

The Godless Search for Satisfaction

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 6:1-9 | Pastor Brett Toney | November 16, 2025

Descent Into the Fog

On June 12, 2008, I drove to Duluth with some friends. It was a nice, mostly clear day. But as we crested the final hill on I-35 that overlooks the city, we could see a dense fog covering the harbor. As we drove down to Canal Park, across the lift bridge, and out to Park Point, the fog progressively got thicker and thicker. When we got out of the car, it was like we were walking around in a soup. The damp air chilled to the bone. What had been a cheery day had become an eerie one. That's the imagery that has been lingering in my mind these recent months, having a kind of dread in coming to this passage. We've made our descent into the *hebel*, the vapor, through the first half of the book. And here at the bottom of the pit, the fog settles thickest. Solomon's use of the word "vanity" lessens as we move forward. His phrase, "striving after the wind," or "shepherding the wind"—he doesn't use it at all in the second half of the book. We will slowly make our way out of the valley. But here we are, at the bottom, where *hebel* settles thickest.

It feels insulting for Solomon to compare the inability of enjoying wealth with a stillborn child. My wife and I have not walked through that valley—we haven't experienced the pain of a miscarriage nor the sorrows of infertility, longing but never having. I can imagine how soul-wrenching such suffering could be. And it feels so trivial, like such vanity, to compare *that* with not enjoying your second vacation home. But I think if we descend into the valley, we will see that Solomon is showing us there *is* actually something far worse in the godless search for satisfaction.

The Godless Search (Eccl 6:1-3)

We begin our way down in the vapor looking at this person described in v.1-3. By the providence of God, this man has all that he desires, v.2. Likewise, the description of v.3 is that of pinnacle worldly blessing for an Israelite: scores of children and long life. This guy has it all. He's living the good life, the envy of his neighbors. *But*—one thing is missing. Verse 2, “God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them,” or similarly in v.3, “his soul is not satisfied with life's good things.” Maybe you're like me in reading that and thinking, “Really? *That's* this guy's problem? He just doesn't enjoy his big house that's all paid off and his ritzy vacations and his swanky cars? *That* is what Solomon describes as, ‘An evil ... under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind ... this is vanity; it is a grievous evil’?” Anyone else want to tell Solomon about child trafficking, global crime syndicates, sex slavery, and genocide?

I'm pretty sure he knows about such things. So, what are we missing? Why is the state of this guy such a heavy thing, a “grievous evil”? We're helped by comparing this man to the wise, grateful path Solomon charted for us last week in 5:18-20. Recall there how wealth corrupts and does not satisfy, and the beautiful way forward is “to eat and drink and find enjoyment” because *God* has given all things, even our ability to be content with what he has given and our enjoyment of it. We are to have a God-centered, glad-hearted, gratitude-induced reception of every good thing. There is a God-centeredness, a God-saturated-ness in the way of wisdom. Not so with this man in chapter 6. He has only gifts, no God, no grace. The godless search and search, but they find no satisfaction. They can have the “American Dream.” They can have the perfect social feed. They can have the good life. But if God is not in it, it is vapor. It is a grievous evil.

I think this is underscored by two more descriptions of this man. Or is it a description of you? Solomon says “a stranger enjoys” the man’s wealth instead, v.2, and that he lives long but “has no burial,” v.3. The stranger enjoys them because this man dies. It’s not just that some dude is borrowing his awesome boat. The man had no enjoyment and dies nonetheless, leaving all behind for someone else. The lack of burial could be an indication that this man had no satisfaction in life or death, and none lamented his passing. But one scholar suggests having “no burial” is a reference to his prolonged life—he isn’t buried because he doesn’t die.¹ This aligns with v.6, “Even though he should live a thousand years twice over.” But what will nevertheless happen? Again v.6, “Do not all go to the one place?” He will die. He may have all that someone may want, but he too will die and face the Maker.

You won’t be happy apart from God. There are many good things, but they are not God. And your godless search for satisfaction will leave you empty, and one day dead. You may profess faith and sing “In Christ Alone,” but are you actually just clamoring for the next fix, the next purchase, the next stage of life? Kids, this is something I want you to hear. Everyone is starting to gear up for Christmas. Who remembers every gift you got for Christmas last year? Really though—*every* gift. Do you still play with or use all of them? If you’re honest, you’ll agree the answer is, “No.” So, as move into the holidays, don’t go through ads and lists that lead to coveting. They are preaching to you a false gospel that *stuff* will make you happy. It won’t. It can’t. Such is the godless search for satisfaction.

The Better Life (Eccl 6:3-6)

So, what’s the alternative? What’s the better life, Solomon? And this is where things get real hard. This is a bitter statement in v.3, “I say that a stillborn child is better off.” That’s the better life: v.4-5, to come in vanity and go in darkness, and in darkness one’s name is covered; to

never see the sun or know anything. Solomon, what are you saying? How can the death of a pre-born child be better than the long life of the wealthy? This is a vexing statement. It is similar to what he wrote in 4:2-3 about the dead being more fortunate than the living and “better than both is he who has not yet been.” How can this statement be good, let alone “better”? This is heinous—worse than drowning puppies.

Friends, Solomon says at the end of the book that his deliberate, crafted, wise words are like goads (12:11), like the sharp stick of a shepherd to guide a flock. This is provocative and upsetting. But is it not better to be unnerved and distraught by this statement than to be led astray by wealth and comfort and into God’s eternal judgment? Do you see the contrast Solomon makes between these two? You have the man who has everything and lives seemingly forever, and you have this child whose life is vapor, never seeing the light of day. Yet this child finds rest rather than he, v.5. “All go to the one place”—the grave. But only one of these two finds rest for his soul from all the toil in the futility of this cursed world. When you put the two on the scales of eternity, which is better? Live in this world with all you desire only to perish apart from God ... or, never take a breath, never named, never know anything, but have real, everlasting rest from toil? The Apostle John was given a similar vision of these two options. He writes in Revelation 14 of those who go after the way of the world, not honoring Christ,

The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have *no rest*, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image ... Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus ... “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” (Revelation 14:11-13).

O, Friend, may these words provoke you to turn from all that allures you in this world. May you believe in the resurrection Christ guarantees such that you trust that even the most painful circumstances of this life will be made new.

The Satisfaction of the Soul (Eccl 6:7-9)

And may you find the satisfaction of the soul. Look with me at v.7-9. Solomon is stepping back from his comparison of the godless and the stillborn to draw out three principles: Toil won't satisfy. Status is insufficient. Contentment is key. Verse 7, in the end, all of your toil is so that you can eat. That is the basic necessity of life, and that is what we work for. But your "appetite is not satisfied." Always eating, but never full. Yet Solomon is saying more. "Appetite" translates the word for "soul." "Yet his *soul* is not satisfied." There is more at play than toiling for our mouths or bellies. Like the man in v.1-3, we toil trying to satisfy our *souls*. But toil won't satisfy. It can't. You can't ever work *enough* to get out from under the sun, to earn the gift of a God-centered life, to evade the one place all will go. Add to this the second principle, found in v.8. What advantage does the wise man gain or the honorable-but-poor man? Status is insufficient. The solution to make it through the fog is not just to be wiser. It's not to conduct yourself more uprightly with what you have. No, your status as well will not deliver you from death and then judgment (cf. Hebrews 9:27).

The way forward is the third principle: Contentment is key. Verse 9, "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind." It is better to receive gratefully what is before you, what is set before your eyes, than that your soul, with its lusting appetites, wanders about looking always for more. Such pursuits are vanity, an effort to shepherd the wind. And this is what Solomon was aiming at in 5:18-20. Humble yourself before the Lord to receive from him. Don't go after all the world offers but fear God.

The Apostle Paul directs us to do the same in Philippians, following his example of finding contentment in all circumstances because Jesus himself is life and is received by faith as such a treasure that even death is gain (cf. Philippians 1:21, 4:13).

The Table

The godless, they search for satisfaction in the vapor only to die nevertheless. It's better to find contentment and rest with God. Apart from him, we will have no satisfaction in this life and no rest in the next. Jesus spoke a sobering warning to people like us who live among such abundance. "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23-24). "The abundance of all things" can so easily allure us away from "[serving] the LORD [our] God with joyfulness and gladness of heart" (Deuteronomy 28:47). If you are sitting here this morning because you are looking for something to satisfy your soul, because you have tried wealth, possessions, and honor and found them lacking, because you feel the futility of life with all its sorrows—hear the wisdom of Solomon. "Do not all go to the one place?" (v.6). You will die and stand before your Maker. Don't look to your riches and abundance to satisfy. But repent. Cry out to God. Confess to him you have loved and worshiped other things. And believe on Christ, that he is better than wealth and riches. Trust him, that his death and resurrection is life for all who believe. And Church, may we likewise repent and believe on him afresh as we come now to the Table.

¹ W. Hall Harris, eds. The NET Bible Notes. 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), paragraph 46230 (note 16 on Eccl 6:3)