

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-1/ecclesiastes-18-11/>

The Preacher (Solomon) asserts that determining our purpose in life from observation, reason, or invention is futile. He looks into how events in Time are cyclical and therefore are insufficient avenues for completing his search for meaning; nothing circumstantial is truly new or truly resolved.

Time presents a formidable support of Solomon's assertion that all is *vanity* or vaporous in verse 2, because the more time passes, the more things repeat. Observing events through Time renders the conclusion that *all things are wearisome*. There is no observable purpose. No destination that can be determined from observation and reason.

This follows naturally from the preceding poem—trying to understand the whole of life is exhausting. And adding time to the exercise doesn't help. It just makes it more *wearisome*. Solomon has asked what *advantage* or benefit humans could gain from their work, in light of the context of observing and understanding nature and the world around us. But this exercise is comparable to capturing and analyzing water vapor, fog.

Solomon's assessment is comprehensive: he says *all things are wearisome*. The word translated *things* can also mean 'words' and is translated as such in most other occurrences in the Old Testament. Solomon might be saying that "all words" *are wearisome*. That the exercise of trying to explain life and its meaning is an exhausting exercise without a conclusion.

The next three lines of the poem provide a cluster of three images—words that cannot be *told*, eyes that cannot see with understanding, and ears that cannot hear. Each has an inadequacy. The words (or *things*) are *wearisome* and men are *not able to* properly speak. Human explanations fall short. They will be inadequate. Simply put, we don't have the capacity to understand and explain our purpose based on reason and observation.

The eye is not satisfied with what it sees. It wants to see more. But more is never enough. When attempting to discern the meaning and purpose for humanity, the *advantage* of our efforts, observation does not lead to comprehension. Similarly, the ear is not fulfilled with what it hears.

Explanations from others won't provide the answer either. That puts all humans in the same boat.

The senses are not *satisfied*. They are not *filled*. So they seek more. And even what they *hear* they do not comprehend. These three senses are all inadequate to reach an answer in our search for meaning—exhausted from trying to understand, longing for more, but more is never enough.

Just like the verses in the first half of this poem (verses 3-7), human endeavors are cyclical. *That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. There is nothing new under the sun.* The phrase *under the sun* occurs twenty nine times in Ecclesiastes, and refers to events in the entire earth. Whatever you see is a repeat of something that has already happened.

Humans are not original creators. We are re-organizers. Solomon asks the rhetorical question that demands a negative reply, *Is there anything of which one might say, 'See this, it is new?'* He claims that, 'No, it has *already existed for ages.*'

To the question of whether modern technology is an exception to his claim, Solomon might say that this has happened many times: humans invent things to make their lives better but these new inventions create their own problems. So man's circumstances improve, while simultaneously becoming more perilous. There is no resolution. Nuclear power creates an amazing source of energy that enables humans to flourish, but is also applied to make weapons of mass destruction. This is a cycle that has been and will continue to be, *under the sun*. Nothing's new. The inventions change but the result is the same.

So what *advantage* does that cause? None that are observable. This is why this topic is so *wearisome*. Even if you had a lot of time, you would just see more reruns. Whatever pattern you observe, *already it has existed for ages*. It therefore follows that the explanation to the meaning of life will not come through invention or human creativity.

Not only are all human events cyclical, what has happened has been forgotten. Our labors will fall out of *remembrance*. *Earlier things* have been forgotten already. And the cycle will repeat again, because present things are destined to follow the same path (just like in nature; [Ecclesiastes 1:3-7](#)). *Later things* are destined *to be forgotten*. No endeavors are original and every endeavor will fall out of remembrance. Again echoing the realities that lead

Solomon to ask the fundamental question: “What advantage does man have in all his work?” (1:3).

In our modern world, even with all our recording technologies, we still address entire eras that were, in reality, shaped by the lives and decisions of millions of people, and explain them with a couple of displays, a few events, and a focus on a few minutes from the lives of a handful of people. The rest is *forgotten*. Most of us have trouble recounting the events of the previous day. The vast, overwhelming flow of history will be *forgotten*.

When we know the details of an event, we are seldom satisfied with how it is reported. No wonder historians advance competing theories—the theories are based on scant evidence, because the vast majority of what has happened has *no remembrance*. Since the vast majority of what has transpired has *no remembrance*, seeking to be remembered *under the sun* is trying to grab vapor; it is hebel.

All of this is Solomon’s admonition that Time is full of cycles. Therefore, there will be no finality to human effort. There is no conclusion or understanding of the purpose of humanity that will stem from human effort.

There must be something more. Something greater. Another dimension. Something above and beyond human experience.

Using observation and reason to determine purpose is a vapor that cannot be grasped. It is a problem that can’t be solved. We can observe, but we only see the way things are. We can’t reason why they are that way, or how to gain *advantage* from what we observe. Our reason can only grasp the reality that life in this world is an enigma. There is not anything *new*. There is *no remembrance* of toil through the generations. Nothing humanity does is permanent *under the sun* (i.e. through human experience). This is a perspective of reality to be accepted.

Biblical Text:

⁸ All things are wearisome;

Man is not able to tell *it*.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing,

Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ That which has been is that which will be,

And that which has been done is that which will be done.

So there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there anything of which one might say,

“See this, it is new”?

Already it has existed for ages

Which were before us.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of earlier things;

And also of the later things which will occur,

There will be for them no remembrance

Among those who will come later *still*.