

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 8:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 8</i>
Text:	Ecclesiastes 6:1-12
Date:	Sunday, March 10, 2013

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Next Lesson:	Ecclesiastes 5:1-7



TEACHING TIP

Solomon repeats the phrase “I have seen” throughout this book. Spend some time considering how you have seen the same frustrates he writes about in order to drive them home to those in your class who have probably also seen them. In this way, we become co-witnesses of this futility, and hopefully co-witnesses of Christ’s fullness.

This lesson finishes our “exploration of the darkness” in chapters 1-6. In those chapters, **the futility of life merely lived “under the sun”** was driven home by:

- the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)
- the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)
- the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-26)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-15)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:8-20)
- the dissatisfaction of humanness (6:1-12)

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION

Do you enjoy life? Do you really enjoy living and find satisfaction from what each day brings forth? Or, do you merely live? Do you pillow your head at night with little joy from the day and little expectation for tomorrow to be any different?

More specifically, have you ever longed for a particular day to come (e.g., a birthday, Christmas day, an awards day, a vacation, etc.), only to discover after it passed that it wasn't all that you had hoped it would be? Have you ever worked hard to achieve something, only to do so and be dissatisfied with the result? Have you ever accomplished something that ended up being a bit of a let down? Have you ever earned something that expired before you were able



to enjoy it? [Consider incorporating a personal illustration or soliciting specific examples from your class.]

In a picture, that is the futility of life merely lived “under the sun.” Solomon has been exploring that in detail, finding specific illustrations for specific aspects of life’s futility. Now, in 6:1-12, Solomon concludes his quest with a summary depiction of life’s vanity. We could entitle this section “The Dissatisfaction of Being Human,” and in it the Teacher summarily and climactically echoes his recurring theme—life merely lived “under the sun” is futile. In this lesson, we will discover two manifestations of the dissatisfaction of humanness.

THE FAILURE TO ENJOY LIFE (vv. 1-9)

Solomon has witnessed another “evil...under the sun,” and it is “common among [humanity]” (v. 1). That last phrase can be translated to convey either commonality (KJV, NKJV, NASB) or oppressiveness (ESV, NIV, NET, HCSB), and both are conceivable in the context. The word “evil,” used in this way in 2:17; 5:12, 15; 10:5 refers to misfortune. Solomon depicts this misfortune in the following verses by describing a generic man.

1. ***A man may have everything (vv. 1-3a, 6a).***

To this particular man, “God hath given” much prosperity in life. Details are given in these verses.

a. He may have material prosperity (v. 2).

According to verse 2, God has given this man “riches [4:8; 5:12, 13, 18; 9:11], wealth [i.e. possessions—5:19], and honor [i.e., abundance or position and influence due to and as a part of his prosperity], so that he [lacks] nothing for his soul of all that he desires [lit. craves].”

b. He may have an enlarged family (v. 3).

According to verse 3, he (hyperbolically) “beget an hundred children.” This illustrative man has a large and presumably “wonderful” family.

c. He may have a lengthened life (vv. 3, 6).

Verse 3 further portrays him as living “many years, so that the days of his years be many.” In fact, verse 6 suggests that he has outlived Methuselah by double, having attained 2,000 years old. So, whereas people sometimes wish for a longer life or a few more days here and there, this individual receives that.

d. He may have immortality (v. 3).

Finally, verse 3 also seems to indicate that Solomon conceives this man to have (in illustration only) received immortality. The phrase “that he have no burial” is best taken literally in the context, even as Psalm 49:9 and 89:48 suggest. He has no burial, because he has never died.



Why do you think Solomon uses these four assets—material prosperity, enlarged family, lengthened life, and immortality—to summarize the apparent fullness this man enjoys? These categories have always been viewed as the possible sources of satisfaction—“if I just had more...” “if I just have a closely-knit family...” “if I could just have a few more years...” “if I could just a few years back...” “if I could just beat this disease...” etc.

Truly, then, this hypothetical individual has everything that would seem necessary for life “under the sun” (v. 1). And that is where this common and oppressive misfortune starts, for although a man may have everything, he may then discover that everything is still not enough.

2. That man learns that everything is not enough (vv. 2, 3, 6b-7).

Three times Solomon records that this man remains unsatisfied. In verse 3, he writes, “His soul [is] not filled [lit. to be satisfied, to have enough, to be full of—4:8; 5:9] with good,” and a parallel idea is stated in verse 7: “[His] appetite is not filled” (cf. 1:8; also 8:11; 11:3). Although his labor has allowed him to fill his “mouth” (i.e., synecdoche for consumption), the food has turned to ash in his mouth. He also “hath...seen [i.e., enjoy] no good” during his long, prosperous life (v. 6). So, ironically, although he has all that he could desire (v. 2), he still finds himself with unfulfilled desires.

Illustration: The *Pirates of the Caribbean* may live on our cul-de-sac and may work in our office complex. For as they pillaged and feasted and had all they wanted, yet were cursed with the inability to ever enjoy any of that, so our “under the sun” neighbors, coworkers, and family members have discovered a similar curse has befallen them, and a pleasant demeanor simply masks a dissatisfied skeleton.

The reason for this disconnect is shown in the middle of verse 2 and is regularly expressed by Solomon (2:24-26; 3:13; 5:18-19; 9:7): “Yet God giveth him not power [i.e., opportunity, ability, enablement] to eat thereof [i.e., synecdoche for “enjoy”], but a stranger [i.e., simply someone else] eateth it [i.e., the fruit of his labor].” So, since God has not given the gift of enjoyment, this prosperous man finds no satisfaction, and the result is misfortune (v. 1), “vanity and...an evil disease [or ‘severe affliction,’ NASB; evil—‘contemptible,’ ‘injurious,’ ‘unfortunate’; disease—‘suffering,’ 5:18]” (v. 2), and “vanity and vexation of spirit [lit. ‘chasing the wind’]” (v. 9). This drives Wiersbe to ask, “What good is it for me to add years to my life *if I don’t add life to my years?*”¹

3. That man is better off not born (vv. 3b-6, 8).

In light of these first two considerations, Solomon comes to a morbid conclusion (vv. 3b-5, 6b):

I say, that an untimely birth [i.e., stillborn child] is better than he [i.e., the man being described]. For [it] [i.e., the stillborn] cometh in [i.e., is born] with vanity [i.e., for no apparent reason] and departeth in darkness [i.e., death], and his name shall be covered with darkness [i.e., we don’t usually refer to it by name later or even think much about it]. Moreover [it] hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing; [yet] this [stillborn] hath more rest than the other [i.e., the man being described]....do not all go to one [i.e., the same] place?

“Rest” refers to “peace” (4:6) or calmness and comfort (Proverbs 29:9). It is freedom from toil, anxiety, frustration, misery, and disappointment. In essence, it is escape from the “vanity” of life merely lived “under the sun.” Ironically, the stillborn is born in vanity to escape vanity.

Those last two lines explain his logic:

*Both the miserly rich man who lives two thousand years, as well as the stillborn who never lived one day, both go to the same place—the grave. And if the miserly rich man never enjoyed the fruit of his labor during his life, his fate was no better than that of the stillborn who never had opportunity to enjoy any of the blessings of life. In a sense, it would have been better for the miserly rich man to have never lived than to have experienced the toil, anxiety, and misery of accumulating his wealth, but never enjoying any of the fruits of his labor.*²

Illustration: “[We’re] like the birds that [we] watch in [our] backyard. They spend all their waking hours either looking for food or escaping from enemies. These birds are not really *living*; they are only *existing*.”³

That being the case, Solomon doubts any purpose and profit in life: “For what hath the wise more than the fool? [cf. 2:14-17] What hath the poor [gained], that knoweth to walk before the living [i.e., how to survive]?” (v. 8). Solomon, after 6 chapters, has yet to solve the problem of life.⁴

Illustration: A century ago, when the United States was starting to experience prosperity and expansion, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau warned that men were devising “improved means to unimproved ends.”⁵ Thoreau was merely an echo of an earlier Teacher.

4. **Enjoyment is possible for that man (v. 9).**

Solomon ends with a “better” result, alluding back to 5:18-20. He writes, “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire” or “It is better to be content with what the eyes can see than for one’s heart always to crave more” (NET). Solomon proverbializes the common “grass is greener” syndrome.

*Verse 9 is Solomon’s version of the familiar saying, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” This proverb has been around for a long time. The Greek biographer Plutarch (46-120) wrote, “He is a fool who lets slip a bird in the hand for a bird in the bush.” Solomon is saying, “It’s better to have little and really enjoy it than to dream about much and never attain it.” Dreams have a way of becoming nightmares if we don’t come to grips with reality.*⁶

The “wandering of the desire” is undoubtedly a result of “eternity in our hearts” (3:11), but it finds only disappointment in “life under the sun” (v. 1). Solomon is pleased to merely refer back to the solution he previously espoused (5:18-20)—be content with what’s current—without any further explanation here. But, it is enough to remind us that there is a solution.



Application: What must enjoyment in life be grounded on and what does it require to flourish (cf. Job 1:21; 2:10; Luke 10:17-20; Philippians 4:4-5, 12-13; Hebrew 10:34; Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:22)? *It must be grounded on truth discovered “in the Lord”—in other words, we must find our identity in our everlasting “portion,” Jesus Christ, and in the truth that flows from that. Our joy flourishes through faith.*



Will the joy that God gives be sufficient (cf. Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 30)? *Yes!*



What do we learn about joy from John 15:11; 16:20-24; 17:13? How does that reality affect our mission? *Joy is a Christian trademark, and should make the unfulfilled man in this passage jealous and inquisitive, giving us an opportunity to introduce Christ.*

Transition: Being human brings an element of dissatisfaction. One manifestation of that is discovered in the failure to enjoy life, but that problem is not without a solution. The second manifestation of dissatisfaction in our text is the finiteness of existence. Again, however, Solomon is goading us to a very specific solution (cf. 12:11).

THE FINITENESS OF EXISTENCE (vv. 10-12)

Underlying all the frustrations witnessed and worded throughout the first 6 chapters is this great impasse. Solomon repeats the term “man” (Heb. *adam*) four times in this passage to hearken back to creation (Genesis 2:7; 3:19) and remind us that “God is in heaven, and [we are] upon earth” (5:2; cf. 12:7). That great division—infinite God and finite man—is evident in four ways.

1. *Our circumstances are fixed (v. 10a).*

Solomon first affirms that “that which hath been is named already [lit. ‘its name has already been called’].” The phrase “to call by name” speaks of creation (Isaiah 40:26) and appointment (Numbers 1:16; Ezekiel 23:23) and attests to God’s foreordination. Our created universe and our circumstances within it have been fixed by divine authority (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Psalm 139:16).

2. *Our character is frail (v. 10b).*

Secondly, Solomon states, “It is known that it is man [lit. what man is], neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he.” Man is, well, man. He was given his name, Man or Adam (Heb. *adam*), because he came from the dust (Heb. *adam*). As God is in essence divine, we are in essence dust (Psalm 103:14; Ecclesiastes 12:7).⁷



How has life amplified this reality to you (cf. 12:1-8)? *open discussion*

3. *Our contending is fruitless (v. 11).*

Any attempt to fight, thwart, or change those first two points will be decidedly useless. Solomon cites another proverb in verse 11, literally rendered, “The more words, the more vanity; what advantage is it for mankind?” (cf. 6:8). Although the KJV translates the Heb. word *d^ebarim* as “things,” the most common meaning is “words” and that fits well here, too. Humans can consider their fixed circumstances and their frail character and strive against it with reasoning, complaining, arguing, and explaining (“contending,” v. 10), but those words usually lead to further frustration (cf. 10:12-15) due to what Solomon will write in verse 12. “Man cannot escape his limitations, nor can he completely unravel the world’s anomalies (cf. 1:15[; 11:5]).”⁸

4. *Our confidence is foundationless (v. 12).*


Man’s contending is fruitless and frustrating, because his confidence is foundationless (cf. 3:11; 8:17). Solomon asks two questions in verse 12:


For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?


Solomon’s quest, in essence, has been to answer that first question (cf. 2:3, 24; 3:12, 22; 4:3, 6, 9; 5:17; 6:9). This question has to do with discovering “what will truly satisfy as a basis of life.”⁹ According to the verse, our confidence will only be strengthened if the answer provides worthwhile experiences and values (“good”), lasts a lifetime (“in this life”), is sufficient for each day (“all the days of his...life”), and lessens life’s futility (“his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow”). Is there a satisfying answer “under the sun”? No. Solomon throws out a rhetorical question that expects and receives a negative answer. No man knows.


Not only can no individual help bolster our confidence in the problem of life, but no one else can help us either. Solomon wonders if someone else “can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun” (8:7; 10:14), but he discovers no help there.¹⁰ Astrologers, numerologists, tarot cards, fortune tellers, prophets, and history books have never been able to solve the riddle of tomorrow. Thus, Kidner summarizes these unanswered questions— “[Humanity] is left with no absolute values to live for (‘what is good?’); not even any practical certainties (‘what will be?’) to plan for.”¹¹


Application: In a sentence, Kidner encapsulates our typical response to such finiteness: “We...find it easier to enlarge on the way things ought to have been than to face the truth of what they are” or how things are.¹²


 How have you been exposed to secularists who “enlarge on the way things ought to be” without “facing the truth of how things are”? *open discussion*

 What does Isaiah 45:9-12 say about such a response? *“One who argues with his Creator is in grave danger, one who is like a mere shard among the other shards on the ground! The clay should not say to the potter, ‘What in the world are you doing? Your work lacks skill!’ Danger awaits one who says to his father, ‘What in the world are you fathering?’ and to his mother, ‘What in the world are you bringing forth?’” This is what the Lord says, the Holy One of Israel, the One who formed him, concerning things to come: “How dare you question me about my children! How dare you tell me what to do with the work of my own hands! I made the earth, I created the people who live on it. It was me—my hands stretched out the sky, I give orders to all the heavenly lights. It is me” (NET).*

 What was the original cause of the frustrations of finiteness (i.e., mortality and frailty) (cf. Genesis 2:15-16; 1:31; 3:8, 16-19, 23-24)? *humanity’s sin*

 What is the ultimate answer to this problem as found in the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 42-57)? *The promise of resurrection and immortality through the work and resurrection of Christ*

 How does that message alleviate the problem of life (1 Corinthians 15:58)? *It provides hope and removes the meaninglessness (“not in vain”) of labor done “in the Lord.” Again, Jesus Christ—what He has done and our relationship to Him—is the answer to the problem of life.*

 What did God give to help us navigate our way through the problem of life until then (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29; Psalm 119:19, 105; Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)? *His Word*

CONCLUSION

In these first 6 chapters, “the Preacher is slamming every door except the door of faith.”¹³ “The British essayist and poet Joseph Addison (1672-1718) wrote, ‘The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.’ Addison probably didn’t have Christianity in mind when he wrote that, but we have all three in Jesus Christ!”¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 19.

² Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

³ Wiersbe, 19.

⁴ Kidner’s writes (Kidner, Derek, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976, pp. 59-60):

At this point we may protest that life is not by any means as black as this for most people. Normally we can take the rough with the smooth, and find our life decidedly worth living. This of course is true, and is thoroughly well founded if we are men of faith like those we met at the end of chapter five. Even if we are not, we may still live contentedly, as thousands do, and not be worried about the ultimate meaning of things.

To this, Qoheleth might reply... that if we ourselves are not concerned about meanings and values, somebody should be—and who are we to opt out of that responsibility? Once more he is inviting us to think, and in particular to think through the secularist’s position. If this life is all, and offers to some people frustration rather than fulfillment, leaving them nothing to pass on to those who depend on them; if, further, all alike are waiting their turn to be deleted (6c), then some indeed can envy the stillborn, whose turn comes first. Job and Jeremiah, at times, would have fervently agreed (Jb. 3; Je. 20:14ff.); and if we disagree with that mood of those two men, it is because we judge their lives by values that transcend death and outweigh a lifetime’s pains and pleasures—criteria that the secularist cannot logically use. All of this is damaging to any rosy picture of the world.

With that understanding in mind, then, we can understand the relativism of this world as simply being consistent with its worldview of futility and frustration. Therefore, we are also stirred to take up the gospel again and introduce true and eternal fulfillment. We shouldn’t hate the relativist; we should pity him and proclaim the gospel to him.

⁵ Wiersbe, 19.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Adam contended with one ‘stronger’ than he in an attempt to become ‘like God, knowing good and evil’ (Gen 3:5). Adam was in effect the first ‘Teacher.’ He sought an encyclopedic mastery of knowledge (cf. Eccl 1:13) and even experimented with firsthand experience in good and evil (cf. Eccl 1:17). What he discovered was his own mortality and weakness before God. That is, he discovered the real meaning of his own name.

No sage, however brilliant or daring, has substantially added to Adam’s discovery. Indeed, more exhaustive attempts at explaining the human situation only confound the facts and are of no benefit to humanity (v. 11). Adam has already shown us what we are” (Duane A. Garrett, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993], 318).

⁸ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 123. The full quote is:

“Both the world (what is) and man have settled characters.... Thus the Preacher is underlining the impossibility of changing the basic character of life. Man cannot escape his limitations, nor can he completely unravel the world’s anomalies (cf. 1:15). He may, like Job, wish to debate the matter with God, but God is altogether greater. Words cannot change the world; they may even add to its futility.”

Also, Kidner (62):

“Is this defeatism or realism? In terms of life ‘under the sun’ it is wholly realistic, as the argument of this book has already shown. Whatever brave words we may multiply about man, 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 (10), which is another way of saying, with the rest of Scripture, that they owe their being to the command of God; and this command now includes the sentence passed at Adam’s fall. Naturally, we find it hard, and want to protest.

⁹ Eaton, 123.

¹⁰ “The generality of men have no wisdom in themselves (Who knows ...?); nor can others easily be found to help (Who can tell ...?)” (Ibid.).

¹¹ Kidner, 62.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Eaton, 123.

¹⁴ Wiersbe, 19.