

Ecclesiastes 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 6 Ecclesiastes chapter 6 Ecclesiastes chapter 6

Ecclesiastes chapter 6 is a brief chapter which largely continues the theme of vaporous wealth from the latter half of chapter 5.

Daniel Fredericks has remarked upon the similarity of structure between chapter 5 verses 13 to 20 and chapter 6 verses 1 to 9. Both sections begin by referring to an evil under the sun in chapter 5 verses 13 to 14 and chapter 6 verses 1 to 2 respectively.

An evil that involves the possession and then the loss of riches. Both move to speak of begetting yet of being without and they also speak of the relationship between birth and death.

Finally both raise the key question of the advantage of toil where satisfaction is not present, concluding by stressing the importance of contentment. This chapter concerns the case of a man who is granted the power to get rich yet is denied the opportunity to enjoy his wealth.

[2 : 31] Like the person who loses his great wealth suddenly and has nothing to pass on, The person who gains great wealth yet loses his life or his ability to enjoy his wealth is an instance of the temporary and vaporous character of riches.

We might again think of Jesus' parable of the rich fool who plans to build bigger barns yet loses his life before he can truly enjoy his wealth. We are not the masters of our lives, nor are we the ones who determine how long we will live.

Man proposes, as the saying goes, but God disposes. James most likely has Ecclesiastes in his mind when he writes in chapter 4 verses 13 to 16 of his epistle, Come now you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. The case discussed at the beginning of chapter 6 contrasts with the situation described in chapter 5 verses 18 to 19.

[3 : 44] 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.

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. The enjoyment of the good things of life is a gift of God, both the good things themselves and the power to enjoy them.

These gifts, however, are not universally enjoyed. For various reasons, some wealthy people lose their ability to enjoy their great riches, and their wealth falls into the hands of strangers.

The person who dies prematurely is an example of this. The person struck with serious illness, or the person who was taken from his land by exile. In another way, the person who is given over to dissatisfaction can never enjoy the good gifts of his life.

Every one of his gifts is a sign of what he does not possess, what he envies in his neighbour. Verses 3-6 may continue to refer to the same man as was the subject of verses 1-2, or perhaps it refers to another person.

[4 : 50] This person, by outward appearances, has the great blessings of long life and numerous children. However, his life is one of misery and discontentment, without enjoyment of the good gifts of life.

It ends in dishonour, as he doesn't even receive a proper burial, already being forgotten at the time of his death. Children and long years, far from being gifts to such a person, may even compound his misery.

Perhaps his children become burdens upon his meagre resources, and each further year of life is another year of bitter suffering, with ill health or social rejection, or maybe just a deep discontentment that he has fostered in his heart.

Like Job cursed the day of his birth, and considered that he would have been better off had he never been born, this man is less well off than the stillborn child, the child who had never seen or experienced the evils that occur under the sun.

In the stillborn child's greatly premature death, at least he knows some rest, while the man who lives a long life of bitter toil has an extended and unrelieved sentence of hard service.

[5 : 51] Adding years to such a man's life won't improve his lot. The emphasis given to the man's lack of burial is also in keeping with one of the preacher's consistent concerns throughout the book, of the transitory character of life seen in being forgotten.

As Fredericks observes, The man who receives no proper burial is like the stillborn infant in many respects, both pass away nameless, their bodies disposed of without much regard of their unique selfhood.

The tragedy of failing to achieve satisfaction has been a recurring theme of the book to this point. It's underlined again in verses 7-9, which recall us to chapter 5 verse 10, with which this short body of teaching on wealth began.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is vanity. The toil of the man in verse 7 is Sisyphean. He is constantly labouring to satisfy an appetite that is inordinate.

It's never satisfied. He never gets beyond the bearer's sustenance to true enjoyment. The problem here, however, is likely not the meagre products of his toil, as the unruly appetite that he possesses.

[6 : 59] This is supported by verse 9, which partly answers the question raised by verse 8. The person given to a wandering and excessive appetite will never be satisfied. However, the wise person seeks to enjoy and reasonably to improve his actual lot, whatever it may be, rather than giving himself over to the service and pursuit of unrealistic appetites and desires.

He will be less in the thrall of pursuing the vapour and seeking to shepherd the wind than the man who is given to envy, for instance. Human beings can take up arms against their lot in life, not reckoning with the strength of limiting circumstances, capacities and other factors.

But we are transitory and impermanent creatures, doomed to pass away like breath when our time comes. We can multiply our words, but the hot air will only add to the vapour.

It is far wiser to have the measure of ourselves, to know our limits and to think and to act accordingly, pursuing enjoyment within those limitations, rather than dooming ourselves to dissatisfaction by constantly chafing at them.

A question to consider, how does the modern world compound the human problem of the wandering appetite, and how might we apply the preacher's counsel to our cultural situations?

[8 : 14]

