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The Bitterness of Disappointment Ecclesiastes 5:13 to 6:12

The bitterness of disappointment DIG: What is the grievous evil of 5:13-15? Of 5:16-17? How do “wealth hoarded” and “wealth lost” (5:13-14) fit into this observation? What is the evil in 6:1-2 and 3-6? What belief influences the Teacher’s conclusions in 6:6b?

REFLECT: What priority does the pursuit of wealth and work have in your life? Is this necessary? What are you expecting your life’s work will give you in the end? How much joy do you experience in your toil under the sun? What would help you enjoy work more?



For the past chapter-and-a-half of **Ecclesiastes** we have been more concerned with living sensibly in the world as we find it - and this included the world of our religious obligations - than with wondering whether we are getting anywhere. The question has been reflected twice in the comment: **This too is pointless (4:14 and 5:10)**; now it is again the center of attention as **Solomon** names some of the bitter anomalies of life. **He** will end **Chapter 6**, and with it the first half of **his** book, by pressing the question **he** had earlier seemed to answer: **Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?**

The crash (5:13-17): I have seen a grievous evil under the sun, cutting God out of the picture: **wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners, or wealth lost through some**

misfortune, so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit. Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. This too is a grievous evil: As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind? All their days they eat in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

A miniature case-history now brings us face to face with frustration - for **Solomon** prefers to show us samples from life rather than abstractions. Here, then, is **a man** who loses **all his money** in one-fell-swoop, leaving **his** family destitute. It might have made sense if **he** had made a bad business deal or gambling. However, in fact **he** worked very hard for **his** money, but now, as it turned out, it has ruined **his** life twice over . . . once for the getting and once for the losing. And if this case is an extreme one, we all will face something like it. For **everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. Solomon's** own life was not as dramatic as **the man** in this example. **The Teacher** was merely pointing out what happens, not what ought to happen, in a fallen world. **A grievous evil** is perhaps the nearest expression for it. That is how **he** introduced the topic in **verse 13**, and **he** repeats it in **verse 16. This too is a grievous evil: As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind?**²⁸⁷

A more excellent way (5:18-20): This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them - for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil - this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with joy in his heart.

The next three verses turn away from that which provides no meaning, wealth, to that which at least dulls the pain. These verses express a similar sentiment to what we have already encountered in **2:24-26**, **3:12-14** and **3:22**, and what we will find in **8:15** and **9:7-10**. As there, we do not have a statement of almost boundless optimism, but of resignation to the limited best that life can offer. That is, in the light of the absence of a meaningful life **under the sun**, **Solomon** advocates a life pursuing small pleasures afforded by **food, drink, and work**. But not everyone can **enjoy** their reward in this life. One can feel **his** envy as **he** describes those to whom **God** has given **riches** and the ability to **enjoy** them. They are the ones, unlike **himself** as **the** speech continually testifies, who are able to take **his** advice and

enjoy life now.²⁸⁸

The tease (6:1-6): I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on mankind. God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that his heart (literally: soul) lacks nothing at all, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is pointless, a grievous evil. A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man - even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

Once again, **Solomon** supports **his** case that there is no ultimate meaning in **wealth**. **He** knows this, so in reality, it's **pointless**. **He** has consistently maintained that pleasure is all there is during one's earthly existence **under the sun**, so **enjoy** it now, if you can. So **he** describes the situation to follow as **evil**. There are some people who have it all - money, material blessings, and power - who cannot **enjoy** it. **The Teacher** blames **God** for this. After all, most **people** don't even have wealth and power, and **they** live on the fantasy that having it would result in satisfaction. Supposedly a divine tease! **Ha'Shem** not only prohibits **the rich** from enjoying their wealth but also adds further insult because **strangers enjoy** the fruits of their labor **instead**. Thus, **Solomon** pronounces this predicament as **pointless**.

Next, **the Teacher** leaves the issue of **wealth** and takes up a similar issue with **children** and **long life**. **He** takes exception to the common biblical teaching that rejoices in large numbers of children (**Psalm 127** and **Proverbs 3:2**). **He** finds it more than conceivable that a person may be blessed with abundant **offspring** and a **long life** but could still be utterly miserable. So unhappy, indeed, that a **stillborn baby's** fate is much preferred to the life of one to whom **God** has given **riches**, long life and many **children**, but not the ability to **enjoy** it all. According to **Solomon**, both **the stillborn's** fate and that of those who are not permitted to **enjoy** life are horrid. The advantage, however, goes to **the stillborn** because **he** lacks consciousness, and as a result, never experiences the hardships and misery of the present life **under the sun**.²⁸⁹

All this is extremely damaging to any rose picture of the world. **Solomon** is very far from giving that **man** rights which **God** ignores; it is rather that **man** has needs which **God** exposes. Some of these, as we have seen, are the kind that the world **under the sun** cannot

begin to meet, since **God has given human beings an awareness of eternity (3:11)**; others, more limited, are of a kind that the world can satisfy for a little while, but none with any certainty or depth. If this is a hardship that **weighs heavily on mankind (6:1)**, it is also a useful thing. The world itself is made to say to us: **Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond all remedy (Micah 2:10 NIV)**. But we are, for the moment, not encouraged to glean any wisdom from **it**, for in **itself**, the human rat race (**to see link click [Cl - The Rat Race](#)**) makes no sense at all. So the chapter will wind its way down to a depressing and uncertain finish, well suited to the state of man on his own.

Unanswered questions (6:7-12): The purpose of all toil is to fill the mouth, yet the appetite is never satisfied. What advantage do the wise have over fools? What do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is pointless, a chasing after the wind. Whatever he is, he was named long ago, and it is known that he is merely human; moreover, he cannot defeat what is mightier than he [death]. There are many things that only add to futility, so how do humans benefit from them? For who knows what is good for someone during life, during the days of his pointless life spent like a shadow? Who can tell what will happen under the sun after a person is gone (6:7-12)? The thoughts and questions of the chapter's final paragraph pick up some issues that have met us along the way, to substitute the motto of the book: **Pointless, all is pointless!**

The first of them, in **verse 7**, makes the point that is as real to the modern man in the rat race as it is to the primitive peasant scraping a bare living out of the soil: that he works to eat, for the strength to go on working to go on eating. Even if he **enjoys** his work and his food, the compulsion is still there. His mouth, not his mind, seems to be the master.

When we object that men have more in them than this, and better things to live for, **verse 8** doesn't let us pass without a challenge. **Wisdom**, for example, may be infinitely better than **foolishness**, as we saw earlier (**2:13**), but is **the wise man** better-off than **the fool**? Materially he may or may not be, though surely he deserves to be; and we have already seen that **death** will level the two of them with complete indifference (see **[Cg - Death Renders Wisdom and Folly Pointless](#)**). As for happiness, the **wise man's** clarity of vision is not all joy. **For in much wisdom is much grief; the more knowledge, the more suffering (1:18)**.

As if sensing that we may still be unconvinced, since we rate the quality of a man's life

higher than its comforts, **Solomon** asks the hard-headed question of **6:8b**. What does a poor man, however well thought of, actually get for his pains? It's a fair question. To quote a famous saying, "To arrive is, for most of us, better than to travel hopefully." That is the force of **6:9a**, and its common sense allows us no daydreams. The trouble is that to "arrive" is, in any ultimate and satisfying sense, beyond our power. Whatever we achieve **under the sun** will melt away as **foolish** as if **chasing after the wind**, whether it's the poor man's self-help or the rich man's success.

Is this defeatism or realism? In terms of life **under the sun** it is entirely realistic, as the argument of the book has already shown. Whatever brave words we say about mankind, or against his **Maker**, **verses 10** and **11** remind us that we shall not alter the way in which we and our world were made. These things are already **named** and **known**, which is another way of saying, with the rest of Scripture, that they owe their being to the command of **God**. And now this command includes the sentence passed at Adam's fall. Naturally we find this quite disturbing and want to protest. The idea of disputing with **the Almighty (6:10b-11)** fascinated **Job**, who abandoned it only after much heart-searching; and **Isaiah** earned a classic rebuke when **Ha'Shem** said: **Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a broken, discarded piece of pottery, or a potsherd, among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?" Does your work say, "He has no hands" (Isaiah 45:9)?** Yet we still find it easier to dream about the way things ought to have been rather than face the truth of what they actually are.

But this truth, to be the whole truth, must include what we are becoming and what will become of us. Part of this, that we shall **die**, we know only too well; the rest, too little. So the chapter, at this mid-point in the book, ends with a string of unanswered questions. The secular **man**, heading for **death**, and being swept along by the currents of life **under the sun** can only ask **who knows what is good . . . ? Who can tell what will happen after I am gone (6:12)?** This is a double puzzle. **He** is left with no absolute values to live for (**what is good**); and no practical certainties (**what will happen**) to plan for.²⁹⁰

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** have planned a wonderful home of eternal peace and **joy** for those who **love You**. **Behold, the dwelling of God is among men, and He shall tabernacle among them. They shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them and be their God. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:3b-4).***

***Your** home in heaven will be a place of peace, without **shame**, for all who **love** and worship*



You. For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart it is believed for righteousness, and with the mouth it is confessed for salvation. For the Scripture says: Whoever trusts in Him will not be put to shame (Romans 10:9-11).

*We do not have to know all the answers to life, but what is important is to know and to **love** you! **Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you . . . My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, (Psalms 63:3, 5).** Your love satisfies and is the answer to why we live. It is a joy to love **You** and to look forward to spending eternity with **You**. In **Yeshua's** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*