

IS LIFE A TREADMILL?

By Steve Zeisler

I heard of a six-year-old boy who one day asked his mother the question every little boy or girl inevitably asks: "Where did I come from?" She sat him down and explained as thoroughly and simply as she could the reproductive process. When she had finished, the little boy said, "That's strange. My friend Jimmy says he came from Chicago!" The mother immediately realized that she had answered the wrong question.

WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS?

In our studies in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we have been uncovering answers to life's most important questions. We have talked about the incarnation, when God became man in Jesus Christ, and the inevitable result of that: that in his resurrection, our Lord achieved for man an everlasting bond between God and man. Death no longer holds sway over mankind. We saw that history will come to an end at the last trumpet sound; and we shall be changed. Isn't it comforting to know for certain that this is what is in store for us at the end?

It is also very important, however, to know the questions that give rise to these answers. Why was the incarnation necessary? Why did God speak first in his prophets and lastly in his Son? What about people who do not have the same hope and certainty that we have? So, having already learned the answers to some of these questions, let us see if we can now learn what are the questions, using the book of Ecclesiastes as our source.

Ecclesiastes asks a number of very profound questions about life. No other book in the Bible is quite like it. It has been a source of fascination for all generations. This fascination comes from the brilliant and realistic way in which the human condition, with all its desperation and confusion, is portrayed.

Genesis tells us that Adam, the first man, plunged the human race into rebellion and sin. From one generation to the next, the deadly disease of sin is passed along. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, is man as he ought to be. Jesus is God's answer to the problem of fallen humanity. God sent him to earth to be an example to us, and finally a sacrifice for us, and in him we too become "new creatures in Christ." These are the great, twin themes of the Scripture: man's dilemma, and God's answer to his problem.

AN INTERMEDIATE ADAM

In some ways, however, the book of Ecclesiastes represents what we might speculatively describe as the observations of an intermediate Adam. What is life like in the period between the fall of Adam and the coming of Christ? Spiritually, most of us have had some experience in this time period. Thus, we are not speaking primarily about a historical time frame, but our own life's experiences. All of us are born fallen, and we spend a period of time awaiting the announcement to us of the good news that will change us. What is life like in the interim period? This is what we shall seek to discover in these studies.

The answer which the book of Ecclesiastes gives to this question is quite subtle. Solomon, David's son, is our example of man's life experiences in the period between Adam and the coming of Christ and the gospel. Solomon is a perfect choice for this study. He had every advantage in life. He had a godly heritage, a brilliant intellect, wealth beyond counting, vast influence, and he ruled in a politically stable climate. In a worldly sense, Solomon was a shining example of humanity at its highest level.

The opening verses identify the author and set the stage for 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."

Notice that the book makes no claim to have been written by Solomon. The words, "son of David, king in Jerusalem," could be applied to any successor of David. As a matter of fact, this description can be applied to all Christians. We who are in Christ are sons of David, in Christ, descended from David because of our spiritual heritage. Many scholars reject Solomonic authorship of this book. I don't find the arguments for rejection persuasive. But no one doubts that this book was written from the perspective of the historical figure: Solomon, king in Jerusalem.

The key phrase which gives the context for all that follows is the repeated word "under the sun." In these words we have a description of what life is like if the heavens are shut off from man. If a bowl were placed over the earth, masking the heavens (i.e. the spiritual world from which God speaks and acts), what would life be like? Given this perspective, what would be the view from earth? This is the experiment which is in focus in the book of Ecclesiastes. Everything is viewed as being "under the sun." No revelation from heaven comes into the picture. Given this context, what does our intermediate Adam perceive life to be like?

"UNDER THE SUN"

Here we could ask why should such a book be included in the Bible? What good does it do? One very important thing it does is make believers sensitive to people who know nothing about God's breakthrough in Jesus Christ; those who do not know that there is resurrection after death; the hurting and broken who are living in a darkened world, convinced that this is all there is to life. I believe Ecclesiastes was written as a pre-evangelistic text, in which Qoheleth (this is the word translated "Preacher"; the professor, the one who collected information) was saying to those who do not yet know that God speaks and expresses his love, "We understand what life seems like to you. We have thought about it and entered into it."

This book is addressed to the despairing and confused. We detect a ray of hope at last near the end of his discourse when the writer suggests that there is more to life than what we see "under the sun". The Preacher reaches out a helping hand to those who are living in darkness, saying, "There is something else to live for."

Despite the opening statement, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," Ecclesiastes is not a completely pessimistic book. Non-Christians do not regard life "under the sun" to be an entirely pessimistic thing. Those who do not apprehend spiritual things find that there is laughter and joy in life. And even if we could place a bowl over the earth, we could not shut out God entirely. God is still present in his creation. Even those who do not have a life-giving faith are yet aware that God exists and that he is sovereign. They even sense that religion is important in life--even in life lived "under the sun." But one thought that runs all through Ecclesiastes is the fact that life is capricious. We cannot predict what is going to happen. Good will be the result on occasion, but it is merely happenstance when it does. There is no guarantee or assurance that justice will ever be done.

So while prospects are not all bleak-life can be very good at times-life is always unpredictable.

LIFE IS CAPRICIOUS

But life can be good. In 5:18-20, Qoheleth writes,

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Some people seem to live perfectly delightful lives. They work, eat, play, sleep, and accept life as a gift from God. They don't ask questions about life. They live and let live, we would say. People who live like this make those who ask endless questions about life wonder why they have all those questions. Qoheleth runs into this

frequently as he observes life under the sun.
But listen to what he says in 8:14-17:

There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

Some who are righteous take the hardest knocks, while others who are bent on doing evil all their lives live trouble-free. Thus, the Preacher commends enjoyment of life, but can offer no guide for achieving it.

Life just happens. There is no way of discovering whether righteousness or wickedness, wisdom or ignorance are better in the long run. If you try to discover the way to simple joy merely by observing life, you cannot find a pattern. Bad things happen to the good and good things happen to the bad. Unless God breaks through and tells us what is going on, it's hit or miss. There is no predictability to life.

Frederick Buechner elaborates on this theme in these words:

If you decide to knock yourself out getting rich and living up to it, he [Qoheleth] points out, all you have to show for it in the end is the biggest income tax in town and a bad liver; and when you finally kick the bucket, the chances are that your dim-witted heirs will sink the whole thing in a phony Florida real estate deal or lose it at the track in Saratoga. If you decide to break your back getting a decent education and end up a Columbia Ph.D. and an advisor to Presidents, you'll be just as dead when the time comes as the high school drop-out who went into sausage-stuffing, and you'll be forgotten just about as soon.

Life itself gives us no clues. We do not know why good and bad things happen to people. So we must return to the first word, which is perhaps right after all, "Vanity of vanities! All is futility." As we begin our study in these opening verses, I would ask you to keep in mind the two words, weightlessness and weariness. Verse 3:

What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?
A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.

Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again.
Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.
All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.

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.
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.
Is there anything of which one might say

"See this, it is new"?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.
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.

WEIGHTLESSNESS

Life is futile, says the Preacher. "Vanity" means emptiness; that which is insubstantial. Like the vapor which is visible for a moment when one exhales on a cold night, a life leaves no mark, it accomplishes nothing. It is weightless, without substance, like a soap bubble which bursts and disappears, leaving no clue that it ever existed. In this sense, says the Preacher, life is vain. The earth remains always the same despite the many generations that come and go. Each generation scratches about on the earth for a while, and perhaps some may leave a mark, but eventually it is covered by green vegetation and can no longer be discerned. Human lives don't have any weight, any lasting substance.

Weightlessness presents a whole set of problems for the Space Shuttle. Following the recent flight of the module there were comments made on how strong was the presence of body odor on board. In zero-gravity conditions, of course, taking an ordinary shower is absolutely impossible. This is leading the engineers to try and find a way whereby the crew can keep themselves clean.

Weightlessness therefore presents many problems in the space program. This is a parable of what it means to be without weight, to have nothing about us that will make an impact socially, spiritually or emotionally. Qoheleth says that we are weightless. Life is vanity. Have you ever found yourself to be without weight in a social setting? You are part of a group engaged in a discussion but every time you try to contribute someone interrupts and no one seems to notice you. Despite your best and most thoughtful efforts, everything you say makes no impact on anyone; your words have about as much impact as a vapor. You are suffering from social weightlessness.

BEING IGNORED

According to Qoheleth, this is the problem in life. While we may have some impact, who will be around to remember us when we're gone? What have we accomplished that was truly unique? Hasn't it already been done before and won't it be done again?

I had an experience of weightlessness once when I was a teenager. In high school, I invited a certain girl I was interested in to go to a New Year's party with me just a couple of weeks after she had broken up with her regular boyfriend. I noticed that he also was at the party but I paid no particular attention to him until I began to observe as the evening wore on that he and my date seemed to be slowly but surely gravitating toward each other. When midnight struck and we began to sing the old year out and the new year in, as the emotions and memories of the passing year came flooding, they fell into each other's arms, kissed and made up. (As a matter of fact, they have since married and have three children.) To put it mildly, I felt rather weightless at that party. I had ceased to be of any interest or consequence to the girl I had escorted to the party.

This is the problem that Qoheleth is describing here. And we fight and resist this feeling. We do not want to be counted in the ranks of the weightless. Our instincts tell us that the earth should pass away, but not us. The rocks, the sand and the trees should disappear, but not people. And our instincts are right. Of course, people

should last forever. There is no antidote to our despair, however, unless God breaks through and reveals it to us.

By all appearances one generation follows another, while the earth remains the same. Everything we do has been done before. Just as soon as we discover a medical cure for one disease, another ailment seems to surface and we must begin again. Despite all the advances in communication techniques-computers, space satellites, television, sophisticated phone lines, overnight mail deliveries-honest, in-depth communication has not improved one iota. Modern-day political debates seem to shed little light on the problems that confront us. Cave men sitting around a fire could do as well, it seems. We have made no real advances. Nothing is new under the sun.

I used to work in a scrap metal yard. Old refrigerators, washing machines, automobile bodies, etc., were pressed and pounded into solid metal cubes which were amazingly small and compact, considering what had gone into them in the first place. As I watched banged-up and abandoned cars compacted together with old refrigerator parts, I often thought that these cars were once new and shiny and coveted by their owners. People went into debt to buy these things and now I couldn't tell which part was car and which part was freezer. But even (perhaps especially) cars don't last. All became history in quick order, melted down and re-fabricated into something new. We fight against the tragedy of weightlessness, but nothing changes. "There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, there will be for them no remembrance Among things which come later still."

Is there anything of which one might say, "This is new, this is unique?" No, according to Qoheleth, there is nothing new under the sun.

WEARINESS

Now let us look at the second of our concepts, that of weariness. Verse 8: "All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor in the ear filled with hearing." Not only do we not leave our mark, we don't even experience satisfaction in our years on earth. This, says Qoheleth, is wearisome. Speaking of the sun, verse 5 says that, "hastening to its place it rises there again." The actual Hebrew word used is "panting." The writer imagines that the sun is out of breath from its never-ending race to get in place during the night so that it might rise in the east every day. The rivers which flow into the ocean never succeed in filling it up. The wind blows south, but then turns and blows north again. What an endless, wearisome treadmill!

In the same way, man's lot is wearisome and unsatisfying. Neither seeing nor hearing is satisfying. Retirees tell us that they soon tire of endless vacations and wish they could return to work again. Entertaining yourself is wearisome business. Taste, touch and smell, too, become jaded with excess. The boy or girl working in an ice cream parlor soon becomes tired of ice cream. Acts 17 describes the jaded Athenian intellectuals in these words: "now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new." Even talk becomes tiresome.

I notice that Stephen Jobs, the founder of Apple computers, has named his new company and his new personal computer, "Next, Inc." He didn't name it "Ultimate, Inc.", "Unique, Inc.", or "The End of the Line, Inc.", but "Next, Inc." He knows that the technology which went into his new creation will be obsolete in a couple of years. He probably will have to go on to "Next II, Inc." because there is no end to it all. It's wearisome. It doesn't satisfy. The Rolling Stones recorded what is purported to be the greatest rock and roll song ever, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." They were singing about sex, and this sentiment applies equally well there also. Everything is wearisome. Unless there is some divine breakthrough, mankind is destined to remain forever weightless and weary.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ANSWERS

Why should we consider these things? Too many of us have grown complacent about the familiar answers which the gospel supplies. We have forgotten the desperation of those who are asking the questions. We have forgotten how dark it is out there. Christians are often asked, "Why is Jesus the only way?" Solomon's

research provides the best answer. Humanism is doomed to reach the despairing conclusion, "All is vanity." If God does not speak, if he does not come and join us and make eternal life possible, then there is no other answer.

There is only one answer because there is only one time when God became a man. He spoke to us in the prophets. He spoke to us supremely in his Son. If we would minister to those who do not know him, we must understand how confusing, how capricious and desperate at times are the lives of those who do not know that God became a man in Jesus, and in him we will find the answers to the futility of existence. If God does not do something for us, then we cannot do anything for ourselves. "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow," says the old spiritual. "Nobody knows but Jesus." If we who have knowledge of the truth would be galvanized again to care about those who do not know, we ought to hear the despair, the uncertainty. We ought to remember what weightlessness was like. Maybe even God doesn't notice or care. We are tired of running on the same track. If God does not break through and rejoice with us, there is no other answer.

GOD'S BREAKTHROUGH

The incarnation was God's method of breaking through the barrier which covered the earth after the fall. I pray that as we read the words of Philippians 2, words that describe how God became man, we will remember the desperate condition of the world around us.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lord, we ask that you would make the truth of your coming to know us exciting and revolutionary to us once more; if we have grown complacent in our certainty, and if we are unaware of the needs around us, that you would break through and make us ministers of reconciliation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Catalog No. 4083
Ecclesiastes 1:1-12
First Message
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October 16, 1988

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