

Hope for the Disillusioned Life

Ecclesiastes 6

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We have been studying this enigmatic Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. In it, the writer, possibly King Solomon, takes his incredible intellectual prowess and rationally pursues meaning in life as if there was no God. Is there anything available in this world to satisfy the longings of the human heart? Just this world. No God. Nothing beyond this life. Closed non-transcendent universe.

Solomon tries to find satisfaction in the common categories still popular today. He tries man's wisdom and knowledge. He experiments with laughter and partying. He built huge buildings and gardens. He accumulated legendary wealth and fame. He had a harem of 1,000 women. He also had singers and dancers and beautiful music. All the while he retained an objective evaluation constantly asking himself, *does this make me happy?* In each case the answer was the same.

No. I still feel empty. Life without God is futile. There's nothing really to it. It's like the wind. We've walked this journey with Solomon for five chapters and today we are in the sixth. Chapter 6 is about disillusionment. To be disillusioned is to think something should be one way and to find out it is quite another. This is not something positively different—that's called a pleasant surprise—but negatively different—that's disillusionment. Life is filled with disillusionment. It's often not what we hoped for. Don't lose heart though, this is a message about hope for the disillusioned life.

We have the whole chapter ahead. I won't do every verse. We begin in verse 1.

"There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: ² a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil." (Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 ESV)

Disillusioned by Success

This chapter break is a bit unfortunate. Chapter 5 is about the futility of living for money and wealth. But the chapter ends on a high note. It encourages the enjoyment of life and whatever gifts God gives. Indeed, the enjoyment of life is a gift in itself. If I may draw a Mother's Day point, children are a gift. Enjoying our children is also a gift. Some days it comes easy. Some days it's hard. But to see this precious child, whether they are playing or pitching a fit, as a gift from God, now the child is not my possession or obsession but a treasure from God to be enjoyed and loved.

But that's not what chapter 6 is talking about. It's the opposite. He says there is a terrible evil all too common in the human experience. Notice the phrase *"under the sun."* That's code. Solomon is back to describing humanity doing life apart from God. He's not under God, he's merely under the sun.

What is the evil? *"Wealth, possessions, and honor."* (Verse 2) You say, that doesn't sound so bad. Money. Things money can buy. Fame and honor from others. Isn't this the American dream? *"Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them."* (Verse 2)

He's describing the person whose whole goal in life is the accumulation of XYZ. The whole time he's thinking, *when I have XYZ, then I'll be happy*. And then, either by determination or good fortune, he gets XYZ. His expectation is happiness, peace, living happily ever after. Yet Solomon knew from personal experience what so many experience when they get XYZ. It doesn't deliver as promised. It fails to provide the internal contentment expected. This is a devastating disillusionment. The person who never acquires XYZ can go to their grave thinking, *I was unhappy because I never had XYZ*. But the person who has it experiences a greater pain, *if XYZ doesn't make happy, what can?*

What is the testimony of so many who have accumulated vast wealth? I read a few of these quotes two weeks ago (Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, p. 47):

- *John D. Rockefeller – "I have made many millions, but they have brought me no happiness"*
- *W.H. Vanderbilt – "The care of \$200 million is enough to kill anyone. There is no pleasure in it."*
- *John Jacob Astor – "I am the most miserable man on earth."*

Famous and incredibly wealthy men derive no happiness from their wealth. Or worse, *"but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil."* (Verse 2) The wealth of the billionaire is eventually enjoyed by others. Kids fight over it. Business associates take it. Crooked advisors steal it. This is the plight of the secular man and his secular pursuits. Eventually all these things are lost. They are given to another. Success is no guarantee of happiness. The only thing that is certain is that you don't get to keep anything. To lose what you have is like a death when your whole hope for meaning is found in them.

Tim Keller reports what happened in 2008 when the economy and stock market tanked.

"The acting chief financial officer of Freddie Mac...hanged himself in his basement. The chief executive of Sheldon Good, a leading U.S. real estate auction firm, shot himself in the head behind the wheel of his red Jaguar. A French money manager who invested the wealth of many of Europe's royal and leading families, and who had lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money in Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, slit his wrists and died in his Madison avenue office. A Danish senior executive with HSBC Bank hanged himself in the wardrobe of his [\$700] a-night suite in Knightsbridge, London." (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. ix-x.)

Solomon doubles down.

"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, and he also has no burial...Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?" (Ecclesiastes 6:3, 6)

The three conditions for happiness in the ancient world were wealth, long life, and many children. (Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Vol. 14 [The New American Commentary]*, p. 325) Solomon uses hyperbole. A hundred children. A thousand years of life. If all that is yours and your soul is not satisfied, what's the point?

Ecclesiastes isn't anti-money or children or long life. Solomon is pointing out the human dilemma without God. We are wired to live with some sense of purpose, to believe the source of happiness is somewhere outside of us. In a materialistic culture, purpose is believed to be found in what you can accumulate. Your net worth. But wait, doesn't

everyone go to the same place? Don't we all end up in the cemetery? Rich, poor, middle class, famous, obscure, we all end up the same. Death voids in one second all the apparent purpose for materialistic living. Live for material success and you live the disillusioned life.

Disillusioned by Unfulfilled Desires

"All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind." (Verses 7-9)

The ancient Greek myth from the Odyssey includes the story of Tantalus. Tantalus was an associate of the Greek gods. He did some bad things and so he was banished to the underworld and his punishment was to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree. The branches of the fruit tree were filled with fruit but just out of reach. The water all around him would immediately recede when he went to take a drink. Over his head hung a giant and ominous stone threatening impending death at any moment. Tantalus. It's from his name that we get the English word, *tantalize*. Something is tantalizing when we want it so bad but it remains just out of reach. It leaves us always longing and reaching but never satisfied.

"All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied." (Verse 7) This is man's vicious cycle. Hunger drives him to work. Work provides food. Food feeds the appetite. Work makes you hungry. Hunger leads to work. Works leads to food. Food. Work. Eat. Hunger. Food. Work. Eat. Hunger. We can't escape this insatiable cycle. I would paraphrase verse 7 this way, *a person leases an expensive car so they can drive to work to earn a paycheck to lease the car.* Vicious cycle.

All our work is for our needs but our needs are insatiable which requires more work. It's like the hamster in the wheel constantly running but never getting anywhere. Ever feel that way? What's tomorrow? Monday. Moms, you ever feel that way putting the toys away when the kids have gone to bed? *Why am I doing this? The moment they wake up, out they come and are scattered again. What's the point? Why do I keep doing this?*

Disillusioned by Life's Uncertainties

"Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?" (Verses 10-12)

Commentaries call this *man's impasse*. While life may seem absurd, its essential character and the way the world is, is beyond our ability to dispute or change. We say it this way, *it is what it is*. The one who has made it this way is far stronger than us. All we can do is talk (Verse 11) but all our words are vanity and don't really change anything, do they?

Think of all the chatter going on in our country about politics and policies and the condition of the economy and the world. Politicians promise to change things and make it better. But can any human being really change the essential nature of things? We live, we die. And in v. 12 he looks to the future and says, *"For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?"* (Verse 12) The future is uncertain as I have no idea what will

happen after I am gone. These critical questions we long to answer remain like Tantalus' fruit, just out of reach. Just out of view.

I find myself looking at my daughters and wondering, what will they see in their lives? What will our nation be like? What will their lives be like? What will happen to them? As much as I would like to know and control or protect them, life is so uncertain. They will likely outlive me and outlive my ability to provide for them and protect them in this nasty world.

I don't like that uncertainty. Material success in life is disillusioning. Desires unfulfilled are disillusioning. Uncertainties and unknowns are disillusioning. You are saying, *I thought this was a message about hope for the disillusioned life.*

Hope for the Disillusioned Life

It is. But we have to get there the way Solomon takes us there in Ecclesiastes. The way God takes us there in the story of redemption.

How many of you have ever done a corn maze? Are you at least familiar with the concept? The out-of-town city slicker grandparents here might be a bit confused. But for down home Hoosier types, this is considered great fun. Each fall across the state, in large unharvested cornfields, you can find corn mazes.



A corn maze is a series of paths cut in a cornfield. There are lots of paths. Some go this way; some go that way. Every path ends up in a dead end except one. The goal is to get through the maze, but there's only one way through it. Nobody just walks through it. You are constantly hitting a corn wall, turning around, retracing and trying a different path. They are sneaky in the way they lay them out. You think you are on the right path. It feels like you are making progress. You're almost there, only to have your high hopes dashed. It can be very confusing. Someone designed the maze and made it in a way that takes you down wrong paths so that you can find the right one.



I've done these and they can be incredibly frustrating. I tried this way. I tried that way. You begin to wonder if maybe the devilish farmer made a path with no way out. It would be terrible to be running in a maze with no way out. How disheartening!

Why did God make us with these deep and spiritual longings? Why do we search for purpose and answers to basic questions like, *who are we? How did we get here? Why am I here? What is my future and destiny?*

Ecclesiastes 6 is depressing like a corn maze with no apparent way out. We take paths we think will take us to happiness and satisfaction but we keep running into dead ends. Each dead end creates more disillusionment. Wealth? Still not happy. Success? Something still missing. We reach. We search. We grind away at work and family and relationships but what we really want always seems just out of reach. Why?

Because God is the master corn maze designer. He purposely dead ends our pursuits for meaning and happiness without Him. This isn't mean. This is love. He uses life's despair and disillusionment to lead us to the one path, the one person, who will provide satisfaction in this life and hope for the next. *"But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."* (Galatians 3:22)

The search for meaning feels like a prison, like a maze with no way out. Sometimes people in a maze just sit down and quit. It feels to us like hopelessness, emptiness, gnawing boredom. Like nothing matters. Nothings changes. Who cares? As Martin Luther once said, *"The wicked begin their hell in this life."* An emotional and spiritual hell. A maze with no way out.

But this verse says that God made every path lead to despair but one. There is one path that leads to what we really long for. So that the promise of salvation and eternal life could be given to those who believe. Or to say it another way, God uses disillusionment to lead us to the promise of God to save all who believe in Jesus. Are you feeling disillusioned today? Good! This is God's grace to you!

Jesus said this about himself, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6) God made a way for sinners to get out of the prison of sin and guilt and eternal punishment. This is why Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for us. For our sin. The promise of salvation comes to us by faith for all who believe, who trust in Jesus.

This is hope for the disillusioned life. We are disillusioned by life without God and without the hope found in Christ. You can enter into this promise and this hope by putting personal faith and trust in Jesus and beginning a new life, a new path, with a new hope that extends beyond this life into eternity.

- *"In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* (Psalm 16:11)
- *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)
- *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."* (Acts 16:31)

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