

Is This All
There Is to Life?



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Is This All There Is to Life?

Answers from Ecclesiastes

by Ray Stedman

Is This All There to Life?

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Answers from Ecclesiastes
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Introduction

Ray C. Stedman

1917–1992

“What is your view of approaching death?” asks Ray Stedman. “Do you have some sense of anticipation about it, with the awareness that beyond death is the final explanation of all the unanswered, unexplained questions of life?”

Ray started learning about those great questions in his early years. While he was still a young boy, his mother developed a serious asthmatic condition and could no longer care for him. Later, his father abandoned the family, never to return.

But at the age of 11, Ray asked God to forgive him for his sins, and he put his faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God. And Ray began to know the One who is a Father to the fatherless.

He must have sensed his future calling, for as a farm boy Ray practiced preaching to the cows. Following high school he sought a career in medicine, but financial realities put a halt to those aspirations. After the outbreak of World War II, he went to Hawaii to work, and eventually joined the Navy. In Hawaii, Ray discovered a productive ministry to apprehensive sailors, who would soon face artillery barrages and kamikaze pilots.

Following the War, Ray married Elaine, with whom he would serve in ministry for nearly 47 years until his death. After their marriage, he entered Dallas Theological Seminary, graduating in 1950. He served briefly with J. Vernon McGee and with Dr. H. A. Ironside, pastor of Moody Church in Chicago.

But Ray soon joined a young and vibrant ministry known as Peninsula Bible Fellowship (now Peninsula Bible Church) in Palo Alto, California. It was there that he would hone his pastoral style and preaching skills, serving God and his congregation until his death in 1992.

In addition to *Is This All There Is to Life?* Ray has given us such classics as *Authentic Christianity*; *Body Life*; and *Spiritual Warfare*. He has penned a worthy contribution on prayer entitled *Talking With My Father*; as well as *Waiting for the Second Coming*, a study on the hope-filled epistles to the Thessalonians. His many other works include *God's Loving Word*, on the Gospel of John, *God's Final Word*, which opens the book of Revelation, and an in-depth look at the letter to the Ephesians, called *Our Riches in Christ*.

Even as he battled cancer late in his life, Ray said, "I can say that looking ahead is a time filled with happy anticipation that God is going to answer all the questions which I have had to leave unanswered, because the full meaning of this present experience will never be brought out until death intervenes. Then will come all the answers, abundantly, satisfyingly, fully."

*What has been will be again, what has
been done will be done again; there is
nothing new under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 1:9

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The Search for Meaning

Ecclésiastes—mystery book of the Old Testament! Does it teach us to eat, drink, and be merry,” for life will soon be over? Some think it does. Does it deny life after death? Some have read it that way. Why is it the most often quoted Bible book by atheists and religious skeptics? Certain statements in the book seem to appeal strongly to such scoffers. What shall we make of such a strange book?

We must see one thing right from the beginning: this book is an examination of secular wisdom and knowledge. The book clearly states at the outset that it limits itself primarily to things that are apparent to the natural mind. One of its key phrases is the continual repetition, *under the sun*. “What advantage does

man have in all his work which he does *under the sun?*" (1:3, NASB, italics added). We find the phrase used again in verse 9. That is the limitation put upon this book by the author himself.

Ecclesiastes, then, is a summation of what man is able to discern under the sun—that is, in the visible world. The book does consider revelation that comes from beyond man's powers of observation and reason, but only as a contrast to what the natural mind observes. It is an inspired—and accurate—book. It guarantees that what it reports is what people actually believe, even as it makes a searching examination of those beliefs. The book is not merely a collection of ancient philosophies, for what it talks about is very much relevant and up-to-date. Here is what you will hear in soap operas, in political speeches, and in radical or conservative movements of our day. Here is what you will hear both in the halls of academia, and on the streets of any city.

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 advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? (1:1–3, NASB).

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

Many of today's critical commentators question Solomonic authorship; very few, in fact, accept it. They date the book after

the Babylonian exile, some 500 years after Solomon died. They do this almost habitually. But their views, based, as they think, upon an examination of the culture of the day, have been proved wrong again and again. Let us, however, begin by accepting that it is indeed Solomon who gives to us in this book the wisdom that God taught him throughout his life.

The translators, unfortunately, refer to Solomon as “the Preacher.” I am sorry they used that term. I know the book sounds a bit preachy, especially at the beginning. On reading that second verse it would be easy to affect a “stained-glass” voice, and moan “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Modern audiences would immediately tune out.

The word for Preacher is the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which means, “one who gathers, assembles, or collects.” This is an apt title for the author of this book, who has examined and then collected the philosophies by which men live. The English title, “Ecclesiastes,” comes from the Greek *ecclesia* or assembly. But perhaps a more helpful English translation would be “the Searcher.” Here is a searching mind that has looked over all of life and observed what is behind the actions of people. That is the word which we will use wherever the word, “the Preacher,” occurs. It is not really a preacher or proclaimer, but a searcher and assembler, that is in view.

You do not have to read the last chapter to find the results of his search, because he puts it right here in verse two: “Vanity of vanities.” *Vanity*—that is what he found. Vanity here does not mean pride of face. Many women—and sometimes men—spend a lot of time in front of mirrors. Not only do they finish what they need to do to make themselves presentable, but they take time to admire it. We call that self-admiration, vanity, pride

of face; but that is not what the Searcher is describing. The original word here means “emptiness, futility, meaninglessness.” That is what he found. He puts his view of what he discovered in those terms: emptiness, a feeling of futility. That is what life brings.

Nothing in and of itself, the Searcher claims, will satisfy. No thing, no pleasure, no relationship . . . none of these has enduring value in life. Perhaps we could subtitle this study, “The Things That Won’t Work.” Everybody is trying to make them work, everyone has seized on one or another of these philosophies and has tried 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, more futile, this man concludes, than life.

In verse 3 he asks the question that he constantly asked throughout his search: “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” How does it profit him? After we have sucked dry all the immediate delight, joy, or pleasure of something, what is left over, what endures, what will remain to continually feed the hunger of our lives for satisfaction? That is the right question to ask. It is a question we all are asking. Is there anything that will 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, to delight and joy in life?

The Searcher raises this pertinent question right at the beginning. It defines the search on which this book will take us. Verses 4 through 7 describe the sense of futility that nature

gives us as we live, and verses 8 through 11 speak of the frustrations that everyone feels in facing life.

Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south, and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again (1:4–7).

Here are the endless cycles of life. The Searcher states his theme in verse 4: humanity is transient, but nature is permanent. A generation goes and a generation comes—human beings come into life, live their term, and go on—but the earth remains forever.

He gives three examples of this natural phenomenon, the first of which is the circle of the sun. The sun rises in the east, apparently runs across the heavens, and sets in the west; then it scurries around the other 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 measured. It is endless. It repeats itself again and again.

Then he speaks of the circuit of the winds from south to north. This is unusual, because we have no evidence that men in Solomon's day understood that the wind, the great jet-streams of earth, run in circles. We see evidence of these great jet-streams every day in the satellite pictures on any TV weather

report. Solomon knew it, though the scientific world of that day did not seem to understand it.

His third proof is the evaporative cycle. Thirteen elders and pastors from our church once spent a few days on a backpack trip to the Sierras. There the mountain peaks milked moisture from the clouds that passed over the dry California coastal plain. Torrents of rain, hail, and even snow fell upon our staff, forcing them to huddle in their little plastic tents. Their question was, "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. To the west of California an invisible evaporative process is at work so that the water that runs into the sea never raises the level of the sea. The water is invisibly lifted back up into the clouds. The clouds then move east on the circuit of the winds and drop their moisture again. It goes on forever.

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

Scripture confirms this racial uneasiness. The Bible tells us that man was created to be the crown of creation. He is the one who is to be in dominion over all things. Men and women should last forever and nature should be changing—but it is the other way around. We protest this in our spirits. We have all felt it. We resent, 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 such value

is suddenly taken away from us, while the meaningless cycle of nature goes on and on. Why should this be? It is the question the Searcher continually faced.

Furthermore, the Searcher says, everyone's actual experience confirms this sense of futility.

All things are wearisome [wearisome is a Hebrew word that should be translated restless], more than one can say [describe]. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.

There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow (1:8–11).

His thesis is, "All things are restless." He has observed an inherent restlessness in everything. It is so widespread that nobody can describe it. It permeates all of life, and is found so universally that we are scarcely able to recognize it as an intruder, as an alien to normal human experience.

He has two proofs of this. First, human desire is never satisfied: "The eye never has enough of seeing." My mother-in-law is ninety-five 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 event. News programs are always popular. Television, radio, and newspapers all cater to this hunger of the ear to hear something new. Juicy gossip about a Hollywood star will sell thousands of magazines and newspapers. That is why we tune in to soap operas. We never tire of hearing something new. Some new way of making a profit always appeals to us. 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 built into life. Although something looks new, actually "there is nothing new under the sun."

Someone 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, should be able to remember back to the days before they had any of those things!"

When a friend and I were in Hong Kong recently, resting a couple of days after an 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 we went there to see "The Search for Other Civilizations." I'm always eager to sit in those domed rooms. The lights go down, the stars begin to appear

above like the stars on a summer's night, and you suddenly feel a sense of eternity; you sense the greatness and magnificence of the universe.

The show began by showing the great statues on Easter Island, in the Pacific Ocean, raising these questions: Where did these great statues come from? These monoliths are huge, twenty 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? 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 create on the ground designs so huge that they cannot be seen except from the air? Many have surmised that past civilizations did have ways of rising above the earth. Others suggest that visitors from space used these patterns. Similar mysteries, such as Stonehenge in England, are propounded and compounded as one explores the earth. That planetarium show was a confirmation of what the Searcher of Ecclesiastes declares: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again." Other ages will repeat it. "There is nothing new under the sun."

Then why do things seem to be 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 modern Mayan Indians of Central America, the actual blood descendants of a race of intellectual giants who once lived in the area. The ancient Mayans erected temples filled with mysteries that the present generation of

Mayans has long forgotten. They cannot explain them; they do not understand them. They have lost the knowledge of the past.

This is what the 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 the remains of our television sets, future generations may well ask, “What is this jungle of wires for? What did they do with this thing?” That is the situation. “There is nothing new under the sun.”

So the question is raised: Is this all life is about? Is it merely an empty pursuit after things that never satisfy? Can no breakthrough be made whereby something can be found that will reliably meet the hunger of man’s heart, and give an unending sense of delight, satisfaction, and joy? That is the search we are on.

Before the Searcher takes us into the details of this search—which begins in chapter 2—he assures us of his qualifications, in verses 12 through 18. These fall into two divisions: his position, and his diligence.

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted (1:12–15, NASB).

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 forty years during the reign of Solomon no armies battered at the walls of Jerusalem, as they had been doing all through its history and are still threatening to do today. His father had amassed great wealth of which Solomon was the heir, and he himself had increased this wealth. For forty years of the nation's life there was no demand for great military spending. 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 to observe life thoroughly.

Furthermore, he was able to investigate widely. "I set my mind to seek and to explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven," he says. He could get into everything. But with all candor, he has to state, "It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted 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 because 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, the Searcher was able to investigate even the opposite of things. “I have seen everything,” he says. Yet there were certain limitations inherent in that. That is what he states in a proverb, “What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” It is difficult for man to discover the answers to life, because when he sees something wrong there is yet somehow an inherent 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? “What is crooked cannot be straightened.” 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 long to have that you cannot obtain. “What is lacking cannot be counted.” That was this man’s problem, and it is ours as well.

Then he speaks of his diligence:

I said to myself, “I have 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 those who increase knowledge increase sorrow (1:16–18, NRSV).

For students in school, that last statement is a great verse to memorize! “Those who increase knowledge increase 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"? (Isaiah 53:3, NASB). 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 but been paddling in the shallows of a great ocean of knowledge." He too felt the frustration of not being able to encompass more.

This last verse gives us a clue to the time when this book was written. It must have been in the latter years of the reign of Solomon, after he had enjoyed ample opportunity to investigate all the areas of life (and had done so). Following that period—which the book of 1 Kings describes—he fell into spiritual decline, led away by the idolatry of his foreign-born wives. 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 that 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 Qoheleth, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was king over Israel in Jerusalem."

There is no reference to this period in Scripture, so this account may not be trustworthy. But perhaps it *is* 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 telling 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? Yes, he did, and he tells us the answer in this book. But his answer is not what he began 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.