

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 11

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Starting, in chapter 5 verse 18, through 6:9, I want to make five points: enjoyment, wealth and honor, children and longevity, desire, and, finally, frustration.

I. Enjoyment

First, enjoyment. In chapter 5, verse 18 we read: behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting. Fitting here means beautiful, and refers back to God's plan where he makes everything beautiful in its time. What we have here is not only good, echoing the goodness of creation, but fitting or beautiful. And that is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun.

We have seen this before, but this is a fuller statement. God, who is rarely mentioned in Ecclesiastes, is mentioned four times in these three verses. The good life is a God-centered life. And a God-centered life is one which fully embraces creation. The fear and love of God the Creator means, not the denial of creation, but its full orbbed embrace. To live in God, is to live wholly as embodied creatures who, as Paul puts it, eat and drink to the glory of God.

Notice the note on joy, or enjoyment. And to find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils. Toil which is grievous and vaporous, which gives you no leverage over the basic realities of life, is, nonetheless, something to be enjoyed. And this is one of the central paradoxes of Ecclesiastes. It is precisely in this embrace of creaturely impotence and limitations that joy is found. Notice this enjoyment is to be found "in the few days of his life that God has given him." The vapor always remains. The waterslide into oblivion never closes for repairs. Yet, the mist that is our life, the few days, the passing shadow, is here seen as a gift from God.

This is the crucial link here: gift and enjoyment. When we forget that life, with all its hardships, and all its vanity, is yet a gift from the hand of God, we lose our ability to enjoy it. Our expectations are often deeply skewed here. We expect more from life, more from other people, more from our job, than can be delivered, so we end up drained and frustrated. If every day, and every simple thing in every day, is seen as pure grace, undeserved gift, we can find this good and

fitting enjoyment. And this, the text says at the end of v.18, is our lot. It is something God apportions out to us in His sovereign Fatherly goodness.

This gift of God is seen in its two-fold dimension in v.19: Everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them. Notice God gives two things here. The stuff, wealth and possessions, which for all their danger and all Solomon has said about that, are never evil in themselves. In fact, they are good, IF they come with the second aspect of the gift highlighted here. The power to enjoy them. God gives the stuff AND he gives the power to enjoy the stuff. Enjoyment doesn't come automatically with the goods; it comes, like the goods themselves, from the hand of God. This gift of God here leads one not only to enjoy wealth and possessions, but to accept his lot. This person not only enjoys their stuff, and accepts their lot, they rejoice, they don't merely tolerate, they rejoice in their toil.

All of this, the end of v.19 says, is the gift of God. Nothing in all of creation can satisfy without this grace. With it, we are wholly in the arms of God, and fully in the world. Verse 20 says that this person will not much remember the days of his life. The point here is that he will not allow Solomon's realism, his grim but true descriptions of life, to lead him to despair. He won't deny them, but he won't brood and grasp and kick against the goads of reality.

There are two extremes to be avoided here: one is the person who never considers his days, their vaporous quality, the futility of life, the inevitability of death, the lack of leverage they have over life. It is good to remember these things. The whole book of Ecclesiastes is designed to FORCE us to remember them.

The other extreme is to wrongly embrace Solomon's faithful, wise observations and be led to morbidity and despair. Too much reflection on death is not healthy. Notice Solomon avoids both extremes. He says this person will not MUCH remember his days. He WILL remember, but not all the time. And the reason is that is given and the end of v.20: God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart. This is the sober joy, the realistic joy, at which this whole book is aiming. This means joy is a kind of holy distraction from the brutality of life. A distraction which God himself provides.

II. Wealth and Honor

Our second point, and it is starkly different in tenor, is wealth and honor. Chapter 6, verse 1: There is an evil that I have seen under the sun. He just said he has seen what is good and fitting, now he sees an evil, one that, because of the curse, lies heavy on mankind. You can see it in v.2: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor – note this man has stuff, plus honor: social standing and respect. The text continues: he lacks nothing of all that he desires,

yet God does NOT give him the power to enjoy them. We are not told why God doesn't give this power to enjoy, but because it is an evil which lies heavy on mankind, it is the natural state of affairs in a fallen world.

Here we move out of the realm of the two-fold gift. Here the gift is single. This man has the goods – and honor, but not the power to enjoy them. If life is like a box of chocolates, this man has the box but can't get it open. He has a can of peaches and no can opener.

His point is simple. No grace, no enjoyment. You can't eat the picture on the outside of the can. You can't tell a book by its cover and you can't tell a man's joy from his outward estate. Ety Hillesum, whose prayer I read, had joy in a Nazi concentration camp; this man has none in his gated community.

How much time we waste envying miserable, trapped rich people! This man apparently also has no heir, for his goods end up passing to a stranger. This, Solomon says is vanity and a grievous evil. Creation and its goods can only tantalize and toy with us, unless we have both aspects of God's gift: the goods and the power to enjoy them.

III. Children and Longevity

Our third point is children and longevity. Verse 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. We are covering all the goods in the Hebrew worldview. Wealth and honor, and here children and long-life. This is why this text is an important reminder. The very best things, biblical things, things the secularist even esteems, have no power in themselves to bring joy.

This man's soul is not satisfied with life's good things. Even with a hundred children, Solomon is exaggerating for effect, even with a hundred children, and a very long life, if can't see the purpose in life, he won't find joy in its goods. He ends up with no burial. He's not lamented by his children, and he's not remembered. If this is the case for such a man, Solomon says, at the end of v.3, that a stillborn child is better off than he. You can see the importance of joy as the gift of God to the Preacher. There is an depth of feeling here which is strange to us. We'd say, "well he lived a long life and had many good things and many children" that's about as good as it gets. Solomon wants to know if he had JOY! And if, not, it would be better to be stillborn.

The stillborn child comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. The plight of the stillborn is not glamorized. He comes in vapor and immediately descends into the darkness of death. Moreover, in v.5, it has not seen the sun or known anything. It has not lived, it has not had to face the vapor

and the brutality of life, and then have the darkness accentuated by having a lot of goods without the gift of enjoyment.

Solomon is NOT being hyperbolic here. He really thinks the stillborn is better off. Jesus said that Judas was better off not being born, and apparently he's not the only one. Because the human person is created for God, he is created for joy. Solomon says to live without joy so effaces the human person, he'd be better off stillborn. At the end of v.5 the stillborn finds rest, rather than the man with children and longevity. Rest is coupled with joy right from the beginning. God rests on the Sabbath and delights in his work and we are to imitate that pattern. This man, tragically, has neither rest nor joy. Solomon ups the ante in v.6: Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good – here his thought breaks off and he says: do not all go to one place?

If the destination is the same, why pile up two-thousand years of frustration on the way? One guy drives his car over the cliff; the other guy drives around in circles and then drives his car over the cliff. What difference does it make? Life is not an absolute good. Only God is an absolute good. Life is a contingent good and its purpose is holy enjoyment. Aborting this purpose is a tragedy. Solomon is saying: better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout a long and prosperous life. And the judgment Day will surely look with more mercy on the stillborn, than on those with goods and children and longevity who knew not the gift of God's joy. And that Day will vindicate Solomon's wisdom here.

IV. Desire

Our fourth point is desire. v.7: All the toil of man is for his mouth. The grave to which all men go is never satisfied and neither is man's mouth. He works to eat, and eats to work some more, and then does it over and over again. The biology is undeniable, yet, the text says, his appetite, or his soul, is not satisfied. Same issue: no gift, no satisfaction. And it's in this context that Solomon asks some of his favorite questions next.

Verse 8: What advantage has the wise man over the fool? On the question of joy, he has none, for it lies in the gift of God. Even a poor man who knows how to conduct himself before the living has no advantage. He orders his life with some wisdom, but what good is that if wisdom itself comes with vexation and sorrow as Solomon has said?

Verse 9 is an explicit statement on the nature of desire. Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite. The sight of the eyes here probably refers to seeing life aright. It implies a sort of contentment that sees the nature of the world, that everything is vapor and striving after wind, and refuses to follow one's wandering desires. Human desire is a fundamental problem in the fallen world. Here Solomon commends restraint and contentment.

V. Frustration

Finally, our last point is frustration. Verse 10: whatever has come to be has already been named. This is the same thing we saw in chapter 1. History repeats itself. God is the one who names, and thus defines, all that comes to be. And chiefly here we are concerned with man. And it is known what man is. The nature of man in a fallen world is known, he is already named or defined even before he comes to be. The nature of man and the nature of the curse, the grievous business God has laid on the sons of men, is not something we can do anything about. Solomon continues, at the end of v.10, he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.

This is a reference to God. Man cannot dispute with God about himself or about the nature of the world, and this is a key to wisdom and eventually joy. Our arms are too short to box with God. Talk about it all you want. Whine about it, mope and brood and grasp and twist and turn for leverage, it won't do you any good. As v.11 puts it: the more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? In v.12 Solomon seems to contradict himself. He says: who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes as a shadow? But back in chapter 5, verse 18, he said he saw what was good and fitting. The difference is that we've seen in between the opening and closing of this text.

The gift of God brings joy, the absence of the gift of enjoyment, even in the face of other magnificent gifts from God, means it's better to be stillborn. Without this two-fold gift, who knows what is good for man in his shadowy, insubstantial life? Who can tell what will be after him under the sun? What we have here is no repeal of the vapor or the brutality of life for believers. But we do have two different ways to live here. One by the two-fold gift of God and the other by receiving the goods God gives without receiving the ability to enjoy them. Here we must put matters bluntly. Life in this world is designed to frustrate men who will not fear God. Wealth and honor, children and longevity, desire itself, all become enemies in a twisted and bent world.

Conclusion:

The atheist Ludwig Feuerbach, said man is what he eats. He thought he was attacking the faith with his view. It's the view of v.7: all the toil of a man is for his mouth and his soul is not satisfied. Though Feuerbach would not care about satisfying one's soul. Man is just an eating animal. What Feuerbach didn't know is that we can basically agree with him. How we eat and what we eat ARE decisive for who we are. The sin in the Garden of Eden, as I've pointed out, is a food violation. The primal sin had to do with desire. The fall of man sprung from

desiring the creation and not the creator. But the gift of God reverses all this. As one theologian put it in response to Feuerbach:

Man is indeed what he eats, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table for man. And this image of the banquet remains, throughout the whole Bible, the central image of life. It is the image of life at its creation, and also the image of life at its fulfillment....that you eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.

Man's primal hunger is for God. That God who has become our life in Jesus Christ. He gives us his flesh and blood to eat and promises to raise us on the last day. And when man orders his loves aright, it means he eats aright, and he eats and drinks and works with joy. As Augustine put it: use and enjoy the things of the world, but LOVE God. Amen.

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