

## 2. Nothing New Under the Sun?

**Biblical material:** Ecclesiastes 1.

### Quotes:

- We are things of the day. What are we? What are we not? The shadow of a dream is man, no more. *Pindar, C5 B.C.*
- The world is fleeting; all things pass away; Or is it we that pass and they that stay? *Lucian C2 A.D.*
- The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon Turns ashes—or it prospers and anon, Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face, Lighting a little hour or two—is gone. *Omar Khayyam C12.*
- Life is but a day; A fragile dew-drop on its way From a tree's summit. *John Keats 1816.*
- Worlds on worlds are rolling ever/ From creation to decay,/ Like the bubbles on a river/ Sparkling, bursting, borne away. *Percy Bysshe Shelley 1821.*

### Questions

Is it true that there is nothing new under the sun? What kind of experience is recorded here in Ecclesiastes 1? If the Bible is the inspired word of God, how do we apply these verses? How do we view this world and our place in it? Was Solomon “just depressed”? How does this relate to the assurance of salvation and confidence in the Lord?

### Discussion/Comment

Who are we? What are we? Totally insignificant. Nothings. Zeros. We see our emptiness. A brief existence under the stars, and then gone. When you think about it, it does seem so pointless, so ridiculous...

This is where our journey seems to lead. Now that we see ourselves, we see nothing of any importance—just another lost creature adrift on the endless seas of time and space. “We spend our years as a tale that is told,” says Ps 90:9. Just like someone telling a story, we live out our time here, and when the story ends, so do we. Look at the Bible pictures of the life of mankind:

- “A mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” *Jas 4:14.*
- “My days vanish like smoke.” *Ps 102:3*
- “As for man, his days are like grass— like a flower.” *Ps 103:15;*
- “The grass withers and the flowers fall.” *Is 40:7*
- “I fade away like an evening shadow.” *Ps 109:23*

Mist - Smoke - Grass - Flowers - Shadows. Images of passing. Temporary. Transient. Ending in nothingness.

Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. You can see why Solomon thought that way. We can see the same thing. We know so much more about our universe. We can observe the stars through radio astronomy, through X-ray, infra-red, ultra-violet satellites. We have great theories of stellar evolution. Black holes. Quasars. And all the rest. We may think we are really

something. We may even dream of conquering the universe—"Going where no man has gone before." Man, the centre of the universe in his own thought.

But who are we fooling. We are nothing, and we know it. We are not going to be colonizing the universe - not in our present state. When we become aware of ourselves, as we learnt the last time, we must acknowledge our passing nothingness. We cannot even be sure of our existence—"No man is sure of life." (Job 24:22). Mere man, living and dying on the borders of limitless space.

And what can we do about it? What power do we have to control our destiny, or to help ourselves? On this score we come out even worse: "You are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless." Is 41:24.

Less than nothing. On a measure of ability we come out as negative—we desperately need someone else to do something for us. "The way of man is not in himself." (Jer 10:23). Powerless. Unable to do anything for himself of any real and lasting benefit. Weak, incapable.

A hard thing to admit. No one likes to say that they're incapable. But it's true—every word of it. Bede likened our lives to a sparrow flying across a banqueting hall. It flies in from the darkness—enjoys warmth and light and happiness (maybe) for a terribly short time—and then flies out into the darkness again.

Life is short. Life is full of weakness. Life is nothingness—a "tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." That last part is the worst. In this step towards God it is the pointlessness of life that brings the greatest sorrow. Futility—the real curse of man on his own.

Meaningless. Vanity. Pointless. Man without a point, a reason for living. So many despair in life because of that. There is no point, they say. What does it matter if I live or die? One of the reasons for suicide. For unhappiness in its many forms. The torture of despair—because there is no reason for anything. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" Eccl. 1:2, 3.

To realize that there is no reason for your life is the end of us. If we accept that, then there is no hope: "My days are faster than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope." Job 7:6. "Imagine there's no heaven..." sings John Lennon... In ourselves this is where we end up. Looking in at man himself, we see no hope. This is the lesson we learn on our journey towards God—our total insignificance and hopelessness if we remain apart from him.

### **Ellen White Comment**

Age after age curiosity of man has led him to seek for the tree of knowledge; and often he thinks he is plucking fruit most essential, when, like Solomon, he finds it altogether vanity and nothingness, in comparison with that science of true holiness which will open to him the gates of the city of God. Human ambition has been seeking for that kind of knowledge that will bring self-exaltation and glory and supremacy. {GCDB, March 6, 1899}

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age, after he had fully proved that all the pleasures earth is able to give are empty and unsatisfying. He there shows how impossible it is for the vanities of the world to meet the longings of the soul. His conclusion is that it is wisdom to enjoy with gratitude the good gifts of God, and to do right; for all our works will be brought into judgment. {3BC 1164.6}

Solomon's autobiography is a mournful one. He gives us the history of his search for happiness. He engaged in intellectual pursuits; he gratified his love for pleasure; he carried out his schemes of commercial enterprise. He was surrounded by the fascinating splendor of court

life. All that the carnal heart could desire was at his command; yet he sums up his experience in this sad record: [Eccl. 1:14-2:11 quoted] (HR June, 1878). {3BC 1164-5}

© Jonathan Gallagher 2006