

## Chapter 7: Who Knows What is Good?

*Ecclesiastes 6:1–12*

Ecclesiastes 6 marks the end of the first half of the book. Here, the Preacher summarizes the results of his search for meaning under the sun. The results have been an absolute failure. In this summary chapter, the Preacher focuses on the lack of *good* in this world, under the sun. His argument is simple: there is nothing good under the sun, even if we desperately, anxiously searched for that good throughout our lives. Worse, the Preacher says that even if we found good, it wouldn't help, because we wouldn't recognize it for what it is. With this, the Preacher gets at the significance of faith. We cannot walk by sight, because we are not capable of evaluating good on our own, apart from God. Instead, we must depend on the word of God to guide us toward good, since *God alone is good*.

### Nothing Good (Eccl. 6:1–6)

In the last chapter, the Preacher considered the miserable vanity of the rich man who suffered a “grievous evil” by losing his riches, so that he did not even have an inheritance to give his son (Eccl. 5:13–17). In the first section of chapter six, the Preacher considers an alternative “evil”: those who are not able to enjoy their great riches, for one reason or another. Once again, the Preacher speaks of the evil that “he has seen under the sun” (v. 1; cf. Eccl. 3:16; 4:4, 7; 5:13). The Preacher says that this evil “lies heavy” on mankind; however, as Tremper Longman III points out, the word for “lies heavy” may mean more that this evil is “frequent” than that it is qualitatively “heavy.”<sup>1</sup>

In this scenario, the Preacher envisions “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” (v. 2a). The Preacher does not elaborate on what may have caused this man to lose his riches, because the cause of loss is not the Preacher's focus, but rather the loss itself. Such a loss “is vanity; it is a grievous evil” (v. 2b). Who, then, is this man, and what should we learn from him? Benjamin Shaw observes an implied contrast between the man described in v. 2 and the man described in v. 3, who “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...” (v. 3a). Since the second man is contrasted by living an absurdly *long* time and fathering an extraordinary number of children, Shaw suggests that the implied tragedy of the first man is that he dies too young, and (possibly) before fathering any children.<sup>2</sup>

If Shaw's interpretation is correct, then the Preacher is teaching us that no one can be satisfied through great wealth, honor, and an abundance of children. Some never have the time to enjoy these

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<sup>1</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 169.

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 80.

gifts, while others possess the gifts for a long time, but never find their ultimate satisfaction in them.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the Preacher judges that this is “an evil” (v. 1) or even “a grievous evil” (v. 2). By this, he does not mean that God has acted immorally or unjustly toward these men, but simply that it is a calamity that such great wealth cannot produce happiness. Derek Kidner summarizes this point well: “Qoheleth [i.e., “The Preacher”] is very far from holding that man has rights which God ignores; it is rather than man has needs which God exposes.”<sup>4</sup>

In this case, the need of man is so pronounced that even the wealthiest are worse off than the stillborn child (v. 3b). Such a stillborn child “comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered” (v. 4). Regarding the last phrase in that verse, Eaton helpfully reminds us that “*name* in Hebrew thought is more than a label; it includes the personality and the character. The still-born child has no chance to develop a character or acquire a reputation.”<sup>5</sup> The difference between the two situations is clear enough, as Murphy notes: “one may infer that its affliction is negative in that it is in darkness (contrast 5:16[17]) without vision or knowledge, whereas the affliction of the rich is positive in that they have been thwarted. They have no enjoyment in life, only futile desire.”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the Bible, the situation of a stillborn child is invoked as a curse on the enemies of the people of God (cf. Ps. 58:8), so it is astonishing for the Preacher to claim that a stillborn child is better off than the wealthiest who live.<sup>7</sup>

In v. 5–6, the Preacher draws the contrast between the stillborn child and the suffering rich person in terms of *rest*: “Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he” (v. 5). The rich person, by contrast, may “live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy [lit., “see”] no good—do not all go to the one place?” (v. 6). This section began with the Preacher’s *seeing* evil, and now he states that a rich man could live two thousand years but never *see* good. Ultimately, both the stillborn child and the long-lived rich man go to the same place in death. So, is it really worth it to extend one’s misery under the sun, or would one be better off to cut to the chase by dying in the womb and avoiding the heartache and hardship of this world? In this world, there *is* nothing good under the sun. Our only hope, as Bridges notes, is that we would find some good *above* and *beyond* the sun: “And what *good* is there that will *fill* the man? Only when as a sinner he finds a reconciled God in Christ—his way to God—his peace with God.”<sup>8</sup>

## Needing Good (Eccl. 6:7–9)

In v. 7, the Preacher offers a bleak parable: “All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied” (v. 7). Importantly, the word translated “appetite” is the word for “soul” (נֶפֶשׁ; *nephesh*), suggesting that the “appetite” in view here has to do with seeking deep satisfaction for our souls, and not merely the physical contentment of a full belly after a good meal. Because this soul appetite is, as

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<sup>3</sup> Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 126–27.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 171.

<sup>8</sup> Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 125.

Garrett comments, “the real motive behind human efforts, no one is ever fully satisfied.”<sup>9</sup> Even today, “modern man [is] on his industrial treadmill as to the primitive peasant scraping a bare living from the soil: . . . he works to eat, for the strength to go on working to go on eating.”<sup>10</sup> Where does this endless cycle go? When do we reach the satisfaction our souls are seeking? What toil will finally fill our appetites?

The Preacher carries this line of questioning forward: “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?” (v. 8). In pursuit of seeking to satisfy the soul, even the wise has no advantage over the fool, so that the poor have no hope of walking well before the living (i.e., “living so as to please” them).<sup>11</sup> No one has a leg-up on the rest. All of us, wise and foolish, poor and rich alike, will never discover lasting, soul-satisfying *good* in this world.

The Preacher makes this point directly in the next verse: “Better [i.e., “more good”] is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite” (v. 9). True *good* can only come by “the sight of the eyes”—that is, by gaining possession of the object of the soul’s deepest desires.<sup>12</sup> The human soul (ESV: “the appetite”, however, is perpetually wandering from object to object, trying to find something that will satisfy. Ultimately, this project “also is vanity and a striving after wind” (v. 9b). The object of our soul’s satisfaction is not to be found in this world, no matter how hard we may seek to find it. The only comfort we may find is by learning contentedness in what we do have.<sup>13</sup> Even this, however, is of limited value. Our souls must find deep satisfaction somehow before we can be truly content.

## Knowing Good (Eccl. 6:10–12)

In the final section of chapter 6, the Preacher returns to an earlier theme: namely, that “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9).<sup>14</sup> Here, the Preacher frames this discussion in terms of what has previously been named: “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” (v. 10). As other commentators have noted, the keyword in vv. 10–12 is the word “man” or “Adam” (אָדָם; *’adam*).<sup>15</sup> So, the naming here “could” refer to the original creation, when God “named” creation in such a way as to bring it into existence.<sup>16</sup> More likely, though, in view of the repetition of the word “man/Adam,” the emphasis here is rather on *Adam’s* naming of the animals in Genesis 2:19.<sup>17</sup> As Longman observes, this work meant “much more than simply giving them a name tag. In the OT, naming captures the essential

<sup>9</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 316.

<sup>10</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 317.

<sup>16</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 317–18.

nature of a person or thing. Thus, to name is to have knowledge and control of something or someone. Qohelet's comment then means that everything that takes place has previously been known."<sup>18</sup>

Still, Adam's role in naming the *animals*, and not the rest of creation, does mark off the limitations of human authority. God has given human beings dominion over creatures, but God has also set them under the heavenly beings, and, much more, under the authority of his own, majestic name (cf. Ps. 8). If even Adam was "not able to dispute with one stronger than he"—that is, with God—at the judgment of Adam's sin (Gen. 3:8–19), how much more are we incapable of disputing with God? We may complain about our lot in life, and the vanity of living under the sun, but the "more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?" (v. 11). In these references to the futility of disputing with God, and to the vanity of piling up more words, some commentators have suggested that this may refer to Job's failed attempt at disputing with God (cf. Job 40:3–5).<sup>19</sup> If, though, Adam is in view, it is also possible to understand this as a reference to Adam's feeble excuse-making after the original sin (Gen. 3:10–12).

The Preacher closes this section with two questions. First, "For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?" (v. 12a). Once again, the reference to man/Adam invites a consideration of the first man, Adam, as Duane Garrett notes: "The following question ('For who knows what is good for 'adam?' [v. 12]) plays on the situation of Adam prior to the fall. The trees had 'good' fruit, and the land had 'good' gold (Gen 2:9,12). It also plays on the name of the tree of his demise, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam's days, though they numbered 930 years (Gen 5:5), passed like a shadow, and no one could tell him what was to follow him. What is true of him is equally true of all who bear his name, 'adam/humanity. We are but weak mortals before an omnipotent God."<sup>20</sup> More than the goodness of Eden that Adam knew before the Fall, we should also remember that knowing the "good" was what led into the original sin. Satan tempted Eve to eat from the tree with the promise that, by eating of it, they would "be like God, knowing *good* and evil," (Gen. 3:5), and then, "when the woman saw that the tree was *good* for food...," she eventually sinned by taking it and eating it, and giving it to Adam, who ate of it too (Gen. 3:6). Surrounded by the blessed goodness of the garden of Eden, Adam did not know how to discern between good and evil—and will we do better?

Not only do we fail to know what is good *now*, but we do not know what is coming after us (v. 12b). Kidner remarks, "It is a double bewilderment. He is left with no absolute values to live for ('what is good?'); not even any practical certainties ('what will be?') to plan for."<sup>21</sup> There is nothing good to see in this world, even though it is far better to see good than merely to seek it. But even if we found good it wouldn't help us, since we are notoriously bad in distinguishing good from evil. The increasing bleakness of the Preacher's conclusions is important, for (as Eaton writes), like "the Mosaic law (cf. Gal. 3:22), the Preacher is slamming every door except the door of faith."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 317–18.

<sup>21</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) How is it possible that someone could gain all that he desires, and yet not find enjoyment and satisfaction in this world (v. 2)? Why would the Preacher say that a stillborn child is better off than the one who lives two thousand years, but sees no good in this world (v. 3–6)? How does the wisdom of Ecclesiastes evaluate the fact that “all go to the one place” (v. 6)? Where do you seek for good in this life? How satisfied are you in those things? What might you learn from this passage?
- 2) Why does all of our toil never satisfy the deep cravings of our soul’s appetite (v. 7)? Why cannot even wisdom or wealth provide us with the skill or resources to find lasting satisfaction in this world (v. 8)? Where does your soul’s appetite wander (v. 9)? Have you yet seen the good that you are looking for? Why, then, do we so consistently discover new temptations within our soul to wander over again to something new? To what degree do you feel the vanity of these efforts?
- 3) Who was the one to have “named” all things (v. 10)? What was the significance of his work in naming the animals, beyond simply giving them something to be called? Why, then, did Adam give so much credence to the serpent who tempted him and his wife to do what God had forbidden them from doing? Why do we, with Adam’s story to study, continue to think that the created world will bring us more good than the Creator?
- 4) At the end of the first half of Ecclesiastes, what have been the highlights for you? Which passages have challenged you the most in your own thinking, desiring, or behavior? What is one area that you have freshly recognized your foolishness and sin? How might Ecclesiastes lead your life in a different direction? How does Ecclesiastes help to loosen your clinging grip to the created things under the sun, and instead to look in faith to the Creator, and to his Son Jesus Christ?