

Looking at Life's Mysteries

Ecclesiastes 6

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For many living today, it is no secret that life is empty and vain. You're born, you go to work and come home, then you die and are buried. That's your life. Life becomes monotonous.

As you look at the book of Ecclesiastes written by Solomon, known as "the Preacher" here, he is really a philosopher, and we discover that Solomon was looking at life "under the sun." There is one key word and one key phrase in this book: "vanity" and "under the sun." He said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." He looked at life and said that it was empty. "Vanity" was a word for nothingness. It's like a soap bubble; you reach out to grab it and it pops and is gone. Have you found life to be empty?

Solomon said the reason life is empty is because he was looking at life "under the sun." The phrase "under the sun" carries with it the idea of life without God. He was looking at life, but God was not in the picture.

It's really as simple as that. When you take God out of life, life becomes vain and meaningless. There's really no substantive purpose or meaning in life. It could be that in your marriage, in your profession, in your pleasures and enjoyments, they have been drained of satisfaction, because God is not a part of your focus; He's not in the picture.

We're going to be looking, in chapter 6, at life's three great mysteries that Solomon saw. Because of these mysteries, many things did not make sense to Solomon. He saw, number one, that you could have riches without enjoyment; number two, you could labor and work hard and not have satisfaction; and number three, you could have questions but get no answers. These are the mysteries that Solomon delved into. We'll see that the solution to these three problems is going to be God, right in the middle of our hearts, minds and lives.

Number one, Solomon was frustrated, because he saw that you could have riches but not really enjoy them, Ecclesiastes 6:1-6. "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun..." There's that key phrase. It means that I've looked at life without God, and this is what I conclude to be an evil. "...and it is common among men: A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction." The New Living Translation of verse 1 reads like this: "There is another serious tragedy that I've seen under the sun. It weighs heavily upon humanity."

So as Solomon looked around, it didn't make sense to him. We would say that a person might have a nice car, a nice home, a beautiful wife and great kids, a good job and makes all the money he'll ever want, vacations often, has an RV, a motorcycle and surfboards in the garage—everything his heart could desire—but his life is empty and vain. It's because God hasn't given him the capacity or ability to enjoy these things.

Then in verses 3-6, Solomon continues talking about riches without enjoyment. "If a man begets a hundred children..." That's a lot of children. I don't know if you would consider that a blessing, but the Bible does say, "Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them." Whether this is hypothetical or not, we don't know.

As a matter of fact, when he talks about, verse 2, "a man to whom God has given riches," we don't know if Solomon is talking about himself, so it could be autobiographical. Or it could be theoretical; that he is talking about a hypothetical situation. Or he could be talking about someone he knew.

Then again, in verse 3, he says, "If a man..." and "a hundred children." This seems to be hypothetical. In those days, men did have multiple wives, so if you had many wives, you could have many kids.

Solomon continues, "If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness..."—in other words, he can't enjoy the blessings that come from God—"...or indeed he has no burial..." That means that he is not loved by his family. When you died and if your family loved you, they would give you a big funeral, and they would all cry and eulogize you and talk about how wonderful you were. So when Solomon says, "he has no burial," it means that they don't give him a funeral.

Isn't it funny that we wait until people die to talk about how great they were? We should have "pre-death funerals" where we talk about how great that person is and how we love and appreciate them. Better yet, just tell your loved ones that you love them and appreciate them and all that they mean to you before it's too late.

He next says, "I say that a stillborn child is better than he." That means that instead of being rich but not happy, it would be better if he never had been born. Verse 4, he still describes being born dead when he says, "...for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness." The Jews many times would not give a stillborn child a name, so they could get over the grieving process sooner. "Though it has not seen the sun..."—the child never saw the light of day—"...or known anything, this has more rest than that man..."—he is dead, but has more rest than the man who has wealth without enjoyment—"...even if he lives a thousand years twice..."—if this guy were to live 2,000 years—"...but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?"

This "one place" is a reference to the grave, so don't misinterpret that and say that everyone goes to heaven. He's saying that all—rich man and poor man, happy man and sad man—go to the grave. Everyone dies; it's universal. Then they all go to the same place, the grave.

Solomon might be summarized here by saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." You see someone driving a nice car and you might say, "Wow! He must be happy." Yeah; until the car payment's due or until someone scratches it. "Oh, look at that house! I would be so happy to live in that house. That would be awesome!" So don't judge a book by its cover. If you looked

at some of the best books in my library, you'd think it wasn't a very good book.

I must confess that when I'm at the beach and I see these big, beautiful beach homes overlooking the ocean, I say, "That's happiness!" Then I realize how stupid and vain that is. Sometimes I think, Oh, if I could just live there! If I could have that! You might think, If I could just have that husband. If I could just have that wife. If I could just not have this husband. If I could just not have this wife. But Solomon's saying that you're better to have and enjoy what you possess than to have desires that cannot be satisfied.

How sad that a person can have prosperity but not have enjoyment. What Solomon is saying in this whole sixth chapter is that, in God's economy, prosperity is not always good. In chapter 7, he actually says that, in God's economy, adversity is not always bad.

Sometimes you look forward to a comfortable retirement, but you might have a heart attack or a stroke or some other setback or crisis in the family that drains both your money and strength and robs you of your enjoyment. I've seen it happen. I've seen so many men who work hard their whole lives, and they're waiting to retire so they can play golf or get an RV and travel the country or move to their dream location and build their dream house, but their health keeps them from enjoying that. The lesson here is to learn to enjoy the present. Don't be worried about tomorrow; enjoy today. Realize that the blessings come to you from the hand of God.

Here's another important truth: You cannot enjoy the gifts from God without the God Who gives the gifts. This is simply profound. To enjoy the gifts without the giver is idolatry. Idolatry can never satisfy the human heart. Warren Wiersbe said, "Enjoyment without God is merely entertainment and doesn't satisfy. But enjoyment with God is enrichment and brings true joy and satisfaction." I like that. So the only way to have real joy and satisfaction in life is to bring God into the picture. He needs to come into your life, into your marriage, into your family, into your plans, goals and ambitions. Everything needs to be about God and His glory and pleasing Him and serving Him. The ability to enjoy life comes from knowing God and living to please God.

What does it mean to please God? It means that we live by faith. It means that we trust Him. God wants you to trust Him. He wants you to hope in Him. He wants you to look to Him and depend on and rely on Him. God wants to wean us from worldly things. That's why we should pray every day, read His Word every day and seek Him every day for our marriage, for our children, for our health, for everything in our lives. If we neglect that, then life becomes unsatisfying, vain and empty.

We are chasing after the things that do not satisfy, so we need to know God and glorify Him forever. We know God by faith, and we glorify God by faith. The Bible says, "The just shall live by faith." God wants you to rest in Him and trust in Him and to hope in Him. In Isaiah 55:1, the prophet called out to Israel, that had turned away from God, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. And you who have no money, come, buy and eat...And let your soul delight itself in abundance."

Why do you spend your money on things that don't satisfy, and you labor for what does not bring real peace? You basically become an idolater. Even as Christians, we can slip into idolatry. We can make idols of our marriage, our children, our money, our home, our cars and our pleasures. Some guys wax their idol every Sunday afternoon. It's okay to have a cool car, but if that's where your affections lie, it comes in between you and God.

The Ten Commandments or the Decalogue has as the first commandment, "Thou shalt not have any other gods before Me." The new atheists say, "What's wrong with God? Has He got a problem? He commands everyone to make Him first. He doesn't want anyone to come between me and Him. Is He that hung up? Does He have low self-esteem, so He needs help?" I think, Are you serious? We're talking God here, the sovereign creator of all things! He was here before anyone. God gave you the very breath that you use to attack God. When you argue with God, you're arguing with the very One who gave you the ability to argue with God. He sustains you on your bed at night.

Every one of the Ten Commandments is for our good. The reason God says that there should be no other gods before Him is that God knows it's good for us. He knows it's what we need. God knows that if we are idolatrous, other things come into the place of God in our lives. Then we won't be happy or satisfied, and our lives won't be fulfilled.

The New Living Translation of the Bible of Ecclesiastes 6:7-8 says, "All people spend their lives scratching for food, but they never seem to have enough. So are wise people really better off than fools? Do poor people gain anything by being wise and knowing how to act in front of others?" The answer is "No." Apart from God, life has no purpose, and life has no real meaning.

The second great mystery that Solomon saw was that you could labor and gain no satisfaction from it, verses 7-9. "All the labor of man is for his mouth." In other words, you do all this work and labor, and it's just for your own satisfaction. You just work to eat. "And yet the soul is not satisfied." So you are living and laboring selfishly, just to satisfy your own appetites, yet you are not truly satisfied. "For what more..."—or what advantage—"...has the wise man than the fool? What does the poor man have, who knows how to walk before the living?" Here's the point—"Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire." He means that it's better to have one bird in your hand than two in the bush. We're always wanting what we don't have, but it's better to be satisfied with what you have than have this constant desire.

The last of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not covet" anything that belongs to your neighbors. So God says not to have any other gods before Him and not to covet. Try going to Costco with a lot of money in your wallet and not covet. It's dangerous when guys go to Costco; we buy things we don't even need because it's cheap. We don't even know what it is, but it's inexpensive. "Look at this. This is a good deal!"

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but it's really cool!"

My wife goes to Costco and she says, "We're getting this and getting that. No; that's not a good deal."

"How about that? Look at that!" It's dangerous when I go to Costco. "Thou shalt not covet." That's the verse I quote myself when I go there.

So verse 9 says that it's better to just enjoy what you have than to live with covetousness and desire. "This also is vanity and grasping for the wind."

Solomon has moved, in verses 7-9, from the rich man, who has no enjoyment, to the hard-working laborer, who is without satisfaction. Remember Mick Jagger's song I Can't Get No Satisfaction. That's really the mantra of today's culture: I can't get no satisfaction. You may have all this stuff, but it doesn't bring real satisfaction. Whether you're rich, and God doesn't give you the ability to enjoy it, or you work hard, but it brings no purpose or satisfaction, it's because you're not living for God. So the key to satisfaction is living for Someone greater than yourself.

The way Jesus put it is, "If you seek to find your life, you'll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake and the Gospel's, you'll find it." It's one of His paradoxical statements. But if you say, "I don't care what anyone says. I don't care what God says, what He thinks or what His will is. I don't care about my wife, my kids; I'm going to do what I want to do. I want to be free and follow my heart and do whatever I want to do." That's when you'll lose your life.

Sometimes a person who is married will say to me, "I want to get a divorce."

"Why?"

"Well, I just don't like him anymore."

That's out of God's will. Love is not a passing emotion; it's a continual devotion. If you hang in there, you might start liking him this week, in a few days or tomorrow. Feelings come and go. Love is not an emotion but a commitment you make to seek the highest good of the person loved.

What about God's Word? What about obedience to God? What about wanting to bless God, honor God and live for God? That's why you need to bring God into your marriage, into your family, into your occupation and all that you do. You're going to want to live for Him, because it's going to bring satisfaction. If you seek to find it, you'll lose it, but if you lose your life for Christ's sake, you'll find it.

The British essayist and poet, Joseph Addison, said, "The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, someone to love and something to hope for." I like that. All three of those are met in God. We can serve the Lord, we can love the Lord and we can hope in the Lord.

Another little footnote: If you want to have satisfaction in your work, learn to be thankful. Everything you have is more than you deserve. We don't want to hear that, but it's true. "I deserve a better job."

"No; you deserve hell." The commercials tell us, "You deserve this!" No; if we got what we deserved, we'd all be in hell. Everything's uphill from there.

"I deserve a better husband. I deserve better kids. I deserve a better job. I deserve more money!" No; we deserve hell. Everything that God has given us is of His mercies. Every morning when the sun comes up, God's mercies for you are brand new. God is a God of mercy. If you can learn to count your blessings and be thankful for them, your labor will bring satisfaction.

There is a third and last problem that perplexed Solomon. There are questions in life that don't seem to have answers. There are questions without answers, verses 10-12. We'll break down these questions. "Whatever one is, he has been named already..."—he's talking about God's sovereignty—"...for it is known that he is man." He means here that God called man and called him "Adam." In the Hebrew, his name means "from the earth." Some say "from the red earth." So we come from the earth, and when we die, our bodies go back to the earth.

"And he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he." He's basically saying that what's going to be, is going to be, and you cannot argue with God. Verse 11, "Since there are many things..."—or "words"—"...that increase vanity, how is man the better?" So you have all these words, but they don't answer life's questions. "For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow?" Shadows come and shadows go; shadows move throughout the day. They are temporary. "Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?" So basically Solomon is saying that what is going to be, is going to be. We can't argue with God. Lots of words don't bring light. Who knows what is good for us? Who knows what the future holds?

If you take God out of the equation, you have fatalism. Fatalism is living by the idea that everything is happenstance; there is no purpose, no providence, God is not engaged in our lives. God doesn't even exist, in the fatalist's view.

But we see providence in the Bible; it is seen where God is in charge of our lives. Psalm 139:16 says, "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book, they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them." God providentially watches over us, takes care of us and provides for us. You can look back over your life and see where God protected you, watched over you, provided for you, guided and directed you. That's the providence of God.

But without God, we have fatalism. "Well, just whatever is going to be, will be, and there's nothing that will change it."

Romans 12:1-2 says to "present your bodies a living sacrifice" to God. "And do not be

conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” What it means is that God can work in our lives for our good and for His glory. Life doesn’t have to be what it’s “going to be.” Life is going to be what a loving Father in heaven so designs for each of us. If you have a relationship with God as your Father, who loves you, and you know He’s in control, life is good. God is in control, and He knows what He’s doing. God’s purpose and plan are being fulfilled in my life.

Verse 11 says that lots of words don’t bring light. Remember when Job had his trial? His three friends showed up to “comfort” him. They did bring comfort as long as they kept their mouths shut.

I have learned in many years of ministry that when people are grieving and sorrowing, they don’t need words. They just need love and encouragement, or maybe just a hug or just your presence. Maybe they need a prayer that just turns them toward God. Sometimes people say, “I don’t know what to say to them.” Their husband just died, or their wife just died or they just lost a child. Then don’t say anything. Just let them know that you love them, and you’re praying for them. Just be there with them.

So the first three days, Job’s friends just sat with him. He was comforted by them. Then they really messed things up, because they opened their mouths. They said, “Okay, Job, ‘fess up. What did you do to cause all these problems? You must have done something really bad to have all this to happen to you. Come on, Job; tell us what you did.” Then Job said, “False comforters are you all!” Job hadn’t done anything. Many times we accuse people of doing something when they really haven’t.

Solomon said that our words don’t really help, but what we need are God’s words. The Bible is called “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” Psalm 119:105. I love that. So we need to rest in God’s Word, because it has promises, and follow God’s light in His Word.

Verse 12 of our text is the point. “For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow?” The answer is, “God knows.” Who knows what’s best for you? God knows. Your Father in heaven knows best, and He’s given us His Word. Prosperity is not always good, and adversity is not always bad. Leave it in God’s hand.

The last question is, “Who knows the future?” That question is in verse 12: “Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?” The answer is, “God can.” God is the answer to all life’s perplexing questions.

The important point, though, is this: We live not by explanations; we live by His promises. If you broke your arm and went to a doctor, he x-rayed it, put the film up on a light board and showed you how the arm broke and what the bone looked like and he described it, that wouldn’t bring you comfort and hope. It might even hurt more. “I knew I was in pain, but now I’m in lots of pain, seeing that.” But the moment the doctor said, “We’ll reset the bones, and in a couple of months you’ll be as good as new,” you felt much better. “Thank you, doctor, I needed that.” You

didn't need to see how bad it was; you needed to see hope for your situation.

That's the same thing God does with us. He doesn't explain everything to us. I don't know why you lost your job. I don't know why you were diagnosed with cancer. I don't know why you had a stroke or a heart attack. I don't know why this is happening in your family or marriage.

But God has given you His promises. One of those promises is, "As your days, so shall your strength be." As God has given you the day, God will give you the strength for that day. God will not give you a burden that you can't bear. If you take tomorrow's problems and try to carry them today, you'll be weighted down. But "casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." He has promised to come alongside you and comfort you. So He says that He will give you strength, He will be with you, He will guide you, He will protect you and He will provide for you. And He said about heaven, "I go to prepare a place for you...and I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

Let's review. First, many people have riches but no enjoyment. The solution is finding joy in God, the giver of the gifts. Don't become idolatrous and focus on the gifts. Become a worshipper and focus on God. Secondly, many labor, but there is no satisfaction from their labor. The solution is to find your purpose in serving the Lord. If you're driving a truck, digging a ditch, working in an office—whatever your job might be—find your joy in serving the Lord. We're all servants of the Lord, and we want to live for Him, serve Him and be pleasing to Him. Thirdly, if you have questions without answers, find your rest in the promises of God. We live by His promises, not by explanations. Amen.