

## DESCRIBING THE STORM

### CHAPTER TWO

In the first lesson we gave a general description of the times in which we live. We pointed out that a great change is taking place away from the old framework of thought and life toward a new framework. Under the new framework people see no meaning in human existence. If there is no God—no plan—no final or absolute truth—then, of course, there can be no meaning. In this lesson (and the next four) we will endeavor to show the way in which this new framework is clearly manifesting itself in our culture and society today. We begin with—

#### *The Poets*

We will make no attempt, in these lessons, to trace the history of various movements. We will not try to be technical. We will simply take a number of examples which clearly show *how modern man thinks of himself and the world as without meaning or purpose*.

The following poetry was written by the poet-artist Hans Arp. In Zurich, in 1916, this type of poetry was devised as a protest against the old framework of life. The name of this poetry is Dada—the French word for “hobby horse.” It was chosen by letting the dictionary fall open, at random, and then blindly placing a finger on the page. The word that they hit upon was the word dada, and the very “meaning” of the word—as used by these poets—was that it was not supposed to have meaning. The poetry to which this name was given was produced in much the same way. Various words were placed in a hat, and then drawn out at random and then—with little touches added here and there by the poet—allowed to stand in a senseless or meaningless order. Here is an example of Dada poetry—Hans Arp’s “The Guest Expulsed.”

Their rubber hammer strikes the sea  
Down the black general so brave.  
With silken braid they deck him out  
As fifth wheel on the common grave.

All striped in yellow with the tides  
They decorate his firmament.  
The epaulettes they then construct  
Of June July and wet cement.

With many limbs the portrait group  
They lift on to the Dadadado;  
They nail their A B seizures up;  
Who numbers the compartments? They do.

They dye themselves with blue bag then  
And go as rivers from the land  
With candied fruit along the stream,  
An Oriflame in every hand.

In one sense it would be a big mistake to think that this poem has meaning. But in another sense it would be an even greater mistake to think that it has no meaning. It does have meaning. It tells us that the poet saw no meaning in the world because he is thinking within the new framework. *That* is the message of the poem, and that message is effectively expressed by it. Other poets use a more conventional form to express the idea that life has no meaning. The following stanzas from W. H. Auden’s poem entitled “September 1, 1939” (when the Second World War was just beginning) will illustrate .

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-Second Street  
Uncertain and afraid

As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade;  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.  
Faces along the bar  
Cling to their average day:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,  
All the conventions conspire  
To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
Lest we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good.

In a similar vein is "Lament for a Lost Life," by H. B. Mallalieu. We quote a few stanzas.

O, what shall I do for the long, long day  
But dream of what never will be.  
The husband and neighbours have gone away,

Nobody comes at three.

There's nothing to fill an engagement book:  
There's nowhere to take the car;  
Not even the tradesmen seem to look  
At my eyes as they are.

Never the sea will flood the street,  
Or mountains spring from the road:  
I'll never run lightly or gaily to meet  
One from my dream or a god.

O, what shall I do the long, long day?  
Where shall I find a lover?  
Will no one come to take me away,  
Death or another?

Not all poetry that is written today expresses this idea that life has no meaning and makes no sense. As we shall see later on in these studies the very nature of man as God created him is such that man cannot quite kill the longing within his own heart for meaning and purpose in life. The Bible says that God has "set eternity in their heart" (Eccles. 3:11). It is because of this "built in" longing for ultimate meaning and purpose in life that men try to "create" meaning for themselves even when they imagine that they live in a meaningless universe. Yet it is true that more and more modern poetry expresses the new framework of thinking and therefore pictures man as nothing in a universe without meaning.

### ***The Novelists***

It is the same with the great novelists today. *The Old Man and the Sea*, by Ernest Hemingway, will serve as a good example. In this novel we find an old fisherman battling to catch a great fish. Day after day he goes out, farther and farther from the land. Finally the old man catches the great fish, but he is very far out at sea.

It is an exhausting battle to bring it back in to land. Not only that, but because he has to tow the big fish back, the predators have the opportunity to eat away its flesh. And so, in the end, the fisherman has nothing left but the skeleton. It is not hard to see that all of this is symbolism for man's life situation. Hemingway seems to be saying that human life is like this story—an endless battle wherein man seeks some kind of meaning and fulfillment. But even when he accomplishes what he sets out to do, it still turns out to be senseless. It is in effect a way of saying, "No, you can't really come to anything that has meaning in a universe that is just a big accident." Another novel that effectively expresses the idea that life is senseless is entitled *The Plague*. It was written by Albert Camus, who was an existentialist. Existentialists believe that the universe is accidental. Man is here as a result of blind chance, surrounded by a universe that is chaos (*not* cosmos). In this novel, a plague breaks out in the city of Oran. It begins to strike down people (or not strike down people) in a random and meaningless way. The principal character in the novel, Dr. Rieux, accepts it as his work to fight the plague. But why? What sense did it really make to fight the plague? As the novel puts it, "He knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could only be the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts..." The message of the novel seems to be this: We are trapped in a hopeless and senseless world; yet somehow we must go on fighting against it, even though we know that we can never win. Here we see the new framework of thinking. The novelist accepts—without questioning it—that we live in a universe which has no creator and therefore no meaning.

We give as a third and final example Arthur Koestler's novel entitled *Darkness at Noon*. The novel is based on Koestler's knowledge of people who were caught in the purge trials in Moscow in the early 1930's. The main character in the novel, Rubashov, is condemned to death for "crimes against the state." At any moment he expects the final summons. His feelings are those of a man who has no hope for the future. Talk about the great future promised by the Communists does not help, since he will never live to see it. So the book ends with these words, in which Rubashov expresses the sense of despair that Koestler sees as our human predicament.

"What happened to those masses, to this people? For forty years it had been driven through the deserts, with threats and promises, with imaginary terrors and imaginary rewards. But where the Promised Land?

Did there really exist any such goal for this wandering mankind? That was a question to which he would have liked an answer before it was too late. Moses had not been allowed to enter the land of promise either. But he had been allowed to see it, from the top of the mountain, spread at his feet. Thus it was easy to die, with the visible certainty of one's goal before one's eyes. He, Nicolai Salmanowitch Rubashov, had not been taken to the top of a mountain: and wherever his eye looked, he saw nothing but desert and the darkness of night."

Koestler himself explains why man today is in Rubashov's position, rather than in that of Moses. "Before the shift," he writes (and he means the shift from the old framework to the new), "the various religions had provided man with explanations of a kind which gave everything that happened to him meaning...But the explanations of the new philosophy [new framework of thinking] were devoid of meaning..."

There is a book of the Bible that says much the same thing that our modern poets and writers are saying. It is the book of Ecclesiastes. To understand the message of this portion of the Bible, two phrases are of key importance. When Solomon (the author of Ecclesiastes) speaks of life "under the sun," he means life lived as if the visible is all that exists (that is, as if there is no God, no heaven or hell, and no continued existence after death). When man lives as if this is all there is, then he will finally arrive at the conclusion that "all is vanity." The word *vanity* simply means empty, senseless, or void of meaning. So in Solomon's day too there were those who adopted a certain framework of thinking and then ended up in despair. This is important. We are not the first people on earth who have lived in a time when society as a whole shifted over to such a framework of thinking. In the days of the decline of the Roman Empire (to cite one notable example) great multitudes of people felt very much as people do today. This is, in fact, what *always* happens when people reject the light of divine revelation (the Bible). God has created man—and the world—in such a way that it is impossible for man to find sense or meaning apart from Him. One can say, then, that God Himself is driving modern man to despair—to the realization that he is at a dead-end, and that apart from Christ and the Bible there is no exit.

We must not make the mistake, however, of thinking that the message of the Bible (as in Ecclesiastes) and the message of the modern poets and novelists is the same. It is not. Both do indeed bear witness to *where* man ends up when he accepts the wrong framework. But it is only the Bible that shows us *why this is so*. In the final analysis it is only God who can show us the truth about anything, including ourselves. And this—as we will see more and more in these lessons—is the one thing that fallen and sinful man hates to admit. It is in fact so distasteful that men much prefer to stumble on in blindness and despair rather than to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. What we stress is the fact that men are not mere victims. No, they are also culprits. There is no valid excuse. A study of Psalm 19 and Romans 1:16-32 will clearly demonstrate this. As we speak to others, then, who are living within this new framework of thinking, we must be faithful: We must not only tell them where they are, but also why. And in dependence upon the Holy Spirit we must then call them to repentance and faith.

### Questions:

1. How does the invention of Dada poetry illustrate new framework thinking?
2. What is the meaning of the poem, “The Guest Expulsed”?
3. Is the meaning communicated in the form or in the content?
4. How does W. H. Auden express the view that life is without meaning? (Support your view with lines or phrases underlined in the poem).
5. What feeling do you have in reading Mallalieu’s poem? What phrases best bring out the idea of the emptiness of life?
6. Why is it that some modern poetry is less expressive of the idea that life has no meaning?
7. What does the “big fish” represent in Hemingway’s novel?
8. Underline one phrase in the words of Camus expressing the idea of senselessness.
9. What do Moses and Rubashov symbolize?
10. What does the book of Ecclesiastes mean by “under the sun”?
11. What does the book of Ecclesiastes mean by “all is vanity”?
12. What is the big difference between the way in which modern writers picture the results of “new framework” thinking and the way the Bible presents this?

### Projects:

1. Read Ecclesiastes chapter 1—or chapter 2—and choose the verse that best expresses what you take to be the meaning of “the new-framework” thinking.
2. Bring to class a summary of a short story or novel or a poem, which expresses “new-framework” thinking, and be ready to defend your choice.