

VII. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“Back to Vanity with the Sure Hope of Vitality”
Ecclesiastes 6
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
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In this study we will be in Ecclesiastes 6. Ecclesiastes 6:1–6 says [1] *There is an evil that I (Solomon, the Preacher) 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?*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

Perhaps you are coupon savers and you’re always taking a look at the promises that manufacturers make to you. Some coupons would read ‘satisfaction guaranteed, if not satisfied will refund.’ In Ecclesiastes 6 I’m going to change the title to ‘dissatisfaction apart from the Lord guaranteed.’ Dissatisfaction in a life apart from the Lord is guaranteed. The book of Ecclesiastes is a documented journey of Solomon back to Proverbs. He starts with humility, asking the Lord for wisdom and becomes a collector of wisdom yet somehow the wisdom he gains, instead of living life to the glory of God, he begins to live life seeking his own glory in a life sought after under the sun. I believe Ecclesiastes is a documentary of Solomon’s repentance and his appraisal of trying to live a life disconnected from the Lord.

What does it mean to live life under the sun? The verdict is vanity, meaning emptiness, like striving after the wind. Have you ever tried to grab the wind or try to control it? You have no control over it for it blows where it wishes. You hear the sound of it, our Lord says, but you do not know where it came from or where it is going (John 3:8). This is what life looks like with emptiness, futility and meaninglessness when you live life under the sun instead of living life for the One above the sun and the One who made the sun. That is when life begins to take on proportions.

Here, the writer of Ecclesiastes has given us some interesting analysis. He shows us life under the sun in the opening chapters as man begins to deal with his disappointments and futility of life under the sun, his man-made solutions and how they don’t answer his emptiness. On the contrary, the man-made solutions to living life apart from a God-centered world and life view actually add to the futility, emptiness and the vanity of life. When he gets to chapters 4 and 5 he can’t help himself and tells us where we do need to get to – fear God. This is how he journeys back to Proverbs. Proverbs is the glory of knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Knowledge is I know the truth. Understanding is I can see the implications and applications of the truth. Wisdom is I am learning to live the truth and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7).

Then he ends back to not only the reverence and respect that is due to God, who gives us life and who alone can redeem our life, but that life is to be lived in concert with Him. In Ecclesiastes 5 he gives you a little hint of it. Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 says *[18] Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. [19] Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. [20] For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

Here is someone is working in his toil and has the good things of life. They have something to eat and drink and labor with their hands. They not only have the good gifts from the hand of God but they have joy from the hand of God with those good gifts. Now in Ecclesiastes 6 we have another case study. This is someone that in the hands of a sovereign God has been given good gifts but God has not given them joy because their life is not lived in the fear of the Lord who gives the joy. Their life is under the sun. They think that everything they have has been by their own activity, endeavor and achievement. The reality is that whoever has it whether good or evil, whatever they have it is by the hand of a sovereign God that they have it. But God does not give joy to everyone, only those who have the relationships of grace and reverence with Him and who fear the Lord. So here is a man who has possessions from the Lord but doesn't have joy from the Lord.

The man at the end of Ecclesiastes 5 has possessions from the Lord, joy from the Lord and lives in the fear of the Lord. The man in Ecclesiastes 6 has possessions from the Lord but doesn't acknowledge it and doesn't have joy from the Lord or fears the Lord. He lives his life in reference to himself under the sun therefore it is a life of vanity. This man has possessions from the Lord but not gifts from the Lord. Let's look closer at this man from Ecclesiastes 6.

Ecclesiastes 6 starts out by saying 'there is an evil...' It is an evil existence that men who are living their lives under the sun and is something that is heavy upon mankind. This is a very difficult translation in the Hebrew. I'm not going to try and unravel this translation but I understand why the ESV Bible translates this as being 'heavy on mankind' which I think is the best translation. It means that you will find what is being described here throughout all mankind. This isn't an oddity that you just find in certain places. This evil you will find throughout mankind that mankind is enjoying by God's common grace, good gifts in their life that are even beyond their needs. Even though they have them there is an evil that weighs upon them.

Here is a man who has wealth. He is being honored in life. He has materialism, consumerism and influence. Yet while God has given him all of that in a fallen world, God does not give him the power to enjoy them. There is a power that is missing in their life that is required for them to enjoy what they have and do. This is an evil that is found throughout mankind and is heavy. This is a vanity. In Ecclesiastes 6:2 he calls it a grievous evil. It is one that brings grief and despair in all of life.

You think that desires of life, with objects in life can do what God alone can do. The journeys to those things are journeys that you take and never arrive at the destination. We think that next vacation or that next purchase will be the thing that satisfies us and yes there will be an immediate exhilaration at the acquisition of it or the achievement of it but then you will need something else. When we have these desires (whatever it is) with these objects that we desire in place of God or as rivals to God we will never arrive at the desired destination because they never deliver what we think they will deliver. That is a grievous evil that dominates all of humanity. When you are on this journey it is dissatisfaction guaranteed.

I'm not trying to say whether a big house or a small house is holy or not, I'm just saying for instance here is someone with a small house that is satisfied with the Lord and then here is someone with a big house that is ready to get a bigger one. The problem isn't the size of the house. The problem is what were they looking for in that object and once it was obtained did it deliver it to them. When we look to it to deliver to us what only God alone can give us, then what we have is emptiness in life. That's where we end up. Maybe it's a car, clothes, a job, a position, a house, a degree in school.

I am not saying there is anything wrong with the thing, whatever it is. In fact, we just read in the text that God has given them good things. The thing is amoral. It doesn't bring evil in and of itself. The issue is, what are we looking for it to do in our life. When we do get it we're asking it to deliver what it does not have the power to give. Only God can give you the power of joy.

Why is this such a grievous evil? The reason this is such a grievous evil is because you were made for God and joy. What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Let's do some exegesis of the shorter catechism. Notice the shorter catechism says the chief end meaning singular purpose. Why did God make me? Why did God save me? Why does God sustain me? It is that I might glorify God and enjoy Him and those are not two purposes. Those are one purpose. You can think of it as a coin with two sides. My responsibility, my call in life is to glorify Him. My relationship in life is to enjoy Him. These two are interdependent and inseparable. In other words, the more you glorify God the more you will enjoy Him and the more you enjoy Him the more you will glorify Him. When you glorify and enjoy Him, now the good things in life can be used for good purposes to praise God from whom all blessings flow.

I Corinthians 10:31 says [31] *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* When you turn those things around that you have been given for His glory and praise then now you can enjoy them. If I am eating to live for the Lord it is glorious and I can enjoy it. If I am living for the Lord then I am eating and drinking to the glory of God. If I am living to eat or drink then I'm on a route to emptiness, despair, and dissatisfaction guaranteed and I'll never get enough to eat or drink because food and drink are good gifts from the Lord but they are terrible substitutes for the Lord. They can't deliver. When you are eating and drinking to the glory of God then you eat and drink to live for the Lord and that means you enjoy Him and the good gifts you have been given.

I want to take this a step further with you. The writer now takes us to illustration/step number two. Ecclesiastes 6:3–6 says [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?*

If you were living in the ninth century B.C., in the days of Solomon, in the course of humanity, in the ancient near east culture, there were two things that every man would love to have. The “good life” was simply to have a long life and many children to bear your name after you were gone. So here's a man with perhaps even 2,000 years of life and 100 children but he does not know the Lord. His joy is not in the Lord and he's trying to use life's good things as if they are the answer to life – his years and his children.

This man goes into life unburied. He ends life as if he has never lived it at all. Periodically throughout Ecclesiastes Solomon will give an illustration and then say ‘and this would be better than...’ He is not saying it is better or what you want by using this phrase, but he is saying it is better than what the person had. So in this case a stillborn child is better than what this man had and what Solomon means by that is that this man never saw the light of day, the light of the sun and lived in the darkness of the womb, died in the darkness of the womb. Therefore does not have the disappointments of the one who saw the light of the sun and lived under the sun as if the things under the sun were God. At least the stillborn was spared the despair, dissatisfaction and disappointments of thinking the things under the sun were to give them life, but instead give emptiness and striving after the wind.

When the things desired under the sun, for these two illustrations, replace or rival the God who not only is above the sun but who made the sun and everything under the sun, then dissatisfaction is guaranteed, disappointment is assured and discontent will be the rule of life. At least the stillborn did not attempt to live for the things that the light of day would have shown them and therefore was spared that dissatisfaction. Notice that the stillborn and the man with the empty soul go to the same place, meaning that they both end up in the grave, but you don’t even know of the burial of the man with the emptiness of soul. The stillborn is considered more than the man with the empty soul.

So in this second illustration we see a man who has all the things that he values – long life and lots of children – but as the text says he had an empty soul. By the way, children are good things for the Bible says ‘blessed are the children of your youth’ (Psalm 127:4). Long life can be a blessing of the Lord, but when your soul is empty you are better off than having seen the light of day, like a stillborn for at least they are spared the dissatisfaction and disappointment of looking to that which ought to be a good thing for the Lord but is a terrible thing when we put it in place of the Lord.

Solomon doesn’t stop there for he goes on to give us some proverbs. The first one is in Ecclesiastes 6:7 which says *[7] All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.* From this I came up with when the things desired under the sun, replace or rival the God who not only is above the sun but who made the sun and everything under the sun, then dissatisfaction is guaranteed, but Solomon went more to the crux of the matter. Here, if you live to eat in order to put things into your mouth being the reason you live as you think it will bring joy to your life, then you will find out that your appetite is never satisfied. You will eat more and more. Put whatever you want in place of eating like materialism and then you will want to hoard more and more.

The second proverb is in Ecclesiastes 6:8a which says *[8a] For what advantage has the wise man over the fool?* A man who requires wisdom under the sun has no advantage over the fool because the fool says there is no God, but the wise man who lives under the sun lives as if there is no God. This is what we call operational atheism. Have you ever taken an inventory of your life and then helped others make an inventory of their life? One says ‘I believe in the Lord’ but what difference does that make Monday through Saturday or even on Sunday except for maybe an hour? If you want to know what people really believe look at their calendar, their money and what they do with their abilities and the good things that God has given to them. Many will have a confessional theism but they have an operational atheism.

Then he goes to a third proverb in Ecclesiastes 6:8b which says, *[8b] And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?* So what advantage does the poor man have over the fool? What about the poor man in contrast to the rich man? The

poor man who knows how to live among the living is much better off than the rich man who is looking to his riches for his satisfaction in life.

The fourth proverb is in Ecclesiastes 6:9 which says [9] *Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.* In other words, once you let the lust of the flesh become the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life then the appetite for what you have seen and want to consume will never satisfy. We don't have to go any further than the Garden. Genesis 3:6 says [6] *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (the lust of the flesh), and that it was a delight to the eyes (the lust of the eyes), and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (the boastful pride of life), she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.* Dissatisfaction absolutely guaranteed.

The life that is lived for the things under the sun in the place of the One who made the sun and everything under it, is a life that is guaranteed to bring disaster and distraction in all of life. But the preacher/writer of Ecclesiastes cannot help but get to a life takeaway which is where he goes with the last paragraph of Ecclesiastes 6. We'll start by looking at the first verse of that last paragraph.

Ecclesiastes 6:10 says [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.*

In your mind circle the concept of name as it is referred to in verse 10. In our church, at baptism why do I say 'Father name your child'? We think of name as a way to get someone's attention or identify it. That is not the Hebrew cosmology of naming. In the Old Testament to name something meant three things. One is that when you name something you have authority over it. That's why in the history of Christian marriage when a woman leaves her father and mother she leaves her family name and takes her husband's name as his completer. When God gives you children no one has the right to name your child, but you. You are in authority over the child and you are called to name your child.

I love my wife's name – Cindy Lou. I love to say 'I love you Lou.' I remember asking her parents why they named her Cindy Lou. I was expecting some glorious thought through process but that's not what they gave me. Cindy was born in Charlotte and if you had the first child in the first of the New Year there were a lot of prizes given. Her mother was certain she was going to get those prizes and I think she drank about three quarts of castor oil thinking that would bring the child on the first day of the year. She missed it because Cindy came on January 2 but her mother was also convinced that she was going to have a boy. When it was time for her birth the nurse said to her mother 'You have a beautiful girl!' Her mother said 'Oh, really?' The nurse said 'What are you going to name it?' Her mother said 'I don't know, I haven't thought of a girl's name.' She saw the nurse's name was Cindy and said 'Cindy sounds good.' 'Use Cynthia since that's my real name.' 'Ok.' 'You want a middle name, use 'Lou' like the song 'skip to my Lou my darling.'" I don't know about you but that whole story has a special place in my heart.

I remember the discussion my parents had when they were telling me what they were going to call me. Names are something we attach to people but the reality is that a name is highly important for you have the authority to do it and secondly, when you name something you are defining it. Adam was called to rule over the creation and 'name' the animals, looking for a suitable helper. As he named them none fit the definition. The God said it was time for some anesthesia. Then God took from Adam's side, the woman and made her. Genesis 2:22–23 says [22] *And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought*

her to the man. [23] Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Then Adam named her.

Adam’s name was man and in the Hebrew it is *Ish* and then he named her *Ishah* which is woman, a reflection of man, completer of man. He not only affirmed his authority, he defined who she was. When he named the animals none fit that definition of her, for which he would be able to rule over the creation, subdue the earth and be fruitful and multiply. But she was perfect. She was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

Thirdly, when you name you declare ownership and responsibility. So let’s look at verse 10 again, Ecclesiastes 6:10 says [10] *Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is* (because he has been named, defined and there is someone who owns him), *and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.* The someone who owns him is the someone who had already named him. That someone cannot be defeated with a challenge. Man has been named and cannot dispute by definition the one who has named him. So who is the one that knows the one who has already been named? Who is the one who knows who man is? Who is the one when man challenges, cannot defeat him? It is but the sovereign God of glory. That God is the One who gives us life and a life of joy in Him. Let’s finish the paragraph.

Ecclesiastes 6:11–12 says [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?* Do you think you can defeat God just by using more words, multiplying your vocabulary or increasing its level? No, He is above you. He is stronger than you. You are a reflection of Him but you aren’t Him and nothing that you have rivals Him.

See how Solomon uses these rhetorical questions. Who is it that names man? Who is stronger than man? Who is it that knows man before man ever is? Who is it that knows the days that are given to the man? Who is it that is so powerful that man’s inevitable challenges against him is always defeat? He will never win that battle against that sovereign God. Who is it and what is it that you have that is stronger than Him? This God is the One who knows what is good.

So can the food converse with you? Can the food redeem you? The thing you live for in the place of God? Can it do what God alone can do? The answer is no. Who is it that knows what is going to happen to man after his pilgrimage under the sun? Will the things that we crave with our appetites be able to tell us about eternity or is the only One who has eternity in His hands the God who names us, who knows us, who gives us good things that will be good things as long as we don’t put those things in place of Him? He is the God who has the power to give us joy. That is the God who has the gift of eternal life, after the voyage, under the sun.

Do you hear Jesus? Jesus says in John 17:3, [3] *And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* When you do know Him you have the power of the Spirit who gives you the joy of a life that glorifies God and enjoys Him forever. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Take these few moments in silent prayer as you think about these insights from this particular installment of the preacher’s journey of repentance, back to the wisdom of the fear of the Lord, the reverence of the Lord and the trust in the Lord. Let it speak to your heart. Jesus, we love You. We thank You that we are Yours and You are ours. We love to speak with You and we even love to debate for the purpose of understanding You, but we rejoice that we rest in You. We rejoice that You are the One who made us, named us, saved us and then gave us a new name

in glory. Now we can live our life under the sun and for the One who sent His Son to save us. Whether we eat or drink or whatsoever we do, so let all that I am and all that I have worship You. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.