

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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Chapter Six

Possessing Everything, Enjoying Nothing

By **application**, the Preacher **found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence** (6:1–8:15).

After discussing the role of wealth in one's life (5:10–17), Solomon explains that people can enjoy God's gifts of possessions and wealth (5:18–19). Such enjoyment provides relief from the toil and trouble of mortal life under the sun (5:20). Now Solomon moves on to address an apparent inequity: someone can possess wealth but be unable to enjoy it. Life's manifold mysteries confound even a man as wise as Solomon. Mere mortals cannot adequately understand all that occurs in God's world. How is it possible for a person to gain all that his or her heart desires (gold, wealth, honor, family, long life, and education), yet never find any joy in those attainments? Thus, Solomon presents

- An evaluation of man's outward fortunes (6:1–7:15).
- An evaluation of man's character (7:16–29).
- A consideration of the role of government (8:1–14).

Case History #1: A Full Treasury (vv. 1–2)

By experience and by observation, Solomon comes to the conclusion that *prosperity is not always as good as it might appear*.¹ "There is" (v. 1) involves a common formula in Ecclesiastes (2:21; 4:8; 5:13; 6:1, 11; 7:15; 8:14; 10:5) introducing specific examples or cases that he employs to formulate his argumentation. He clearly identifies the viewpoint of the discussion: "under the sun." Mere mortal beings who conduct their lives without God in this life will face enigmas seemingly without solution. An individual who lives by faith in the Creator and Sovereign of all things may experience the same enigmas, but God's sovereign control provides the means for enjoying His gifts in spite of the difficulties and discouragements.

¹ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 334.

Note the two contrasts between 5:18–19 and 6:1–2:

“Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting” (5:18)	vs.	“There is an evil which I have seen” (6:1)
“every man to whom God has given riches and wealth” (5:19)	vs.	“a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor” (6:2).

Those good things that God has given look, in at least one situation, as though they bring nothing but evil, calamity, or trouble upon a person. How can this be? **James 5:1–6** reveals one of the key causes of such a turn of events: the individual thus gifted spends his or her wealth on wanton pleasure while oppressing the poor. His heart is not right with God. To be sure, a wicked heart and wanton life style are not the only causes for gold’s loss of glitter. A righteous individual might also lack the opportunity to enjoy possessions and wealth. *But God alone controls both the giving and the enjoying—note that “God has not empowered him to eat from them” (Eccl 6:2).*

Second Chronicles 1:11–12 also mentions “riches and wealth and honor” (Eccl 6:2) as gifts from God to Solomon (cp. Eccl 2:1–8). If Solomon speaks of himself, the question that arises concerns the identity of the “foreigner” (or, “stranger”). The stranger might be someone outside the family. In 2:21 Solomon identifies an individual who did not work for what he receives. He might have Jeroboam in mind (see previous discussion of 4:13–16). The truth of the matter, according to William Brown, involves the fact that, “Ownership is, thus, a misnomer. One’s possessions are exclusively gifts of God, and as easily as God gives, so God takes away to give to others. The givenness of material possessions is a two-edged sword.”² **In other words, there are no guarantees in life when it comes to one’s possessions and wealth.**

Case History #2: A Full Quiver (vv. 3–5)

Another apparent inequity occurs in life: someone who has “a hundred *children* and lives many years” (v. 3) may live an unsatisfying life (enjoying neither children nor wealth) and not even receive a proper burial. Scripture depicts numerous offspring as a significant blessing (Ps 127:3–5). Obviously, Solomon might match this particular description of many children, given his many wives and concubines (cp. Gideon’s 70 sons, Judg 8:30; Ahab’s 70 sons, 2 Kgs 10:1). Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, sired 28 sons and 60 daughters (2 Chron 11:21).

Ironically, Solomon declares that a miscarriage (stillbirth or unborn fetus) is better off than this man with a hundred children (Eccl 6:3). A reference to a “miscarriage” occurs also in Job 3:16 where Job opines that he would have been better off as a miscarried infant rather than to have suffered the loss of all of his children and all of his possessions, as well as his health. In Psalm 58:8 David uses the condition of a miscarriage to describe how wicked and violent men should be removed from life. Such comparisons to a miscarriage focus on the quality of life rather than the duration of life. No one lives a shorter time than a miscarriage. Solomon characterizes the state of the miscarried infant as “futility” and “obscurity” (Eccl 6:4). Indeed, the last portion of verse 4 indicates that there is no memory of the miscarriage either because no one gave it a name or because no one recognizes the name since the individual never entered the sphere of their existence. Still, the unborn infant enjoys a better circumstance (v. 5) than

² William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes, Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2000), 65.

someone who has brought one hundred children into the world, yet cannot enjoy his life or find satisfaction and rest.

The miscarriage “knows” nothing of the frustrations, disappointments, and enigmas of life under the sun. “It is better off than he” should be translated more literally, **“more rest has this one than that one.”** Interestingly, the proximity of this mention of “rest” to referring to someone living twice one thousand years (v. 6) and to names (vv. 4, 10) both bring to mind Genesis 5:28–29 with the naming of Noah (derived from the root for “rest”) in a time when longevity could be just under one thousand years. Earlier, Solomon referred to “rest” in 4:6. The comparison between the miscarriage and the man who had a hundred children and lived many years reminds the reader of Solomon’s words in 4:2.

Old Testament writers consider burial (6:3) to be a significant responsibility that the living must fulfill for the dead (cp. 1 Sam 31:11–13). Improper treatment of the corpse (such as exposure to the elements) comprises dishonor and is emblematic of being cursed (cp. 1 Kgs 14:10–11; 2 Kgs 9:33–37; Isa 14:19–20; Jer 16:4; 22:18–19).

The familiar spiritual, “This World Is Not My Home,” addresses the reason for a lack of satisfying rest “under the sun”:

This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through;
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from Heaven’s open door,
And I can’t feel at home, in this world anymore.³

The individual who seeks to make this world his or her focus tends to lay up treasures here and to place too much emphasis upon what one possesses and experiences in this life. Their fallen nature fails to include God in their worldview. A miscarriage might not experience any life under the sun, pass into obscurity, and remain unknown, but it will experience the grace of God and will be at rest with Him.

Case History #3: A Full Life Span (v. 6)

Literally, verse 6 reads, “Even if he lives a thousand years twice and does not see good.” *Two thousand years doubles the life span of Methuselah, who lived 969 years (Gen 5:26–27). Adam himself lived 930 years (Gen 5:5).* According to the Ten Commandments, a long life comes as a divine blessing to those who honor their parents (cf. Exod 20:12; Ps 91:16; Prov 3:16). Thus, the miscarriage (Eccl 6:3), that lives such a short time, still has greater enjoyment than someone who lives twice as long as Methuselah. **Having in his possession all that some people count as blessings, a person “can still depart unnoticed, unlamented and unfulfilled.”**⁴

The Elusiveness of Satisfaction and Rest (vv. 7–9)

From verses 3–6 the reader comprehends that, “Despite family, longevity and fame, life may so miscarry as to incur lifelong dissatisfaction and an unmourned death.”⁵ Solomon has already addressed lack of satisfaction in 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; and 6:3. This

³ Jessie R. Baxter, Jr. (Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Co., 1946). The second line of the second stanza asks, “If Heaven’s not my home, then Lord what will I do?”

⁴ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 59.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 80; Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 105.

proverb in 6:7 merely repeats the truth within the context of the previous three case histories. Each of those three situations speak to a lack of satisfaction. The term translated “satisfied” is actually “filled” (cf. 1:8). The proverb teaches that **a person living as a mere human being without God in his or her life can never find satisfaction in quantity of possessions, wealth, children, or years of life.**

Verse 8 employs a second proverb containing two rhetorical questions. Although translating and interpreting verse 8 has produced much scholarly wringing of hands,⁶ it is clear that both questions demand the same answer: “There is no advantage.” Neither the wise man nor the fool have an advantage when it comes to satisfaction. A wise man might gain a temporary advantage over a fool. A fool might have a temporary advantage with his street smarts. *However, neither one can gain any advantage over death or over God (see 2:12–17).*

The third proverb (v. 9a) presents an equivalent to “A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.” Dreaming about something does not bring it to pass or bring it into one’s possession. Take what you have—what you can see—and do not count on your desires being fulfilled. **In other words, better to be content with what I have than to waste my life desiring what I do not have.**

“This too is futility [*hebel*] and a striving after wind” (v. 9b) wraps up the three case histories with the same summation to which Solomon appeals again and again throughout the book of Ecclesiastes (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 5:16). *In fact, the author does not employ the phrase again in the rest of the book. The very next verse marks the middle of the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes. Therefore, the first half of the book comes to a close with this phrase.* The next three verses set up the remainder of the book and introduce the theme for the second half.

A Sovereign Lord (vv. 10–12)

*In effect, verses 10–12 comprise Solomon’s reflection upon the Fall.*⁷ The passive “been named” (v. 10) infers that God is the actual agent. Ancient Near Eastern peoples considered the giving of a name to something or to someone as appointing its, his, or her character.⁸ Naming displays authority (cp. Gen 2:19–20). The Creator established His authority over creation by naming the day, night, expanse, waters, land, seas, and man (Gen 1). He revealed His authority over the stars by naming them (cf. Isa 40:26). God named the first human being “man” (*’adam*), a word that comes from the word for earth (*’adamah*, Gen 2:7; 3:19; Eccl 3:20; 12:7). **Thus, he has been properly named. He is earthly—made of earth and tied to the earth. That name puts all mankind in their proper place (cp. Eccl 5:1).**⁹

Mankind’s position is on earth and “him who is stronger than he is” refers to God, Who is in Heaven (cp. 1 Cor 10:22). Chuck Swindoll summarizes verse 10 in this way: “So long as I fight the hand of God, I do not learn the lessons He is attempting to place

⁶ David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Preacher’s Commentary Series 16 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 154.

⁷ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 317.

⁸ John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1957), 207.

⁹ Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., 1977 reprint of 1869 ed.), 143.

before me.”¹⁰ *The Sovereign Creator controls all things—including the circumstances of life that we face as human beings.* Thus, multiplying words once again comes to the forefront of Solomon’s discourse (v. 11; cp. 5:1–3). Elihu reached a similar conclusion in Job 35:16 (“So Job opens his mouth empty; he multiplies words without knowledge”). In Isaiah 45:9–12 the prophet employs the figure of a potter and his clay pot to explain the futility of someone quarreling with his Maker.

Verse 12 opens with a question that implies that it is God who “knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime.” **“Good” operates as a bridge to what follows in chapter 7.** A brief statement to emphasize the brevity of a person’s life follows (“He will spend them like a shadow”). “Shadow” depicts the ephemeral nature of human existence (Eccl. 8:13; 1 Chron 29:15; Job 8:9; 14:12; Pss 102:11; 109:23; 144:4). Then Solomon asks a second question with the same implication as the first question: *only God can reveal to a person what will happen “under the sun.”* This verse is a fitting wisdom summary for the thematic elements in both Ecclesiastes 1–6 and Isaiah 40–46.

According to Roland Murphy, “The uncertainty of life tomorrow is as bad, if not worse, than the uncertainty of ‘life’ after death.”¹¹ The ultimate message is that human beings do not possess control over the present or future. (See Romans 9:20.) Solomon carefully demolishes every question, every observation, that mere mortals might make in the process of questioning their Creator’s wisdom. Solomon draws the reader to the conclusion that only God can control one’s destiny. The reasons things are as they are is due to the fact that the Sovereign Lord of creation does it that way for His purposes. As Michael Eaton puts it, “Like the Mosaic law (*cf.* Gal. 3:22), the Preacher is slamming every door except the door of faith.”¹²

Hubbard aptly summarizes Ecclesiastes 6 with a series of truths the reader must acknowledge:

- Contentment is more satisfying than wealth.
- Doing God’s will is more important than gaining goods.
- Doing God’s will brings the highest wealth of all.¹³

In Mark 10:29–30 Jesus speaks clearly to this matter of not finding satisfaction in possessions, family, and longevity. May we learn these lessons well and continue to look up, beyond the sun, to our Creator. Satisfaction comes only through obedience to His will and in accepting all things He grants to us with thanksgiving and joy.

Questions:

- What are the essentials for enjoying a satisfied life?
- Why are some people unmourned in their death?
- Why do large families (many children) sometimes fail to provide satisfaction and joy?
- What are some of the disadvantages of a very long life?

¹⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 192.

¹¹ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, Publisher, 1992), 59.

¹² Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 108.

¹³ Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 156–57.