

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 6

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: 2 a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil. 3 If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. 4 For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. 5 Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. 6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place? 7 All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind. 10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. 11 The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? 12 For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

6:1 *an evil* – The Preacher has shown that the power to enjoy good aright is the gift of God, and is the sum of earthly blessings. He now considers the opposite case, (CB)

When riches increase, there is a temptation to rest our hearts on them rather than the Lord and His gifts. (TLSB)

6:2–3, 6 *enjoy*. Comparing v. 2 with 5:19 demonstrates that the ability to enjoy God's blessings is a bonus—a gift of God, not a right or guarantee. God calls the person who forgets this truth a fool (Lk 12:20). (CSB)

6:2 *God gives wealth...*— Unless God grants it, man can have nothing. Contrary to the American Dream, there is no such creature as the “self-made” man. Regardless of how hard a person may work, it is God who “gives a man wealth, possessions and honor.” Human effort or labor is merely the channel through which the Lord gives His “good and perfect gifts” (James 1:17). Luther describes it this way:

[All human activities] are our God's masks; beneath these He chooses to be hidden and to do everything. Had Gideon not co-operated and taken the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been defeated. Yet God was able to smite them without Gideon. No doubt He could create children without man and woman, but He does not intend to do so. Rather He joins man and woman to make it look as if man and woman do the procreating. Yet He, hidden under this mask, is the one who does it. They say: God bestows every good thing; but you must “pitch in” and “take the bull by the horns,” that is, you must work and supply God with a reason and a covering. (PBC)

God does not give him power to enjoy them – This is done either through the influence of tormenting passions as avarice and envy; or through sickness and other calamities. (CB)

Riches, wealth, and honor are God's gifts. He desires that we serve His kingdom and our neighbors with His gifts. The ability to enjoy God's blessings is a bonus—a gift of God, not a right or guarantee. God calls that person a fool who forgets this truth. (TLSB)

Possessing things does not necessarily mean enjoying them. In fact, it often happens that the two do not go hand in hand. Both must come from God. (PBC)

a stranger enjoys – Someone other than himself. (CB)

Perhaps the wealthy man has no children. Perhaps some thief illegally gets hold of the money. However it comes about, it is God working behind the scenes. For one reason or another God is withholding enjoyment from the individual. He might withhold enjoyment because He wants the person to despair of riches and turn to God. Or He might withhold enjoyment as a judgment upon a wicked individual. (PBC)

6:3 *a man fathers a hundred children* – This may refer to his immediate children or include his grandchildren as well. In either case, he has a very large family. Back in ancient times large families were considered special blessings from God. Solomon mentions this in one of his psalms, “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Psalm 127:3, 4). (PBC)

Life is not meaningless. Life is a gift of the Lord. (TLSB)

not satisfied – Silver and gold may fill our hands but not our souls. (TLSB)

has no burial. Dies unlamented or dishonored, like King Jehoiakim (Jer 22:18–19). (CSB)

The burial of an unbeliever appears little different from that of a dumb animal. (TLSB)

In this verse Solomon seems to be describing a wealthy man who puts off his own enjoyment and saves up for his children. They, however, are ungrateful and do not even honor their father with a proper burial, a matter always considered of importance in the Jewish community. In life and even in death the man is frustrated. (PBC)

stillborn child. For the secularist, life is a pointless journey to extinction, to which being stillborn is the quickest and easiest route (cf. Job 3:16; Ps 58:8). (CSB)

Or, miscarriage. Author hopes the wicked have no more future and no greater accomplishments in life than a stillborn child. (TLSB Note on Ps. 58:8)

This is strong statement. In addition to the many children who die in miscarriage, we think of the millions who have been aborted in our country. They are better off than the man who lives a miserable life without God and without being able to enjoy his gifts. “Thus the wicked begin their hell in this life,” remarks Luther. (PBC)

6:4 *name is covered* – None shall hear of it. (CB)

A stillborn child (v 3) may have no name, no identity. (TLSB)

The stillborn child never enjoys the light of day, but passes from the darkness of his mother's womb to the darkness of the grave. If the child was named at all, the name quickly passes into obscurity, to be remembered only by his parents and, of course, the Lord. (PBC)

6:5 Solomon asserts that the stillborn child has more rest than a covetous miser. (TLSB)

has not seen the sun – Luther: “[This is] Hebrew for ‘to enjoy things and take pleasure in them.’ ... Thus the wicked begin their hell in this life, because they are deprived of the use of all the creatures and gifts of God, so that they never see the sun, which we nevertheless have every day. In other words, they do not rejoice in the gifts of God but are always looking for something else” (AE 15:96, 97). Cf Nu 6:25. (TLSB)

6:6 *enjoy no good* – Real quality-of-life comes only with a God-given contentment and thankfulness. Looking at it this way, often the wealthiest and most gifted people lack true quality-of-life, while the handicapped child of God lives a life of highest quality, in terms of happiness, contentment and hope. (PBC)

go to the one place. Still talking in terms of what we can observe (that all men die), not of what lies beyond death (see v. 12; 3:21). (CSB)

Since in his long life he has seen no good, what is the profit of living long, as in the end the aged must with all others go to the grave? (CB)

The grave is the end, no matter if the person lives a thousand years or one hour. (TLSB)

6:7–12 In confronting complacency, the Teacher gives several causes for concern: the short-lived (v. 7), debatable (v. 8) and elusive (v. 9) rewards of life; the limits of our creativity, power and wisdom (vv. 10–11); and the unreliability of merely human values and predictions (v. 12). (CSB)

In rapid-fire succession Solomon now rattles off a series of proverbs. Each relates in a different way to the meaningless of worldly wealth and activity. Together they capsule everything Solomon has said about life under the sun. (PBC)

6:7 *for his mouth* – To satisfy his bodily wants. (CB)

The flesh is never satiated. The soul finds bondage, not satisfaction, in wealth. (TLSB)

This can refer to all of man's physical needs, just as when Jesus talks about “daily bread” in the Lord's Prayer to signify whatever we need for our bodily welfare. (PBC)

not satisfied – The craving is ever for more. (CB)

The attitude of looking out for oneself has almost become a religion in our “me generation.” Advertising, television and popular wisdom bombard us with this theme: “You're number 1... You deserve the best... You owe it to yourself.” And what is the result of all this emphasis? One's appetite is never satisfied. We never have quite enough. We'll be happy (or so we think) if we just get one more raise or advancement or.. (PBC)

6:8 *what advantage* – That is, in respect to what has just been named. In their bodily wants, wise men and fools stand on a level. (CB)

poor man – A poor man may conduct himself with wisdom, kindness and honesty only to be ignored or pushed aside in favor of a wealthy fool. Again, there seems to be no advantage. At least not under the sun. (PBC)

6:9 *wandering of the appetite* – The word “appetite as translated in this verse literally means “soul.” The soul, as one commentator puts it, is the “seat of the appetite.” When we come right down to it, most of our “roving” desires are spiritual problems. Many married men are not satisfied with their own wives but, to use Jeremiah’s expression, they are like “well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for another man’s wife” (Jeremiah 5:8). Others never have enough money, but always want more and more. Still others are never satisfied with their position in life. Such people are constantly restless. St Augustine addressed this problems when he said, “The soul is restless till it rests in God”; and “He who is not satisfied with God alone is too greedy.” In either case, the problem is spiritual. It is a sickness of the soul. (PBC)

It is better to make the best of what one has (contentment) than to wander in the ways of desire (covetousness). (TLSB)

Instead of letting our appetites roam, we should learn to control them. An old English proverb states, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” This is what Solomon is saying with his words. We can learn to appreciate what we have when we live in humble thankfulness for God’s gifts. (PBC)

6:10 *named*. Predetermined by God. (CSB)

Known by divine foreknowledge. This does not teach fatalism or determinism, which denies the God of Holy Scripture. (TLSB)

known. Foreknown by God. (CSB)

one who is stronger. God. (CSB)

That is, weak, frail, and perishing man, who occupies this world subject to the sovereign appointment of God, and unable to change the course of human affairs which God has established. (CB)

How foolish it is to try to go against God’s Will. How foolish for modern man to think he can ignore the lessons of the past. God still punishes sin. Try as we might, we simply cannot overcome God and His plans. Rater than making a futile attempt to oppose God, we should trust Him and stick close to Him and His Word. (PBC)

6:11 *more words, the more vanity* – Most ideas prove meaningless. Without God’s Word, we do not know how to advise others or how to act. (TLSB)

6:12 “The Lord” is the answer to these questions. We live, move, and have our being in Him. (TLSB)

like a shadow. See 1Ch 29:15. (CSB)

A number of Scripture passages compare life to a shadow. One example is Psalm 144:4: “Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.” Human wisdom has no answers to the

questions in this verse. At best it can guess. Only the God who has created man knows what is best for man. Only that same eternal God can tell what the future holds. (PBC)

The answers to these questions will take up the rest of Ecclesiastes. In the first half of the book the Teacher has dramatically depicted man's meaningless life under the sun. For the rest of the book he will emphasize the way life is meant to be lived – under God. (PBC)

5:8–6:12 In the latter part of ch 5, Solomon shows how to make a comfortable use of God's gifts. In ch 6, he shows the evil uses of wealth and asks, "Will the amassing of wealth bring happiness?" What person is better for his or her wealth, pleasure, and honor when standing before God at the final judgment? Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6; Ac 4:12). He is the author and perfecter of our faith, so that we do not grow weary and lose heart (cf Heb 12:2–3). • O God of all comfort, by Your Word and Holy Spirit grant us a firm, glad, and grateful faith, that by it we may overcome every trial and at length hear the Word of Your dear Son: "Take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). Amen. (TLSB)