teach "soul sleep," i.e., that when the body dies the soul goes to sleep within the body.

But all of these groups fail to note what we must note right from the beginning, that this book is an examination of secular wisdom and knowledge. The book clearly states at the outset that it is limiting itself to that which is apparent to the natural mind. One of the key phrases of the book is the continual repetition of the words, "under the sun." What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Verse 3 asks. We find that phrase used again in Verse 9. That is the limitation put upon this book.

Ecclesiastes is a collection of what man is able to discern under the sun, i.e., in the visible world. The book does not take into consideration revelation that comes from beyond man's powers of observation and reason. It is an inspired, an accurate book. It guarantees that what it reports is what people actually believe. But it is an examination of those beliefs. The book is not merely a collection of ancient philosophy, for what it talks about is very much up-to-date and extremely relevant. Here is what you will hear propounded in soap operas, in political speeches, in the radical or conservative movements of our day. Here is what you will hear in the halls of academia, or on the streets of any city. In this book the philosophies by which people attempt to live life are brought into consideration and examined. That is why Ecclesiastes is so practical and up-to-date.

The first three verses introduce the theme of the book:

**The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun? {Eccl 1:1-3 RSV}**

First, we learn that the writer is, "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." We immediately recognize that that could refer to no one but King Solomon. "The son of David" could refer to any descendant of David who sat on the throne after him, but this particularly relates to Solomon, as several things in the book will confirm.

Many of the critical commentators of our day question that view, and very few of them accept it. They try to date the book after the Babylonian exile, some 500 years after Solomon lived. That is the habitual stance of critics of the Old Testament. But their views have been proved wrong again and again, based, as they think they are, upon an examination of the culture of the day. I think, however, that we shall have no problem accepting the fact that it is indeed Solomon who shares with us in this book the wisdom that God taught him throughout his life.

The translators, unfortunately, here refer to Solomon as "the Preacher." I am sorry they used that term. I know the book sounds a little preachy at the beginning. On reading that second verse it would be so easy to affect a "stained-glass" voice. In a modern audience this, of course, would turn everybody off. The word for Preacher is the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which really means, "the one who gathers, assembles, or collects things." This is an apt title for the author of this book who has examined and then collected together the philosophies by which men live. But I think a more accurate English word to translate this would be "the Searcher." Here is a searching mind which has looked over all of life and seen what is behind the actions of people. That is the word which I am going to use wherever the word, "the Preacher," occurs. It is not really a preacher or proclaimer but a searcher that is in view.

This is indeed a search, and, if you are concerned about what he discovered, he tells us. You do not have to read the last chapter to find out the results of his search because he puts it right here in Verse 2: "Vanity of vanities" -- that is what he found. Vanity here does not mean pride of face. Some of you ladies -- maybe even some of you men -- spent too much time in front of the mirror this morning. Not only did you finish what you needed to do to make yourself presentable, but you admired it a little. We call

that vanity, pride of face, but that is not what this Searcher is talking about. The word here, in the original, means, "emptiness, futility, meaninglessness, blah-ness." That is what he is talking about. His view of what he found out in his search through life is put in those terms. Emptiness, a feeling of futility -- that is what life brings.

Nothing in itself, the Searcher claims, will satisfy. No thing, no pleasure, no relationship, nothing he found had enduring value in life. That is why my sub-title for this study is, "The Things That Won't Work." Everybody is trying to make them work; everybody has seized on one or another of these philosophies, these views of life, and tries to make it satisfy him. But according to this Searcher, who has gone through it all, nothing will work. When he says, "Vanity of vanities, emptiness of emptiness," that is the Hebrew way of declaring the superlative. There is nothing more empty, this man concludes, than life.

In Verse 3 we have the question which he continually used in his search: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" What is the profit of it to him? This is an interesting Hebrew word, meaning, "that which is left over." After he has sucked dry all the immediate delight, joy or pleasure out of something, what is left over, what endures, what will remain to continually feed the hunger of his life for satisfaction? That is the right question. It is the question we all are asking. Is there anything that will really minister continually to my need -- that summum bonum, that highest good, which, if I find it, I do not need to look any further? Is there a key to continual pleasure, delight and joy in life?

The Searcher raises a very pertinent question right at the beginning. This is the search which this book will take upon. Verses 4-11, where he amplifies this a little, are a brief introduction to exactly what he means, Verses 4-7 describe the sense of futility which nature gives us as we live in this natural world; and Verses 8-11 describe the sense of futility that every person individually feels as he faces life.

Verses 4-7:

**A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again. {Eccl 1:4-7 RSV}**

-- the endless cycles of life. The Searcher's theme is stated in Verse 4: Humanity is transient, but nature is permanent. A generation goes and a generation comes -- the human race passes on from this life, comes into life, lives its term and goes on -- but the earth remains forever.

He has three proofs of this, the first of which is the circle of the sun. The sun rises in the east, runs across the heavens, apparently, and sets in the west; then it scurries around the dark side of the earth while we are sleeping, and there it is in the east again in the morning. That has been going on as long as time has been counted, as far back as we can read in human history. It is endless; it repeats itself again and again.

Then he speaks of the circuit of the winds, south to north. This is unusual, because we have no evidence that men understood scientifically the fact that the wind, the clouds and the great jet streams of earth run in circles. This is evident to us in our day because we can see from a satellite picture in any news broadcast the great circles of the winds. How they knew this back then I do not know. But Solomon knew it, though the scientific world of that day did not seem to understand it.

His third proof is the circuit of the evaporative cycle. Thirteen elders and pastors from this church have just returned from a backpack trip to the Sierras. There the mountain peaks were milking moisture from the clouds which passed over all you dry people down here. We had torrents of rain, hail, and even snow falling upon us while we were huddling in our little plastic tents, enjoying this backpack experience. Where does all the water which endlessly drops out of the sky come from? The answer, of course, is that it comes from the ocean. Out here to the west an invisible evaporative process is at work by which the water that runs into the sea never raises the level of the sea because there is an invisible raising of that water back up into the clouds. These clouds then move east by the circuit of the winds and drop their moisture again, and this goes on forever.

The writer is suggesting that there is something wrong in this. It is backwards, somehow. Man ought to be permanent and nature ought to be transient, he suggests. There is something within all of us that says this. We feel violated that we learn all these great lessons from life, but just as we have begun to learn how to handle life it is over, and the next generation has to start from scratch again.

The Scripture confirms that something is wrong. The Bible tells us that man was created to be the crown of creation. He is the one who is in dominion over all things. Man ought to last endlessly and nature ought to be changing, but it is the other way around. Man feels the protest of this in his spirit. We have all felt this. We all protest, inwardly, at least, the injustice of losing the wisdom of a Churchill, the beauty of a Princess Grace, or the charm of a John Kennedy. Something is wrong that all of this is suddenly taken away from us, while the meaningless cycle of nature goes on and on endlessly. Yes, the human spirit feels that strongly. That very pertinent question is going to be developed in the theme of this book.

But furthermore, the Searcher says, the present experience of every individual confirms this sense of futility. Verse 8:

**All things are full of weariness; [Actually, "full of weariness" is one Hebrew word which ought to be translated "restless."]
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has been already,
in the ages before us.
There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to happen
among those who come after. {Eccl 1:8-11 RSV}**

His thesis here is: "All things are restless." He has observed that there is an inherent restlessness in everything. In fact, it is so widespread nobody can possibly describe all the restlessness of life.

He has two proofs of this. First, human desire is never satisfied: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing." My wife's mother is 95 years old. She is just a shell of a person now, but her mind is still sharp and clear. The other day we had her in our home and somebody mentioned a far-off place. Immediately she said, "Oh, I wish I could see that." Despite her years, the eye is not tired of seeing; it longs yet to see other places, other realms, other customs. The eye is never satisfied.

Nor is the ear ever satisfied with hearing. We are always alert to some new idea or something new that has happened. That is why news programs are always popular. Television, radio and newspapers all cater to this hunger of the ear to hear something. Some juicy gossip about a Hollywood star will sell thousands of magazines and newspapers. That is why we tune in on soap operas. We just cannot tire of hearing something new. Some new way of making a profit, for instance, always makes its appeal. The Searcher's argument is that the ear never tires because human desire is never satisfied; it is a consequence of the restlessness that is built into life.

But second, he says, even though we long to see or hear something new, nothing new ever really shows up. Life is a rehash of what has been before; it is the old played over and over again. That is his argument. This too is a result of the restlessness that is built into life. Although something looks new to us, actually, "there is nothing new under the sun." Somebody immediately objects and says, "Wait a minute! They didn't have radio, television, space travel or any such thing until just a few decades ago. Why even you, Ray Stedman, ought to be able to remember way back to the days before they had any of those things!"

When Don Broesamle and I were in Hong Kong recently, spending a couple days of rest after a rather exhausting travel and speaking schedule, we stayed at the wonderful old British Peninsula Hotel on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong. Right across the street from us was a newly built planetarium, and Don and I went to see there *The Search For Other Civilizations*. It is always exciting to me to sit in those domed rooms. The lights go down, the stars begin to appear above like the brightest stars on a summer's night, and you suddenly feel the sense of eternity, you sense the greatness and the magnificence of the universe.

The show began by showing the great statues on Easter Island, in the Pacific Ocean, raising the question, "Where did these great statues come from?" These statues are huge, 20 feet or more in height, made of great stones that weigh hundreds of tons. Who erected them? Where did they come from, and how did they get there? Nobody has ever been able to answer those questions. Then the show took us into areas of South America where huge geometric patterns have been worked out over acres of ground. These designs have obviously been made by man, or some intelligent creature, yet they cannot even be seen unless they are viewed from the sky. This raises the question, "Why would any people draw figures on the ground so huge that they cannot be seen unless they are viewed from the air?" Many have surmised that past civilizations did have ways of rising above the earth. Perhaps visitors from space used these patterns. Other mysteries, such as Stonehenge in England, are propounded and compounded as one explores the earth. It struck me that that planetarium show was a confirmation of what the Searcher of Ecclesiastes declares, "What has

been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done." Other ages will repeat it. "There is nothing new under the sun."

Why then do things appear new? His answer is in Verse 11: Man's memory is faulty; we have forgotten things that once were. The planetarium show confirmed that. One excerpt showed the Mayans of Central America, the actual blood descendants of a race of intellectual giants who once lived in the area, who erected temples filled with mysteries that the present generation of Mayan Indians has long forgotten. They cannot explain them; they do not understand them. They have lost the knowledge of the past. This is what this writer declares. Our memories are so short that we lose what we know -- and, he suggests, it may happen again. All these technological marvels that we are so proud of may one day disappear in a great nuclear holocaust. Viewing our television sets or some such things, future generations may well ask, "What in the world is this jungle of wires for? What did they do with this thing?" That is the problem. "There is nothing new under the sun."

So the question is raised, "Is this all life is about?" Is it merely an empty pursuit of that which never satisfies? Can no breakthrough be made whereby something can be found that will continually meet the hunger of man's heart, to give an unending sense of delight, satisfaction and joy? That is the search.

Before the Searcher takes us into the details of this search -- which begins in Chapter 2 -- he gives us a word as to his qualifications, in Verses 12-18. These fall into two divisions, his position, and his diligence. Verses 12-14:

I the Searcher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is emptiness and a striving after wind.

**What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be numbered. {Eccl 1:12-15 RSV}**

This man's position gave him unusual opportunity. He was a king, the highest authority in the land; no one would challenge what he did. And he was a king in a time of peace. For 40 years during the reign of Solomon no armies battered at the walls of Jerusalem, as they had been doing all through history and are threatening to do today. His father had amassed great wealth of which Solomon was the heir, and he himself had increased this wealth. For 40 years of the nation's life there was no demand for expenditure for munitions. It was a time of peace and great wealth. Furthermore, during this time the Gentile nations were sending delegates to Jerusalem. The Queen of Sheba came all the way from the ends of the earth, she said, to see and hear the wisdom of this man. Solomon had great opportunity.

Furthermore, he was able to investigate widely. "I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven," he says. He could get into everything. But, with all candor, he has to state, "It is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with." That translation misses something of what he meant. In the Hebrew it is not "the sons of men," rather, it is "the sons of man." The word is Adam, "the sons of Adam." So the reference is not to the conglomerate of humanity, it is to the nature of man.

I think he is making reference here to the fall of man. He is recognizing the fact that it is difficult for men to discover answers. There is something wrong inside of man. It is a tricky business for a man, who senses an overwhelming curiosity to discover the secrets of life around him, yet he finds himself baffled all the time by an inadequate understanding. Man cannot put it all together.

Furthermore, he was able to investigate even the opposites of things. "I have seen everything," he says. Yet there were certain limitations inherent in that. That is what he quotes in a proverb, "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered." It is difficult for man to discover the answers to life, because when he sees something wrong there is yet somehow an inbuilt difficulty that prevents him from correcting it. Have you ever felt, as I have, that when things go wrong in your family, although you long to put them right somehow you cannot get hold of it, you cannot make it right? "That which is crooked cannot be made straight." One of the great frustrations of life is that no matter how hard you try there are some things you cannot set straight. Also, no matter how much you may discover, there is information you would long to have that you cannot find. "That which is lacking cannot be numbered." That was this man's problem.

Then he speaks of his diligence, Verse 16:

I said to myself, "I acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

**For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. {Eccl 1:16-18 RSV}**

For you students who have just gone back to school, that is a great verse to memorize. "He who increases knowledge increases sorrow." That is true, sad, but true. It is no argument for not increasing knowledge, though, because the alternative is even worse; ignorance is foolishness.

Isn't it remarkable that the Man who for all ages has been the personification of wisdom is also the one who is called "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"? {Isa 53:3}. Yet this Searcher kept on, despite the increasing frustration that the more he knew the more he knew he did not know. At the close of his life, Isaac Newton said, "I have been paddling in the shallows of a great ocean of knowledge." He too felt the frustration of not being able to encompass more.

This gives us a clue as to when this book was written. It must have been in the latter years of the reign of Solomon, after he had had ample opportunity to investigate all the areas of life and had done so. Following that period, which the book of First Kings describes, he fell into spiritual decline, led away by the idolatry of the wives he had married from foreign nations. This enlightened son of David, with all his knowledge of the law of Moses and all the insight of the word of God, actually ended up bowing down to lifeless idols in the heathen temples which he built for his wives in Jerusalem. But there was, apparently, a time of recovery.

One of the Targums of the Jews has an interesting word here:

When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became greatly elated with riches, and he transgressed the commandment of the Word of God; and he gathered many houses, and chariots, and riders, and he amassed much gold and silver, and he married wives from foreign nations. Whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, the king of the demons, and he drove him from the throne of his kingdom, and took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world, to reprove it; and he went about the provincial towns and cities in the land of Israel, weeping and lamenting, and saying, "I am Coheleth, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was King over Israel in Jerusalem."

There is no reference to this period in Scripture, so this may not be trustworthy. But it may be true. There is suggestion in Scripture that there came a time when King Solomon saw the folly of what he was doing, and repented. This book is his considered proclamation from a chastened mind of what he had learned from life. This is not an angry young man speaking. These are the words of a man who has been through it all and is sharing with us what he found in his search.

Did he find an answer? Did he find that key to life that makes everything yield up its treasure of joy? The answer to that is, Yes, he did, and he tells us the answer in this book. But his answer is not what he has started out with here. What he found "under the sun" was emptiness, but he went on to find something more than that. That is what this book declares.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for this wise, wise word. Thank you that the answers to life are not found in the wisdom of man. No human institution can give us the key to living. It must come from your loving hand, often through much pain and sorrow as we work our way to these great answers of life. Guide us now, guard us and help us to wait and learn and be attentive, remembering that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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