

Nothing New on Earth?



SABBATH—JANUARY 6

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ecclesiastes 1.

MEMORY VERSE: “Everything that has ever been will come back again. Everything that has ever been done will be done again. Nothing is new on earth” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NIV).

THERE IS A STORY ABOUT A GREEK PHILOSOPHER NAMED DIOGENES WHO WALKED THE STREETS OF ATHENS WITH A LANTERN. Diogenes' goal was to find an honest man. According to one side of the story, Diogenes thought he found the right man. But he was mistaken. The “right” man stole his lantern. So poor Diogenes had to find his way home in the dark.

Whether true or not true, this story shows how easy it is to be negative about life.

In a way, that is not hard to understand. The world can make a person feel negative and depressed. Just ask Solomon. He looks in nature and sees reasons to feel hopeless and depressed. He looks at wisdom and finds it depressing. He looks at life as a whole and finds it meaningless (useless). Maybe that is why even rich people are depressed. If not, why are millions and millions of dollars spent on antidepressants?¹ Not because people are happy!

Ecclesiastes 1 introduces the book. It begins with a look at the uselessness of life without the knowledge of God.

¹antidepressants—medicines to help people overcome depression.

SUNDAY—JANUARY 7**KOHELET IN JERUSALEM
(Ecclesiastes 1:1)**

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1. The Hebrew word for “preacher” or “teacher” is *kohelet*. *Kohelet* comes from the Hebrew root *kahal*, which means “to assemble [to meet, get together],” “to gather.” *Kohelet* is translated to *ekklesia*, a Greek word meaning “church.” From *ekklesia*, we get the name Ecclesiastes. The Jews just called the author, and the book, *Kohelet*.

There has been much debate over many years about what the word *kohelet* means. Is Solomon gathering people in order to preach or teach them his great wisdom? Or he is a gatherer of wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:13, 16, 17)? We will have to wait for heaven to know for sure.

Write a summary of what Solomon seems to be saying in Ecclesiastes 1. Do not worry about understanding each sentence. Just focus on the general message. How do we understand these words from a Christian viewpoint? Keep in mind who wrote them, when, and why.

These appear to be the words of a bitter and frustrated man. All Solomon sees is the hopelessness and the meaninglessness (uselessness) of life. His words sound like many modern godless philosophers, who complain about the uselessness

of life. This, of course, cannot be true about Solomon. We need to judge this book on the basis of the whole Bible. Solomon lived much of his life apart from God. This made him bitter. He lived for the world’s riches and pleasures rather than for serving God. But if we keep in mind the greater picture of God and the promise of salvation, Solomon’s words fit perfectly with the main theme of the Bible.

How much bitterness do you see in your own life? What caused it? How can these things be cleansed out before they poison your whole spiritual life?

MONDAY—JANUARY 8**VANITY OF VANITIES
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)**

Read Ecclesiastes 1:2. Most translations of this verse use the word *vanity*. The Hebrew word, *hebel*, means “vapor” or “breath.” But it also carries the ideas of emptiness, meaninglessness, and uselessness. The word *vanity* will appear many times in Ecclesiastes.

When you think of “vapor” or “breath,” what do you think of? Why would Solomon use this example to talk about life? Also read Psalm 144:3, 4.

Think again about the background

of Solomon's writing. He wasted years of his life on things that do not last. Suppose most of your life is made up of *hebel* (vapor). Then when you get to the end of that life, the whole thing can seem like a vapor. This is because life passed by quickly and seemed full of meaningless things.

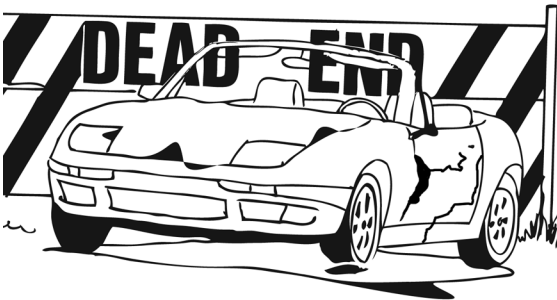
How do the following verses show the idea of life as a vapor?

Isaiah 52:3 _____

Matthew 6:19, 20 _____

Mark 8:36 _____

James 4:14 _____



“Do not put away riches for yourself on earth. Rust can destroy them”
 (Matthew 6:19, NIV).

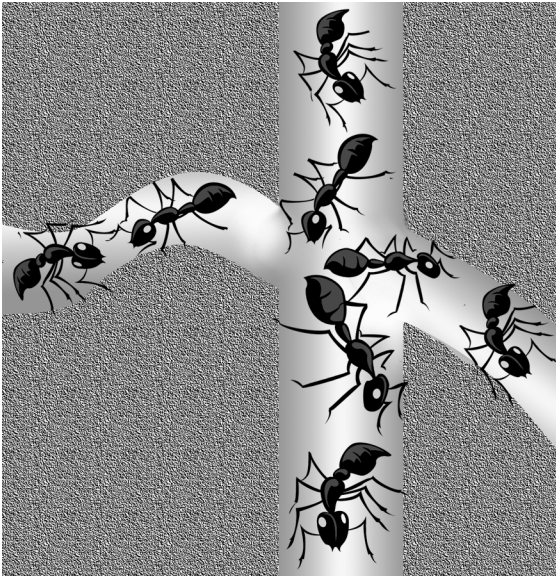
Solomon's words are powerful, because he was the man who had everything this world could offer. He had his fill of worldly pleasures. As Solomon himself said, he got everything he wanted (Ecclesiastes 2:10). But, in the end, Solomon calls it all meaningless, an empty vapor or breath. What a lesson for all of us about what is important in life and what is not.

Examine your life. How much of what you are doing could you consider *hebel* (vapor)? What things are you really working for? What things do you think are really important? If you get what you are working for, might you one day judge them as *hebel*?

TUESDAY—JANUARY 9

THE SUN ALSO RISES (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11)

Solomon, in his younger years, was a good student of nature. From nature, he learned many spiritual lessons (Proverbs 1:17-19; Proverbs 6:6-9; Proverbs 17:12; Proverbs 26:1-3, 11; Proverbs 31:10). In his later years, Solomon was still looking at nature. But we cannot be too certain about the lessons he learns from what he sees because of his negative thoughts.



Lazy people should learn how to work from the ants (Proverbs 6:6-8).

What point was Solomon making in Ecclesiastes 1:4-11?

Solomon was doing “natural theology.” Natural theology is trying to learn the truth about God and life from nature. This is fine because nature is God’s “second book.” Read, for example, Psalm 19:1-7, Isaiah 40:26, and Hebrews 11:3.



God “causes the stars to come out at night one by one” (Isaiah 40:26).

How does nature speak to us about God? What are the limits of what nature can teach us?

Solomon is complaining about his life in Ecclesiastes 1:4-11. He looks at nature and gives an opinion that is not the lesson to be learned. He is pouring his own negative feelings into nature itself. This is easy to do. One eighteenth-century writer argued that because nature kills, so can we. Talk about making a wrong decision! Again, this shows how easy it is to let our bad attitudes² influence our thoughts about what is around us.

How often do you let your bad moods or negative feelings influence your actions and words? Why is death to self so important for protecting ourselves from our wrong attitudes?

WEDNESDAY—JANUARY 10

BEYOND THE CYCLES³ (Ecclesiastes 1:1-4)

Solomon looked at nature and saw many things happen again and again. The sun rises and sets. The wind blows. Rivers flow. And they go on and on for years and years. What happened before will happen again. What will happen already has happened. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NIV).

Solomon seems to suggest that

²attitudes—how a person thinks and feels toward God, other people, or things.

³cycles—periods; things going around and around or happening again and again. For example, summer comes and then comes again year after year.

something is wrong in all this and that things should not be this way. His attitude comes through clearly in Ecclesiastes 1:1-4.

What is Solomon saying in Ecclesiastes 1:1-4 about the short lives of people as contrasted⁴ with nature's endless cycles?

The earth goes on and on. But we do not. We are nothing but vapor (*hebel*). These thoughts get to the greatest puzzle of humanity.⁵ We are people who can understand the idea of eternity,⁶ of something greater than ourselves. But we see that we cannot have this something greater. The sun, the rivers, the wind were all here before us. They will be here long after we die. We come and go. But the rivers, the sun, and the wind are still here. Shakespeare wrote that life is a tale “full of sound [noise] and fury [action], signifying [meaning] nothing.”

How do the following verses answer the puzzle that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes 1:1-4? 1 Corinthians 15:26; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55; Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 21:4.

There have been many great philosophers who tried to explain the hard questions of life. If they cannot solve the question of death, they have no answers for the questions of life. This is because, in the end, all life is

⁴contrasted—showing how things are different.

⁵humanity—all the people of the world.

⁶eternity—life without end; forever.

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 has answered this problem through His death and His return to life. Jesus has shown us that death is not the end. He has shown us that we can one day be alive long after the cycles of life on this fallen planet have stopped (Isaiah 65:17). If not for that hope, Solomon probably would be right in showing his negative feelings.



In heaven, there will be no more crying or pain (Revelation 21:4).

THURSDAY—JANUARY 11

**WISDOM “UNDER THE SUN”
(Ecclesiastes 1:12-18, NlrV)**

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 gives us a better understanding of Solomon's background. He explains again his

role as king. He also says that he had more wisdom than all people before him in Jerusalem. This is more proof pointing to Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes. This all makes sense, because Solomon's rule was one of great peace and prosperity (wealth and success). He did not have to worry about invaders, rebellion, or economic downfall. So Solomon had time to look for knowledge and wisdom "under the sun."



"A lot of human wisdom leads to a lot of sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18, NlrV).

Notice the words "under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 1:13, KJV). This is another way of explaining the same idea as the words "on this earth" (Ecclesiastes 1:3, 9, 14, NlrV). These words appear more than twenty times, and only in Ecclesiastes. What do these words mean?

"On this earth" is another way of talking about what happens here. What we see here is another example

of how all earthly knowledge and wisdom is useless. The world, and all that is in it, cannot answer life's hard questions. Indeed, the world and all that is in it causes us to ask many of life's hard questions. The answers must come from something greater than the world. The answers must come from something that has "overcome the world" (John 16:33). And that is Jesus! If not, the world would leave a person frustrated, angry, and depressed as it did Solomon. The person may gain wisdom. But this wisdom brings only more sorrow.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer sounded like Solomon. Schopenhauer wrote, "Everything in life [on this earth] shows that happiness on earth leads to frustration and failure."—Adapted.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 again. What things does Solomon find so frustrating and useless? How does Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 fit with 2 Timothy 3:1-7?

Read Ecclesiastes 1:15. What "twisted" (NlrV) things in your life cannot be fixed now? What things do you not have that the world just cannot give? How do these things make you wish for Jesus' return?

FRIDAY—JANUARY 12

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: "The world of the happy man is a different one from the world 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 the right relationship with God is so important in how we look at life as a whole?

“Solomon was not complaining of the endless cycles of nature. But he saw in them an example of the cycles of human life (Ecclesiastes 1:4). Does human life, from generation⁷ to generation, go on again and again without any spiritual goal in mind? Will there not be any worthy end for life of the human race? Does God have an eternal⁸ purpose that will be better than the seemingly endless cycles of human life that go on from generation to generation?”

“In Ecclesiastes, the correct scientific description about air movements on the surface of the earth is better than other old-time books. It shows an understanding of the laws of nature much better than most men had in olden times.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1064.

“In its human wisdom the world does not know God.

“Its wise men gather an imperfect [not perfect] knowledge of God

through His created works. And then in their foolishness they glorify nature and the laws of nature more than they glorify nature’s God. Nature is an open book which shows God. All who are interested in nature may see God as Creator. But those who do not fully know the example of God through Christ will get only an imperfect knowledge of God in nature.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Healthful Living*, pp. 293, 294.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

❶ As a class, spend time in nature. Then discuss the following questions: What examples of God do we have in nature? What can nature tell us about God? What can nature not tell us? What wrong lessons can we learn from nature? What does all this tell us about how important it is to get a fuller picture of God?

❷ Why is it so easy to be negative about life? Is some negative thought valuable? This is a fallen world headed for its final end. How do we keep the right balance between being careful about the world or becoming too negative as in Ecclesiastes 1?

⁷generation—all the people born at the same time. Your parents belong to one generation. You belong to the next generation.

⁸eternal—forever; without beginning or end; lasting forever.