

## **An Empty Life (7): The Emptiness of Affluence**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 5. We've found Ecclesiastes to be a very modern book in the sense of speaking to dilemmas and frustrations that strike us as very contemporary, and giving answers to those dilemmas that have a very current ring to them. This is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that Ecclesiastes forecasts these questions three thousand years ahead of our own time.

We discovered the theme of Ecclesiastes to be that "life apart from God is empty." That is, if you are not living your life for the glory of God, life is meaningless, it is empty, it is unsatisfying, it is unfulfilling, it is futile and even despairing. That is a very challenging thesis, and the author elaborates on it for us in the first eleven verses of chapter one, and then for much of the rest of the book, explores different routes that people take to try and supply meaning to life apart from an eternal saving relationship with the one, true, living God who created us. For instance, in Ecclesiastes one and two, the Preacher tells us about some who take the route of wisdom. They seek to become wise, to become learned, in both practical and theoretical things, to be reflective about this life, to study all the ends and beginnings of it, and the Preacher says that if you do that apart from God, you will end up being more despairing and life will be to you more grievous than if you were not reflective about life. Because it is not the wisdom about the fallen world that gives meaning to the fallen world; it is the fact that there is a providential God above this fallen world that supplies meaning to us in this fallen world. So, wisdom is not a way that can supply meaning and satisfaction.

Secondly, he says that since wisdom does not work, many more people try the way of pleasure. And in Ecclesiastes two, he explores some of the ways people invest themselves in pleasure to provide meaning or at least satisfaction for life. Wisdom brings grief and despair, so we'll try fun. And he says that you will find that if you take that route it will not satisfy either, because the God who made us did not make us to be satisfiable by the mere pursuit of pleasure.

He also attempts the way of work or vocation, whether it's pursuing your career and seeking to be the best in your particular field, or whether it's investing yourself in some sort of grand, social, political, governmental or moral quest. The

Preacher says no matter which way you take, that in and of itself cannot apart from God provide meaning and satisfaction.

So where do you go from there? In Ecclesiastes three, he gives his first positive message of the book. He says one of the great keys to experiencing satisfaction and meaning in life is to recognize and embrace the providence of God over everything. And that beautiful passage about there being 'a time for this and a time for that' is part of his argument for seeing life not simply from the perspective of being under the sun, or life limited by our human horizons, but seeing life under heaven, life under the merciful, loving, kind and sovereign gaze of the living God.

In chapter four there is a somber, sobering passage that looks at life and explores the injustice and oppression that continues to exist in this life in the fallen world. Why? Because the author of Ecclesiastes is wanting to point again to the fact that if you are looking for satisfaction in this life, from this life, you are going to be sorely disappointed. Satisfaction in this life cannot come from this life. It has to come from something outside this life. It must come from someone above this life. So, reminding us of the injustice and oppression that exists in our world around us, just as it existed in the days of Solomon, the Preacher is pointing to the inability of this life, apart from God, to supply meaning and satisfaction.

That leads to Ecclesiastes five, in which the Preacher once again raises the question of injustice and oppression, but now zeroes in on another route that people attempt to take in order to find meaning. If they don't find meaning in wisdom, if they don't find meaning in pleasure, if they don't find meaning in work, where are some of the other routes they go to try and find meaning? One way is affluence. And in Ecclesiastes 5, the Preacher directly addresses the escape route of affluence and shows us its emptiness.

Now let me outline the passage for you. In verses 1-7, there is a very interesting treatment of the care with which we must approach God. It's one of the passages in Ecclesiastes where the Preacher directs us how we approach God in worship. In the second section in verses 8 and 9, the Preacher puts before your eyes the common problem of the oppression of the poor. And he says not to be shocked when you see the oppression of the poor, and don't be shocked when you don't see bureaucrats doing anything about it. He says that the bureaucrats basically look after one another, they're not out there for the poor, and so he addresses the inability of government answers to that particular problem. Then, in verses 10-20, he zeroes in on the emptiness of wealth and prosperity and affluence without God, and their attendant problems. Let us hear God's holy word here in Ecclesiastes 5:

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are

doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God. If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. This also is a grievous evil--exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger. Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, as we meditate on this, Your word, teach us, make us to be wise, humble us, convict us, transform us by Your Spirit, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

**I. Engaging with God requires thoughtful, reverent preparation.**

In this passage, the Preacher tells us that a fourth escape route, used by so many to try and find satisfaction and fulfillment in this life, won't work. If wisdom won't work, and pleasure won't work, and work won't work, many others seek to find satisfaction in the results of work, in the rewards of work, in the riches that come from work, in affluence, in money, and in things. And in this passage, the Preacher says, "That won't work either." That is not the way of fulfillment and satisfaction in this life. And as we look at verses 10-20, he will tell us seven problems that attend wealth and which, in part, keep it from being able to supply us with real satisfaction. And as he does so, he will speak both to those who live without God, but also to those of us who are living life with God, but who have been blessed with great material resources. Frankly, that is most if not all of us in this room. Don't think in your mind, "OK, people who have seven digit incomes really need to be listening closely to the message today." Because we are in the wealthiest country in the history of the world, and just by virtue of the fact of where we are today, we are among the wealthiest people in the wealthiest country in the history of the world. So, no matter whether you are one of the members of this congregation who is on the lower end of the income scale, or whether you're one of the members of this congregation that is off the charts, the message about affluence that the Preacher is bringing today, this Preacher, not me, Solomon, the book of Ecclesiastes, God's word, is for you; not for somebody else, it's for you. So he's speaking to those of us who do trust in God, but who have been granted much. How will we use it. To both of those groups he speaks today.

Now, his assertions about affluence are not shocking to those who study affluence in our own culture. Recently, in *The New York Times*,<sup>1</sup> an article appeared, "In Pursuit of Affluence at a High Price." And this is what the researcher said: "The adage that money can't buy happiness may be familiar, but it is easily forgotten in a consumer society. A much more persistent and seductive message is beamed from every television screen, 'Contentment is available for the price of this car, or that computer.'" A little more getting, a little more spending.' Over the last few years, however, psychological researchers have amassed an impressive body of data suggesting that satisfaction simply is not for sale. Not only does having more things prove to be unfulfilling, but people for whom affluence is a priority in life, tend to experience an unusual degree of anxiety and depression, as well as a lower overall level of well being. Likewise, those who would like nothing more than to be famous or attractive do not fair as well, psychologically speaking, as those who primarily want to develop close relationships, be responsible, and contribute to the community. Earlier research had demonstrated that neither income or attractiveness was strongly correlated with a sense of well being, but Dr. Richard Ryan, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, and Dr. Tim Kasser, who is now assistant professor of psychology at Knox College in Illinois, have discovered that the news is even

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*, online, February 2, 1999, *In Pursuit of Affluence, at a High Price*. Alfie Kohn

worse. In three sets of studies published in leading psychology journals since 1993, with a new article expected later this year in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and still more papers on the way, the researchers sketch an increasingly bleak portrait of people who value extrinsic goals like money, fame, and beauty. Such people are not only more depressed than others, but also report more behavioral problems and physical discomfort as well as scoring lower on measures of vitality and self actualization.” Well, I could have spared the researchers a lot of work. Read Ecclesiastes 5:10-20. I think the Preacher hits all those points, doesn't he? Let's see.

## **II. Wealth, though it can be a gift from God, is an awful curse without Him and major trial even with Him.**

In this passage, the Preacher points to the emptiness of wealth and prosperity and affluence without God. In other words, he says these things without God not only come along with problems that rob them of their ability to make us temporally happy, but they cannot ultimately satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. He's saying that wealth, though it can be a gift from God, is an awful curse without God, and even for those of us who love God, it is a significant trial and test. What does he say? Well, look at verse 10. First of all, he says if you're living life without God and you're trying to find satisfaction in affluence and prosperity and things, here's problem number one. It doesn't satisfy. “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves abundance with its income.” The more we have, the more we want.

I got an email a few weeks ago from a congregation member during the earlier part of this series in Ecclesiastes and he said, “Because of the way I have been able to do in my own business, I have had the privilege of running amongst the wealthy and powerful in our culture in American for the last several years and I have noticed uniformly that people with a tremendous amount of wealth and power have a singular concern to get more.” In other words, more never satisfies whatever that more is. There is always a desire for more. It never fills up. And so, Solomon is saying well ahead of time that wealth in and of itself cannot satisfy; it will only, apart from God, breed a desire for more because it doesn't satisfy.

Secondly, look at verse 11. It says wealth, apart from God, is burdensome. There is a burden that goes along to wealth. “The more meat, the more mouths,” they used to say. The more money, the more house; the more resources, the more responsibilities. Listen to what the Preacher says, “When good things increase, those who consume them increase.” Funny how those who have much have a crowd around them waiting for the scraps that fall from their tables, and they end up with more mouths to feed.

Thirdly, Solomon says that wealth is, in fact, disquieting. Far from providing us peace and contentment and joy and satisfaction, it can actually disquiet us. Look

at verse 12. “The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich man does not now allow him to sleep.” In other words, the Preacher says the day laborer sleeps hard and well, but many a magnate goes sleepless. I was searching quotations during this week in preparation for this message, and I came across more than I can possibly share of the type that I am just about to share with you. John D. Rockefeller, after he had made his millions said, “I would give all that I have now if I could experience the contentment and satisfaction in the days when I was making \$3.00 a week.” Now, I could literally find you 50 quotations in his range of wealth just like that. Because, instead of satisfying and bring contentment, what those who experience wealth without God find is that it is disquieting; it is unsettling. It robs one of contentment.

Fourthly, if you look at verse 13, he goes on to say that wealth, especially apart from God, can be hurtful. Hear what he says. “There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun. Riches being hoarded by his owner to his own hurt.” You don't have to look at the story of Howard Hughes to appreciate how frequently this happens. People amass something; they enjoy what they have amassed, but then, insecurities come. There are insecurities about those around them—can they be trusted? Can my financial advisor be trusted? Can my children be trusted? Can my wife be trusted? Can my relatives be trusted? Can my friends be trusted? Do they like me for what I have; would they drop me if I didn't have it? Then what happens? Hoarding, paranoia, isolation, insecurity, implosion. And Solomon had seen it hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Riches can promote paranoia and isolation when they are not received under God and in relationship with Him.

Fifthly, if you look at verse 14, he points out another reason why wealth and affluence and prosperity cannot satisfy—because it perishes. Look at verse 14. “When those riches were lost through a bad investment”—and you can just stop right there, can't you? It's a reality, isn't it? Easy come; easy go. It can all be lost on one bad move, one bad investment. Riches aren't constant; they are not immutable. And there are many in this room that can testify to that. You have experienced fatness and you have experienced leanness. You've experienced great economies and you've experienced bad economies. You've been wealthy and you've had nothing, and you've gone in both directions; and some of you, more than once. Riches perish; they are not constant. Therefore, they cannot be the thing that provides constant satisfaction, contentment, and joy in this life.

Sixth, in verses 15 and 16, he points out that you can't take it with you. He's done this before, and he'll do it again in this book just to drive the point home because you see, the cultures around him didn't understand. You've heard the joke of the man who wanted to be buried in his new Cadillac. As he and his Cadillac were being lowered into the massive grave which had been dug for him, someone at the graveside said, “Now, *that's* living!” And it strikes us as crazy, but look, the ancient Egyptians believed precisely that. They buried their Pharaohs with as

much as possible because they thought, “You *can* take it with you.” And so, you took your gold and you took your chariots and you took your wives and you took your servants—you took them *with* you because the belief was that you *could* take it with you. And why is it that the author says this over and over? Precisely so that the culture around him would realize that you *cannot* take it with you.

And then seventh, in verse 17, he says that riches, wealth, prosperity, affluence, cannot provide meaning and satisfaction because in fact, they become occasions of anxiety. “Throughout his life he also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.” In other words, he says that if the heart fixes on mammon; if the heart fixes on wealth; if the heart fixes on things; instead of life being freed up to be enjoyed, it actually becomes uncomfortable. It becomes filled with fears and concerns and anxieties. For all these reasons, the Preacher says that money and things are not the solution to a meaningful life. In fact, in many cases, they are the problem because there are people who are pursuing them as if they will provide the final answer and at the end, what will you find out? You've taken a long, expensive, dead-end detour. No, affluence cannot provide meaning. Worldly wealth cannot provide satisfaction in this life.

But, for all of those who are pursuing affluence as the way that they find meaning in life, there's a word for believers too. For believers who have been given much. And we have been given much as a people. And the word is this; it's two-fold. We, as believers, must recognize that wealth, resources, money, affluence, prosperity, is a trial. And, in fact, it is in some ways a more difficult trial to endure than adversity. Listen to what these great Christians of the past have said. William Wilberforce, one of the great leaders of the Clapham Sect, those evangelicals who did so much for the social causes in Britain in the nineteenth century said, “Prosperity and luxury gradually extinguish sympathy and harden and debase the soul.” John Wesley said, “Wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion.” Charles Simeon says, “Temporal prosperity is very unfavorable for spiritual development.” Now, that's the assessment of prosperity on spiritual things. So, you not only can go to secular writers to affirm that prosperity doesn't satisfy—for instance, the Roman historian Tacitus could say, “Many amid great affluence are utterly miserable.” But, in thinking about prosperity, you realize that it is a challenge to the spiritual life. Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish philosopher said, “For a hundred that can bear adversity, there is hardly a one that can bear prosperity.” And C.H. Spurgeon says that continued worldly prosperity is a “*fiery* trial.” So the first word for those who do love God, and who have been given much is, “Recognize, if you have been given much, it is not only a blessing, but it just may be one of the biggest tests that God has given you in this life.”

Now, the second thing that this passage reminds us about is this. The way we use what God has given us, is the key to whether we will be owned by things or whether we will own the things. Do the things that we have dominate us, or do we take dominion over them? And the way that we use them is to glorify God, to

meet the needs of our families and ourselves, and to do good to Christians, to promote the gospel, to contribute to those around us in this community. Do we take dominion of our goods or, have *they* gotten hold of us? The Preacher is speaking today to those who are seeking to live life in such a way that affluence fulfills the void of the heart—it cannot. But his words are equally timely for those of us who do trust God, but who very much love the gifts of this life. Do we love the gifts and lose the giver, or do we love the giver and more than we love His gifts? That question for us here is one which is vital to us spiritually to answer correctly. May God, as we come to this table, remind us of where our true riches lie and so put the rest of our riches in proper perspective. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, make us to be rich in the things of God and in all the other richness that you give us, make us to use it to serve the ends of your glory and the good of our neighbor. We ask this in Jesus. Amen.*

## **A Guide to the Morning Service**

### **Thoughts on the Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper**

The biblical teaching on the nature of the sacraments may be epitomized as follows: God's sacraments or covenant signs/seals are “visible words” (Augustine). In them we see with our eyes the promise of God. Indeed, in the sacraments we see, smell, touch, and taste the word. In the public reading and preaching of Scripture, God addresses our mind and conscience through the hearing. In the sacraments, He uniquely addresses our mind and conscience through the other senses. In, through, and to the senses, God's promise is made tangible. A sacrament is a covenant sign and seal, which means it reminds us and assures us of a promise. That is, it points to and confirms a gracious promise of God to His people. Another way of saying it is that a sacrament is an action designed by God to sign (symbolize) and seal (ratify) a covenantal reality, accomplished by the power and grace of God, the significance of which has been communicated by the word of God, and the reality of which is received or entered into only by faith. Hence, the weakness, the frailty of human faith welcomes this gracious act of reassurance. The sacraments are by nature supplemental to and confirmatory of the promises held out in the word, and the grace conveyed by them is the same grace held out via the means of preaching. The sacraments are efficacious for the elect and the elect only, since their benefits are sanctificational and received by faith.

The consensus of Reformed teaching on the way in which Christ is present in the Lord's Supper may be summarized as follows: there is absolutely no corporeal presence of Christ whatsoever in the Lord's Supper. The believer does not corporeally partake of Christ in the Supper. Christ is not elementally, spatially, or locally present in the Supper in any way. There is no change or conversion of the elements in the Supper. The believer does indeed receive Christ in the Supper,



but not by the mouth, rather by faith. Nor does Christ's humanity come down to the believer, but by the Spirit the believer is raised in heart to receive Christ in His ascended glory.

To put it in the language of the *Westminster Confession*, the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper may be summarized as follows: (1) the outward elements of the Lord's Supper (bread and wine) sustain such an analogy to Christ crucified that they may truly, but only sacramentally, be called by the name of the things they represent, that is, the body and blood of Christ; nevertheless in their substance and nature they are truly and only bread and wine (see *Westminster Confession* 29.5). (2) Worthy recipients who outwardly partake of the visible elements of Lord Supper also inwardly by faith, really and truly, though not carnally and corporeally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified and all benefits of His death. (3) The body and blood of Christ are not in any way corporeally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; nevertheless Christ crucified is really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers, in the Supper, just as the elements themselves are to their outward senses (see *Westminster Confession* 29.7). (4) The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacrament rightly used, is not conferred by any power in the elements or ritual. (5) The efficacy of the sacrament is utterly dependent upon the work of the Spirit, in accordance with the word of covenant promise (and hence the necessity of the word of institution, which contains both the dominical precept authorizing itself and a covenant promise of benefit to worthy receivers) (see *Westminster Confession* 27.3).

### **The Lord's Supper**

There being no unambiguous testimony or direction in the Scripture as to the frequency of the observance of communion, we follow the old Southern Presbyterian practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper (what some churches call "the Eucharist" or "Holy Communion") four times a year.

### **The Apostles' Creed**

Since the Lord's Supper is for professing believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who have "discerned the body of the Lord" – that is, the Church – (1 Corinthians 11:29), it is appropriate that we confess our faith together before we take it.

### **The Ten Commandments**

By reciting the Law directly adjacent to the Gospel ordinance of the Lord's Supper we are reminded of our need for the forgiveness of sins and the rich provision we have in Jesus Christ's perfect obedience (see Romans 5:20).

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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