

Ecclesiastes 6 • The Futilities of Life

Introduction

This is not going to address all the humdrum, generic shortfalls of our few years on this planet, but rather touches on the same cycle which not only every person, but every generation has had to deal with since the beginning of time. In the realm of Christian literature this is particularly interesting because every generation lauds pastors, theologians and authors whom they believe to have preached something relevant in a way never before seen, only to find that the very same wisdom was taught by many generations previous. It's just that we keep falling victim to the notion that our time is "different", no one has faced what we currently face, and "times have changed". This is the true futility of life, to engage in the deception that we are not having to learn exactly what Adam and Eve first learned, along with every generation in between.

¹There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men— ²a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. ³If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, ⁴for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. ⁵It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. ⁶Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things— do not all go to one place?"

[Read v.1-6]

Q: According to the world's standards of happiness, what are the three main objectives being addressed?

A: Wealth (v.1-2), long life (v.6) and family (v.3).

Q: What is deemed futile in this particular scenario of wealth?

A: The allusion to "a foreigner enjoys them" is an ancient description of having no bloodline heirs to receive one's inheritance or heritage. This is a scenario where worldly possessions brings neither happiness to the possessor who then passes them on to someone who is nothing to him. His wealth has failed to bring satisfaction on two fronts.

Q: How does this scenario of "a hundred children" extend the teaching even further?

A: This is a scenario at the opposite extreme of someone who although is blessed in the numbers of his family does not find satisfaction because of a failure in those relationships. Having what the previous lacked is still no guarantee of happiness.

Q: What does it mean, "he does not even have a proper burial"?

A: This appears to be an idiom which conveys the thought that there is no honor among the family members upon his death as they are fighting for his possessions. We might describe this as, "They're picking the carcass clean" to describe family members as vultures fighting for their share of an inheritance.

Q: What is deemed futile about a long life?

A: Inevitably, "all go to one place". The end result is eternity regardless of the number of mortal years experienced prior.

Q: What does the middle reference to a miscarriage have to do with this discussion?

A: It is a poetic way of saying that it would be better to have no experience of life than to have lived out these scenarios. Normally we think of anything as being better than death, but it is being argued that is not always the case.

Application: The world's ideals for happiness don't just fall short for this life, but especially for the next.

⁷All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. ⁸For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? ⁹What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.

[Read v.7-9]

Q: How has the focus of the discussion changed?

A: It has gone from the issue of wealth to the issue of wisdom.

Observation: *This section revolves around a series of three proverbs with two common keywords.*

Q: What is the meaning of the first proverb in v.7?

A: One's needs may be a real and sincere motive—"his mouth", but the lusts of the flesh drive it to the point of excess because it—"his appetite", is never satisfied.

Q: How does the second proverb in v.8 seem to exacerbate the problem?

A: Once someone gives in to their appetite, wisdom provides no advantage. The desires of the flesh are allowed to trump the conscience.

Application: *While the pursuit of wealth is certainly one of the most visible signs of a flesh-controlled life, an equally enthusiastic pursuit of **any** worldly thing is just as destructive and ultimately spiritually futile.*

Q: What is the meaning of the third proverb in v.9?

A: This is a poetic way of saying it is better to be satisfied with what has—that is, "what the eyes see" as something already in one's possession that can be seen, touched and felt, rather than to become obsessed to obtain more—"what the soul desires".

Q: What are the contrasting keywords which tie these extremes together?

A: "Satisfied" and "desires".

Application: *The world's ideals for this life's pursuits are never obtainable because instead of arriving at a level of satisfaction, they simply induce a lust for even more.*

¹⁰Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. ¹¹For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man? ¹²For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

[Read v.10-12]

Observation: *The English words in this section rendered as "man" are from the Hebrew word "adam" (Strong's #120), and at times may allude to the original person known by the proper name of the same Hebrew word "Adam".*

Q: To the ancient eyes who originally wrote and read this text, why might v.10 immediately remind them of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of man?

A: Because in Genesis 2-3 Adam was called upon to name things ("whatever exists has already been named"), and the encounter with the tree of knowledge of good and evil brought about his present spiritual state ("it is known what man is"). His encounter with the serpent shows "he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is".

Point: *An entire sermon could be derived from this summary of man's spiritual condition that there is nothing new, man is fallen, and he is unable to resist.*

Q: How is the original Adam mirrored in the life of the Preacher as explicated in Ecclesiastes?

A: Like Adam, he sought an encyclopedic mastery of knowledge (Ecc. 1:13) and even experimented firsthand in good and evil (Ecc. 1:17), only to discover his own mortality and weakness before God.

Q: What does v.11 mean?

A: It is an idiomatic expression of the useless attempt to add to man's knowledge—"many words", which cannot alter the fundamental issues.

Point: *In other words, technological innovation does not contribute to addressing the core spiritual issues each person of every generation is faced with. This is why even today, the most poverty-stricken person in the Third World has the exact, same spiritual issues as the most wealthy and technology rich Westerner.*

Q: How might v.12 again reprise the story of Adam to ancient readers?

A: The question, "who knows what is good for 'adam'" reminds of the time prior to the Fall when so much was characterized as appearing good, but turned out otherwise. And though Adam is recorded as having lived nearly a thousand years, they were still spent "like a shadow" for which no one could tell him that which would follow.

Point: *Previously many things which seemed good have been presented such as health, wealth and family, which turned out to be equally capable of being misused for the worst possible results or for no benefit at all. A lesson is being provided that what Adam experienced was not unique to him alone, but emblematic of what every person subsequently experiences.*

Application: *Every generation's journey toward self-discovery has been the very same since the very beginning. There is truly nothing new under the sun.*

Overall Application

In many respects, Ecclesiastes is a treatise addressing the issue of whether things which are not automatically evil in and of themselves have been allowed to either be misused or misapplied because of one's spiritual condition. The question of the quality of one's faith in Christ has a visible component in whether it extends to our family, finances, career and even daily navigation of life

- *Is there anything which you see as segmented or separate from your Christian walk? Something from which you exempt strict adherence to God's Word and ways?*
- *Are you the exact, same practicing "Sunday morning" Christian when it comes to family, work and all contact with the world?*
- *What is it that you desire even more of? Is this an indication of a deeper, spiritual desire, or betraying a worldly lust for something temporal? If satiated, what will you get from it—satisfaction or a lust for even more?*

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