

ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

ECCLESIASTES 6



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Are We Having Fun Yet? Ecclesiastes 6
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Ecclesiastes 6: Introduction

Solomon knows what Rehoboam has yet to learn: A life of things, fun, and power – apart from God – can never satisfy the deep need of our soul for rest.

Ecclesiastes 6 continues the old king's attempt to persuade his son to see the folly of his chosen way of life, and to turn to God and His ways before it's too late. No matter how successful one may be in this life – wealth, children, power, living it up – you would be better off never having lived than to invest your strength only toward such fleeting objectives.

They won't satisfy, because such ends don't line up with God's good and perfect plan to find fullness of life and joy in Him.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Too Much of Nothing

Pray Psalm 4.3

But know that the LORD has set apart for Himself him who is godly;
The LORD will hear when I call to Him.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.1, 2.

Prepare.

1. Solomon here sees riches, wealth, and honor as “evil”. Why?
2. What is the “power to eat of it” mentioned here? Do you sense a double meaning in this?

Meditate.

Solomon seems to be musing autobiographically again.

He had everything he could ever want but he found, too late in life, that none of it brought him enjoyment. He had lost the “power” to see these gifts for what they really were. Now he was about to turn it all over to his son (is he implying Rehoboam is more like a “foreigner” than a son?); and who could imagine what he would do with it all?

God gives us good gifts to enjoy; however, we will only enjoy them when we see them as gifts from God, to be used for His glory, and not just as ends in themselves, to bring us the pleasure and joy only God can give (Ps. 16.11). The “power” to do this comes from God; we must seek it from Him.

Treat your things and experiences as the source and substance of your happiness, and they simply won’t deliver.

“Evil” is the first and last word in this passage. Solomon means it. It’s not just “too bad” that people don’t live unto the Lord; it’s an eternal tragedy, one that consigns them to misery here and now and unrelieved suffering hereafter. Perhaps, in this increasingly secular world, if we as believers saw the plight of our lost neighbors as “evil” holding them in its grip, we might be moved to reach out to them with the love and truth of Christ (2 Tim. 2.24-26).

Even then, though, there are no guarantees: Rehoboam observed his father’s folly and saw the disappointment it brought him; however, not this, and not his father’s pleadings, would be enough to convince him to repent.

Reflect.

1. God gives us good gifts. We only enjoy them as He intends when we understand and use them as His gifts. With that in mind, how do you understand what Solomon is saying in verse 2? What “power” did the man in these verses lack? Where might he have secured that “power”, and why should he have sought it?
2. Why is the condition Solomon describes here “evil”? What makes anything “evil”?
3. We note that Solomon says this condition of wasting the gifts of God is “common among men”. Does the fact that we see this everywhere mean that we should regard it as normative? Is truth to be determined by majorities? Explain.

Let none of us entertain the desire for possessions, for what gain is it to acquire those things which we cannot take with us? Why not rather acquire those that we can take: prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, understanding, charity, love of the poor, faith in Christ, gentleness, hospitality? Athanasius (295-373), Life of St. Anthony 17

I want to increase in godliness, Lord, so help me today to...

Pray Psalm 4.1-3.

God has set you apart for godliness. Seek Him for godliness today, and know that He will hear you when you call.

Sing Psalm 4.1-3

Psalm 4.1-3 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Answer when I call, Lord Jesus, God of all my righteousness!

Bend Your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress!

Lord, receive our prayer, release us; send Your grace to save and bless!

Wicked men reproach and scorn us, loving what is vile and vain.

God with grace will shield and adorn us through the Savior's blood and pain.

Jesus, You have bought and borne us; hear our cries for help again.

2 Better Off Never Living

Pray Psalm 4.7.

You have put gladness in my heart,
More than in the season that their grain and wine increased.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.3.

Prepare.

1. Should this man have been happy? Why or why not?
2. What did he fail to achieve?

Meditate.

This verse is a restatement of verses 1 and 2, but with the meaning stretched out a bit. It also harks back to Solomon's thought about those who are caught in oppression (4.1-3). In a sense, Solomon is saying that being oppressed and failing to satisfy your soul's deepest need are equally vain.

Here is a man who has many children and lives a long life; but, at the end of his life, not only has he not satisfied the longing of his soul, his children have all forsaken him. We can see how this idea extends the idea broached in verses 1 and 2. This man has no one to bury him, a fate sometimes seen as a consequence of divine judgment (cf. Ps. 79.1-4).

This end of life, Solomon insists, is worse than never living at all. Did this man consume his wealth on himself, leaving very little for his many children? And, at his death, did they scorn and abandon him? We don't know, and Solomon is only trying to get us thinking, not to provide all the details of this situation.

Solomon is a literary craftsman. We saw his use of *inclusio* in verses 1 and 2 – beginning and ending his thought at the same place (“evil”). Now here he completes a Hebrew parallelism, a literary device we most often (though not exclusively) associate with poetry. In this example, the first idea is stated (vv. 1, 2). Then, it is stated again (v. 3), in a different form, and with some embellishment or extension of the original idea. Parallelism provides emphasis, and helps to make an image more memorable.

Do you find it curious that Solomon believed poetry to be a powerful vehicle for conveying important ideas? These days, most of us have little use for poetry. Perhaps Solomon's use of the genre should call us to repent of our indifference to this divinely-ordained literary form?

Reflect.

1. We've seen that Solomon uses a number of father/children images to make his points. Why do you suppose he employed that image so much?
2. Stuff won't make you happy (vv. 1, 2). Neither will many children and long years of life. Why not?
3. How is the soul “satisfied with goodness”? How would Solomon answer that question?

A numerous family was a matter of fond desire and of high honor among the Hebrews; and long life is the desire of mankind in general. Even with these additions a man may not be able to enjoy his riches, family, and life. Such a man,

in his passage through life, seems to have been born for no end or use. And he who has entered on life only for one moment, to quit it the next, has a preferable lot to him who has lived long, but only to suffer. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 6.1-6*

Satisfy my soul with Your goodness, Lord, so that today I may...

Pray Psalm 4.1, 8.

These verses point to the Christian's great hope – peace now, and peace forever in the presence of the Lord. Pray for the peace of God to fill your soul with goodness, and ask Him to use you as a channel of peace today.

Sing Psalm 4.1, 8.

Psalm 4.1, 8 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Answer when I call, Lord Jesus, God of all my righteousness!

Bend Your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress!

Lord, receive our prayer, release us; send Your grace to save and bless!

Safely in Your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in Your love and care.

Rooted in Your strong and wise Word, may we know Your comfort there.

Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

3 More to Life than Living

Pray Psalm 4.3.

But know that the LORD has set apart for Himself him who is godly;
The LORD will hear when I call to Him.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.4-6.

Prepare.

1. How do you see this passage is building on verses 1-3?
2. What “rest” is Solomon thinking about here?

Meditate.

The man who doesn’t find life “under heaven” won’t find it “under the sun.”

Solomon says that a stillborn child is better off than the man he has been describing in verses 1-3. It doesn’t matter how long a man lives, or how much his life is filled with good things, if he is unable to enjoy those things as gifts from God, to be used for His glory, his life is vanity and chasing the wind.

Don’t miss Solomon’s off-hand remark about the stillborn child finding rest (v. 5) rather than the man he has been describing. My sense is that the “rest” Solomon has in mind here is that which every person’s soul most desires. Covenant children, dying in infancy, may be regarded as redeemed and saved on the basis of their parents’ faith. Both the Old and New Testaments indicate this (cf. 2 Sam. 12.15-23; 1 Cor. 7.14). It’s not clear whether or not this grace extends to all children dying in infancy.

Note here that the “stillborn child” is spoken of as though it were a fully human person, since it enjoys rest as other men do. The Latin word used here in the Vulgate version of the Bible is *abortivum*. Even the ancients knew that aborted children were human persons.

In these verses, Solomon extends his parallelism even further, now drifting farther from the original image (the unhappy man), through the lonely image, to the new and stronger image (the child at rest). The “one place” idea here is qualified by “all” and seems to refer to “all those who live under the sun” rather than the all stillborn children. In other words, all who live like this man go to death and vanity for eternity, so what difference does even 2,000 years of the good life “under the sun” avail a man?

Recall that Solomon began this section with a general focus on “men” (v. 1). The problem he observes here is systemic; it’s part of the human condition, the result of mankind’s fall into sin. Sin has effects on every aspect of human life, including our culture, social practices, institutions, and conventions. Human beings are powerless to extricate themselves from the snare of sin and the misguided, ultimately unsatisfying way of life to which sin leads. They need help from beyond, from heaven itself.

Reflect.

1. Neither time nor things nor experiences can bring people what their souls ultimately desire. Why not? But why do people continue to live as if they think these things are where happiness lies?

2. Why is “rest” a good way of thinking about the ultimate need and desire of the soul? Why can’t people find rest “under the sun”?

3. What’s the nature of the “rest” we have who live our lives “under heaven” rather than “under the sun”? How should this idea of rest fit into our presentation of the Gospel?

If a long life terminates in death with no prospect of anything else, will that life have been worthwhile? Long life without knowing God and without the power to enjoy it is indeed frustrating and useless. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), *NKJV Study Bible, Note on Ecclesiastes 6.6*

Lord, I want a full life with You! I want You to overflow from me! So help me today to...

Pray Psalm 4.6, 7.

“Gladness” is next of kin to “rest”. And the gladness God gives is better than that which comes from things. Thank the Lord for all the good things and gladness with which He fills your life.

Sing Psalm 4.6, 7.

Psalm 4.6, 7 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Wicked men may scorn and try us, casting doubt upon Your grace.

Send Your Spirit, Lord, don’t deny us till we see Your glorious face.

You Who sent Your Son to buy us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.

4 Misguided Appetites

Pray Psalm 4.1.

Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have relieved me in *my* distress;
Have mercy on me, and hear my prayer.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.7, 8.

Prepare.

1. How are the wise man and the fool alike?
2. How is the poor man better than either of them?

Meditate.

In a strictly “under the sun” world, what else is there to do but toil and eat? People consume on themselves whatever they earn, and little of lasting value is left over from their labors.

Neither are people satisfied with this, for, having eternity in their hearts, they know inherently that they are made for something more permanent. Their soul wants more than material things. If both the wise man and the fool are left dissatisfied by a materialistic life, then what difference does it make if you’re one or the other?

The poor man – assuming he knows contentment – is better off than the worldly wise or the fool. For he knows how he should walk in the land of the living (that is, “under heaven” rather than “under the sun”): not in the pursuit of things, but in the enjoyment of a contented soul (v. 8).

Solomon wants to help his son think through the folly of trying to find a satisfying life apart from God. His method of argument here is to push the “under the sun” perspective to its logical conclusion: Get and consume all you want; you know such misguided appetites won’t satisfy your soul. Such a life leaves you anxious and wanting, rather than content and at rest, like the poor man.

Since only life “under heaven” can be made to make sense, all other worldviews are false, and can be shown to be finally unworkable. Showing people this may not ensure a conversion, but it should have the effect of raising hard questions that many people “under the sun” may never have faced.

Reflect.

1. What does verse 7 suggest about how secular people see their work? Is this how God’s people should view their work? Explain.
2. What are people like whose souls are not at rest? How does the Gospel bring satisfaction to the human soul?
3. Solomon’s use of “the poor man” in these verses is meant to suggest a man who is not seeking material advantages, but who lives content with what he has, and concentrates on living as he ought. How does this counsel apply to us in our generation? What does it suggest about the priorities we ought to embrace?

Everything that human labor produces in this world is consumed by the mouth, ground by the teeth, and sent to the stomach for digestion. Even when a bite to eat delights the palate, it seems to give pleasure only for as long as it remains in the mouth, for when it passes into the belly, it can no longer be distinguished from other food. The soul of the diner is afterwards not fulfilled... Jerome (347-420), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 6.7

Lord, grant that I may work for that which satisfies my soul and enables me to...

Pray Psalm 4.8.

How will you know the peace of God throughout this day, so that you end the day in peace and rest as well?

Sing Psalm 4.8.

Psalm 4.8 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Safely in Your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in Your love and care.
Rooted in Your strong and wise Word, may we know Your comfort there.
Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

5 The Vanity of Covetousness

Pray Psalm 4.5.

Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
And put your trust in the LORD.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.9.

Prepare.

1. What's the difference between "the sight of the eyes" and "the wandering of desire"?
2. Which of these is "vanity and grasping for the wind", and why?

Meditate.

Rehoboam's problem was that he was coveting his father's fame, wealth, and power. Covetousness is, in many respects, the gateway of all other sin. Whoever allows covetousness free rein in his soul will tumble through all kinds of temptations into the snares of sin (Jms. 1.13-15).

That's why, Solomon implies, it is better to be content with what one has than to let his appetite wander to the things we wish we had (cf. 1 Tim. 6.6-10). An unbridled appetite can never be fully satisfied; it is like striving to catch the wind.

However, even though Solomon over and over counsels contentment, he knows that men "under the sun" will not be able to achieve it. Should not their lack of contentment living "under the sun" persuade them of their need for a more transcendent approach to life? And if we are diligent, as Solomon was trying to be, in pointing out the vanity of their lifestyle, might not this help them to consider something else, even life "under heaven"?

Even in confronting his son's most essential problem – covetousness – Solomon shows himself to be a model of gentleness (2 Tim. 2.24). His approach is indirect, patient, and multi-faceted. He is trying by every means at his disposal to get Rehoboam to examine his motives and aspirations, and to consider the folly of his preferred course of life. In a secular and material age, such patient, gentle love for our neighbors must be part of our effort to lead them to their senses, so that they may escape the grip of the father of lies and find their way to the truth that is in Jesus Christ.

Reflect.

1. Job talked about having made "a covenant" with his eyes, to keep from lusting (cf. Job 31.1). Do you think this is a good way to deal with all forms of covetousness? How might that work?
2. Why is covetousness a "gateway" for other sins? How can you tell when you're beginning to fall into the snares of covetousness? What should you do then?
3. The "sight of the eyes" seems to refer to being content with what we have. How can thanksgiving help us to nurture contentment?

Our lot is appointed. We have what pleases God, and let that please us. The greatest possessions and honors cannot set us above the common events of human life. Seeing that the things men pursue on earth increase vanities, what is man the better for his worldly devices? Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 6.7-12

Lord, give me contentment, and help me to guard against covetousness, so that I may...

Pray Psalm 4.6-8.

God has blessed you with many good things. Take time to acknowledge this with prayer and thanksgiving.

Sing Psalm 4.6-8.

Psalm 4.6-8 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Wicked men may scorn and try us, casting doubt upon Your grace.
Send Your Spirit, Lord, don't deny us till we see Your glorious face.
You Who sent Your Son to buy us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.

Safely in Your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in Your love and care.
Rooted in Your strong and wise Word, may we know Your comfort there.
Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

6 Strength beyond Man's Strength

Pray Psalm 4.1.

Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have relieved me in *my* distress;
Have mercy on me, and hear my prayer.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.10, 11.

Prepare.

1. How is it that things are “named already”?
2. How is increasing in vanity a form of contending with God?

Meditate.

The first part of verse 10 is better translated, “Whatever something is, it has been named already.” Everything that exists, Solomon insists, has its unique nature and purpose before it comes to be. This is because God is the Author of all existence; He alone gives things meaning and purpose, which is why everything has its proper place in the divine scheme of thing.

This includes man: man knows who he is – not an animal, but the image-bearer of God, created to know, love, and serve Him.

People also know that, in this life, it is futile to try to argue or fight with someone stronger than they – a subtle warning that there’s always a “faster draw” waiting for his opportunity for a showdown. But, beyond even that, knowing that people are made in the image of God, who can presume to stand against God’s purpose and will? Only the fool.

Notice how Solomon appeals to his son’s inherent knowledge about the world and its nature, and his own responsibility before God. He says there are many roads to vanity, but they don’t improve the human condition, or satisfy the needs of the soul (v. 11). Shouldn’t we rather look to “Him who is mightier” to guide us in making our way in life?

Solomon is not arguing with his son. He’s assuming that Rehoboam knows God, and knows that what he is saying is true. He’s hoping Rehoboam will recognize his own tendency toward folly and away from wisdom, and, like his father, make his way back “under heaven” soon.

Again, such an approach to answering the fool doesn’t guarantee he will be converted; salvation is of the Lord, not of men. Nevertheless, in order to give an unbelieving friend the best opportunity at seeing the truth, we need to know how to expose his vanities and pluck at his eternal heartstrings, hoping that something we might say, or some particular aspect of God’s truth, will strike a resonant chord in his soul.

Reflect.

1. Solomon insisted that, in God’s great redemptive design, He has a place for everything that exists. Why is this so? How should this encourage us in using everyday things and situations as part of our witness to the Lord?

2. The harder men try to make sense of things on their own, the more they increase in vanity. Why?

3. All people know God at some level, as both Solomon and Paul suggest. How should knowing this guide our attempts to explain God and His love?

Our life upon earth is to be reckoned by days. It is fleeting and uncertain, and with little in it to be fond of, or to be depended on. Let us return to God, trust in his mercy through Jesus Christ, and submit to his will. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 6.7-12

Lord, I want to submit to You in every aspect of my life. Especially today, as I think about...

Pray Psalm 4.1-5.

Every day we are tempted to trust in things other than the Lord. How will you face this temptation today? What will you do to continue trusting in the Lord? He has “named” you for holiness (v. 3). What will you do today, to continue bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1)?

Sing Psalm 4.1-5.

Psalm 4.1-5 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Answer when I call, Lord Jesus, God of all my righteousness!

Bend Your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress!

Lord, receive our prayer, release us; send Your grace to save and bless!

Wicked men reproach and scorn us, loving what is vile and vain.

God with grace will shield and adorn us through the Savior’s blood and pain.

Jesus, You have bought and borne us; hear our cries for help again.

Let your anger flare, yet sin not; meditate, be still, and rest.

Turn your heart to God, begin not trusting in your righteousness.

Praise the Savior, all from sin bought; trust in Him to save and bless.

7 Who Knows?

Pray Psalm 4.6.

There are many who say,

*“Who will show us *any* good?”*

LORD, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us.

Read Ecclesiastes 6.12.

Review Ecclesiastes 6.

Prepare.

1. How would you answer Solomon’s questions in this verse?

2. How should your answer encourage you to live today?

Meditate.

These verses make me wonder if Solomon’s periodic conversations with his son – recorded here in Ecclesiastes – were more than monologues. Did Rehoboam respond with explanations, rationalizations, justifications for his chosen way of life? Attempts to rebut his father and defend the lifestyle he and his friends had chosen to follow?

Solomon here puts these arguments to silence: no one speaking “under the sun” can say anything of any permanent meaning or significance; no one can tell another man how he ought to live. And no one speaking “under the sun” can tell us anything about what happens after we die. The most we can get are opinions and vain hopes from those who are committed to living like Rehoboam.

For such absolute and eternal meaning we need *revelation*, not *speculation*. But revelation is only available to those who are willing to receive it, those who embrace life “under heaven”. If you choose not to live that way, then, if you’ll pardon the expression, you may as well just shut up, because one man’s words under the sun are as worthless as the next man’s.

The Christian must be firm in defending the truth. It’s not that unbelievers never stumble upon or practice things good and true. They do, and Solomon wants to acknowledge that, as should we.

However, unbelievers can’t make sense of this; they can’t account for why they do things good and true, because no one apart from God can finally explain anything.

It’s all simply “true for me”. But in a world where everybody’s truth is as good as anyone else’s, there can be no truth, and everything goes.

Yet no unbeliever will accept that view, for to do so is to validate the use of raw power as justification for everything. Moreover, no one working from a merely human perspective can say anything reliable about things beyond the grave or beyond this material/temporal existence.

But the believer can. Those who live “under heaven” know better, and they also know that their understanding of things is the only one that can make sense of even the unbeliever’s worldview, as well as his own.

Reflect.

1. We know that unbelievers do good things, and have some insights to truth. How do we as believers account for this?
2. Why do we have hope of life beyond the grave? How should that hope affect the way we live now?
3. In a very real sense, unbelievers can't know anything with finality – in terms of the ultimate meaning and significance of things. Why is this so? What about us as believers? Can we know things truly and finally? Explain.

How can the creature say to its Creator, "Why did you make me like this?" Or, how can a creature answer back to God? Let all those kinds of discussions cease. Instead, let those discussions prevail which guide us towards virtue and knowledge. All that is present in this age of shadows is called vanity and shadows, and all that belongs to this life will be covered with the darkness, becoming obsolete upon departing this life. Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), Scholia on Ecclesiastes 52.6.10-12

Thank You, Lord, that I know You will take us to Yourself when this life is done. Knowing this makes me want to...

Pray Psalm 4.1-8.

How does this psalm help you to understand God's purpose for you "under heaven"? How does it lead you to live for that purpose today? Let it guide you in thanks, praise, and commitment to the Lord.

Sing Psalm 4.1-8.

Psalm 4.1-8 (*Picardy: Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent*)

Answer when I call, Lord Jesus, God of all my righteousness!

Bend Your holy ear, relieve us from all terror, all distress!

Lord, receive our prayer, release us; send Your grace to save and bless!

Wicked men reproach and scorn us, loving what is vile and vain.
God with grace will shield and adorn us through the Savior's blood and pain.
Jesus, You have bought and borne us; hear our cries for help again.

Let your anger flare, yet sin not; meditate, be still, and rest.
Turn your heart to God, begin not trusting in your righteousness.
Praise the Savior, all from sin bought; trust in Him to save and bless.

Wicked men may scorn and try us, casting doubt upon Your grace.
Send Your Spirit, Lord, don't deny us till we see Your glorious face.
You Who sent Your Son to buy us, fill our hearts with joy and grace.

Safely in Your peace, let us lie, Lord; keep us in Your love and care.
Rooted in Your strong and wise Word, may we know Your comfort there.
Guard and keep us till we die, Lord; go before us everywhere.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. This chapter is about the many ways that life apart from God is futile. Why must it be that way?
2. Materialism is a self-defeating worldview: The more stuff we get, the more we consume, and the more we want more of the same. Why is that approach to life a dead end?
3. If things and fun won't satisfy the great desire of our soul, what will? How would you explain that to an unbelieving friend?
4. "Under the sun", nothing can say anything of finality about anything. Why not?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 6? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

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